

5-2013

Literacy and identity in popular and participatory culture.

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LITERACY AND IDENTITY IN POPULAR AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

By

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A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2013

LITERACY AND IDENTITY IN POPULAR AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

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for Matt
the greatest Phil Dunphy fan I ever knew

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my director Dr. Bronwyn Williams for his unwavering support throughout my entire doctoral program, and particularly for his guidance through this dissertation. I would also like to thank my other committee members: Karen Kopelson, Dennis Hall, and Debra Journet for their feedback throughout this process, as well as their help in shaping these chapters into articles for future publication. And a special thanks to my outside reader, John Alberti, who has served as a mentor for most of my adult life, and who first introduced me to the scholarly pursuits of Rhetoric and Composition and Popular Culture.

Several colleagues served as sounding boards and readers for various drafts of this project, so I would like to thank them, as well: Alicia Brazeau, Caroline Wilkinson, Hollye Wright, Shannon Howard, Ashly Bender, Brice Nordquist, Matt Wiles, and John Vance. I have been fortunate to work with this wonderful group of colleagues who helped shape my thinking about this dissertation.

I am especially appreciative of the participants in this study, both my former students, who made chapter four both easy and difficult to write—I am in awe of you all—and those who participated online through the Dan Harmon Sucks forum and other fan communities. Your ideas have inspired me to continue research in this area, as well as to become more active in fan culture myself.

Of course, this dissertation would not have been possible without the continued support of my family. My parents John and Terry, who encouraged my avid interest in

reading and writing from a very young age, and who never quashed my interests in popular culture. My brothers Dave, Joe, and Matt (who passed away during the composition of this work), whose shared interests in television series result in bizarre family dinner conversations filled with quotation, and my sister-in-law Edith, who offered additional feedback and encouragement in response to the chapter on *Modern Family*. My father- and mother-in-law Don and Ellen, as well as my brother-in-law Don, who have also encouraged my work and often served as a sounding board for my ideas.

Finally, my partner in academics and life, Rob, who not only watched these series with me and listened to my constant commentary on them, but also read each chapter multiple times. You helped me to find my voice, to embrace my inner fan, and to develop the confidence to compose this work.

ABSTRACT

LITERACY AND IDENTITY IN POPULAR AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Laura A. Detmering

December 3, 2012

This dissertation examines two contemporary television series (*Modern Family* and *Community*) and fan communities dedicated to those series. It then discusses a project developed within an upper-division English course at the University of Louisville, in which students created, reflected upon, and analyzed their own television show fan communities throughout the course. The first chapter reviews recent literature about literacy, identity, fandom, and popular culture, as well as describes the methods utilized within this dissertation project. Analyzing these television series and fans' and critics' responses to them, this dissertation argues that online communities provide a ripe space for community-building, as well as offer television show fans an opportunity to both weigh in on and potentially influence the production of contemporary television series. Finally, the dissertation makes a pedagogical turn, offering one practical application of the concepts explored throughout the earlier chapters in chapter four.

As stated above, the introductory chapter reviews current scholarship on literacy, identity, fandom, and popular culture. This chapter also describes the methodology applied to the project. Chapter two opens with an analysis of representations of gender and literacy on the popular series *Modern Family*. The second half of this chapter discusses two groups' attempts to effect change in the series' production. Chapter three

opens with an analysis of the television series *Community*, focusing on its treatment of the intersecting relationships among literacy, social class, and fandom within the series. The second half of this chapter describes series showrunner Dan Harmon's use of social media to interact with fans of the series, as well as the interactions among members of the *Dan Harmon Sucks* fan forum. Chapter four describes a pedagogical application of the ideas explored throughout the earlier chapters, focusing on three television show fan communities developed within a 300-level English course at the University of Louisville. Finally, the conclusion brings together the concepts explored through the three body chapters and offers future directions for this project.

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CHAPTER I

LITERACY AND IDENTITY IN POPULAR AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

"I mean, in a lot of ways, when I was younger, . . . I was a nerd, and I didn't have a ton of really, really close friends, and so . . . [fan communities are] definitely a welcoming atmosphere to be going in and talking about things that you enjoy. Um, but I guess that's kept me around because I have friends now . . . but . . . it's just, like enjoyable, and it's entertaining, but it's not always passive. It's kind of, if it were just straightforward watching something or reading something for entertainment value, I probably wouldn't have stuck around for as long."—Annie, 22, interview 8/3/11

"[A]s far as . . . [seeing characters on television shows] reading it makes me feel good because alot of people think me and my family r wierd because we read so much so i guess it validates me.and the writing is alittle different because my spelling is so bad and everyone says i have a stange handwriting style that i wish i could do better.and,i try and write letters to certain family members as often as i can but it isnt enough,id rather call them so they cant see my handwriting."—Melinda, 42, email interview 8/10/11

"A lot of things happened in my family that shouldn't have. I had a step-father who wasn't very nice to me, and I think that I read a lot to escape that."—Cassie, 37, interview 8/31/11

Introduction

As the quotes above, taken from face-to-face and email interviews conducted for this project, indicate, literacy is intimately tied to emotional experiences; regardless of any other aspects of their life experiences, people tend to discuss literacy in very affective ways. Numerous writers have published narratives describing their processes of acquiring literacy, poignantly describing their struggles to read and write, often citing their ultimate acquisition of literacy as a moment of pride and personal empowerment¹. In such accounts, reading and writing are quite commonly portrayed not just as empowering but

¹ See, for instance, R. Mark Hall's discussion of Oprah's literacy developments in "The 'Oprahfication' of Literacy: Reading 'Oprah's Book Club.'"

also as means of escape from traumatic situations², as the quote from Cassie exemplifies. Furthermore, being literate and engaging in literate activities with others becomes a type of identity marker; many people tend to view their reading and writing practices as a significant part of their identities.

Like reading and writing, fandom or participation within fan communities can also be liberating. Participation within fan communities allows individuals who feel otherwise marginalized to find a sense of kinship with fellow fans. Not all individuals who join fan communities are seeking escape from difficult circumstances, but many people who participate in these communities see such involvement as a way of fitting in, a way of connecting with others who share their passions. Fandom as it exists today is also often intertwined with literacy practices; most fan communities take place within online spaces, where the ability to read and write is paramount. The very idea of what it means to be a fan has changed drastically with the development of the world wide web; it is no longer enough to watch a popular television show and be a “true” fan—fans today are encouraged both by the creators of the media and other fans not just to watch their favorite shows, but to watch extra footage, read about the shows, and often play games related to the shows online. Just as literacy has become an identity marker, then, so has fandom. That is, in participating within fandom, individuals begin to identify themselves as certain types of people.

Moreover, fandom itself and fan communities in particular are a ripe space for observing new literacies as they develop. By observing these communities, we can see

² See Suzette Henke’s discussion of “scriptotherapy” in *Shattered Subjects* and Leigh Gilmore’s *The Limits of Autobiography* for discussions of autobiographical writing as therapy. For autobiographical accounts on this topic, see, for instance, Susan Brison’s *Aftermath*, Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and Alice Sebold’s *Lucky*.

new literacy practices as they arise because fans often participate in new literacies within their communities, particularly making use of new means of communication such as wikis, blogs, and social networking sites. Within this project, fan communities, then, function as one site of new literacy practices as they develop. Such a study has particular value for the field of composition and rhetoric because of our focus on writing practices. Ultimately, I argue that studying the new kinds of literacy practices individuals are engaging in within such communities will strengthen our pedagogical approaches by forcing us to examine how such reading and writing makes us more conscious of the literacy practices that many of our students bring into our classrooms. This project analyzes the intersections among literacy, fandom, and identity, arguing that the three are intimately connected, that participation in literacy practices and fan communities are forms of identification, and that scholars within the field of composition and rhetoric need to pay more attention to what is happening within online communities such as fan forums in order to better understand what literacies involve today.

As increasing numbers of individuals are participating in online forms of communication and becoming more involved in various types of fan communities, those forms of communication and participation are significantly influencing the literacy practices and constructions of identity many students bring with them into the composition classroom. As teachers of writing, then, we need to not just be aware of these new literacy practices but also to consider ways in which we might incorporate these new literacy practices into our own pedagogical practices. I am not arguing here that we should use technology for the sake of using technology; I *am* arguing that when we teach composition we should, at the very least, be conscious of the kinds of literacy

practices people are engaging in online. Moreover, new literacies often occur in spaces where students feel they have certain levels of expertise as writers. I would suggest, then, that we should begin with the types of literacy practices students are engaging in every day in their real lives, acknowledge the value of such literacy practices, and show them how those practices can translate into the kinds of literacy practices they are being asked to engage in at the college level. In this chapter, I will review discussions within and outside the field of composition about literacy, identity, fandom, taste, and participatory culture, demonstrating where my argument fits in with and builds upon existing scholarship on the subject. Ultimately, in this chapter I will show why a more careful analysis of the intersections among literacy, identity, and fandom is warranted, particularly in thinking about the work we do as scholars in the field of composition. New literacies are developing, the very concept of literacy itself is changing, and we need to recognize the values these new practices offer or risk being left in the wake of important innovations in terms of literacy and communication.

What Is Literacy and What Are Its Implications?

Traditionally, literacy has been associated with reading and writing; more recently, however, definitions of literacy have expanded to include virtually any type of knowledge (e.g. *information literacy*, *computer literacy*, *media literacy*, and *health literacy* among many others). In fact, the term literacy has essentially become interchangeable with a certain type of knowledge; within contemporary U.S. culture, the term literacy has become associated with knowing *how* to do something. Such applications of the term literacy have become somewhat ambiguous, stripping the word of its original meaning. At the same time, as U.S. culture has shifted away from

traditional conceptions of print literacy, a reexamination or redefinition of the term literacy has become necessary to account for the new ways of writing and reading that have developed as a result of newer technologies for composition.

Literacy can no longer be defined simply as “the ability to read and write.” However, like Gunther Kress, I believe we need to be careful in defining literacy not to define it too broadly or else the term will begin to lose meaning. Of the broadening applications of the term literacy, Kress writes, “The more that is gathered up in the meaning of the term, the less meaning it has. Something that has come to mean everything, is likely not to mean much at all” (22). Indeed, applying the term literacy too loosely may result in a lack of clarity as to how one is defining the term. For instance, the way the word “literacy” is used in the phrase “computer literacy” has a much different meaning than does the term “literacy” when used alone. Computer literacy implies a certain type of knowledge or ability, whereas literacy implies a way of communicating and understanding messages. Thus, I borrow Bronwyn Williams’s “working definition of literacy . . . [as] the ability to use sign systems to compose and interpret texts that communicate ideas from one person to another” (*Shimmering*18). Such “sign systems” are not (for me at least) limited to what would normally constitute “written language”; that is, literacy practices involve more than traditional “print” texts—literacy practices may also involve a wide array of visual texts, such as the images one sees on a television or computer screen. This project focuses on this wider array of texts in defining literacy practices. I argue that, while we need to be careful about how we define the term literacy, we also need to expand our definition to incorporate new forms of communication that are occurring as a result of technological developments. Again, literacy is no longer

confined to the medium of print texts; literacy today involves the use of a *variety* of forms of communication to convey information, which may still include, but are no longer limited to, print texts. Therefore, it is essential that we consider such media of communication in defining the term literacy; otherwise, we risk ignoring a wide array of literacy practices that are occurring in contemporary societies, failing, as so many have done before, to recognize the value of certain marginalized individuals' and groups' literacy practices.

Literacy and new literacies can be understood most effectively as a set of practices in which individuals participate. These sets of practices or, to borrow from David Barton and Mary Hamilton, "literacy practices," are social ways of demonstrating one's knowledge or literate abilities: "Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy" (7). Like Barton and Hamilton, I utilize "a social theory of literacy" (7) in this project, arguing that literacy practices "involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships[,] . . . includ[ing] people's awareness of literacy, constructions and discourses of literacy, how people talk about and make sense of literacy" (7). Because literacy practices are social practices, they are influenced by cultural expectations of behavior. Indeed, "literacy practices and values are constitutive of culture, and they are fashioned by culture" (Selfe and Hawisher 110). Thus, with Barton and Hamilton as well as with Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher, I argue that literacy practices reflect the values of a given culture. People within a given culture are expected to practice literacy in particular ways depending on who they are and where they come from. I would add that literacy practices function as a form of performance.

Indeed, literacy is intimately connected to identity, particularly in terms of gender and class. Just as we “perform” our gender and our class positions, we perform our literacy practices; literacy and identity are inextricably linked.

Because literacy and identity are so linked, literacy practices involve a certain amount of performance. As Thomas Newkirk puts it, “all forms of ‘self-expression,’ all of our ways of ‘being personal’ are forms of performance . . . [,] ‘a presentation of self’” (3). Writing, a form of self-expression, is a performance of the kind of self one wants to present to others. Literacy is a type of performance, one that is intricately tied to one’s sense of identity. People are expected to perform literacy in particular ways depending on their personal backgrounds; indeed, by watching how other people like us perform literacy, we learn how we are supposed to perform literacy ourselves. For instance, in Selfe and Hawisher’s study of how technological advances have influenced individual’s literacy practices, case studies of two twenty-something women revealed that “[w]ithin their home environments, the parents of both girls inculcated literacy values in their children . . . , encouraging most particularly those literacy practices they knew their children would later encounter as students in more formal instructional situations” (42). Unsurprisingly, then, people tend to perform literacy in particular ways that at least appear to be gendered and/or classed (i.e. girls often read and write like other girls and women, boys usually read and write like other boys and men, and individuals from various social classes tend to read and write like other people from the same or similar class backgrounds). While it is not always true that individuals perform literacy in particular ways depending on their personal backgrounds, significant patterns recur within a given society, which suggests that literacy practices tend to be developed along

class and gender lines. Those who do not fit into the culturally transcribed patterns of literate behavior tend to be ostracized and can face other troubling consequences for their “transgressions.”

As technologies continue to develop and afford new means of communicating in written, visual, and auditory forms, a reimagining of the term literacy or, more appropriately literacies, must include new ways of communicating messages between individuals afforded by technologies such as wikis, blogs, and other collaborative means of communication. My definition of literacy is, thus, influenced by scholarship in “new literacies”: “new literacies have what we call new ‘technical stuff’ and new ‘ethos stuff.’” (Lankshear and Knobel, “Sampling” 7). Such new ways of writing, they contend, are more “participatory” and “collaborative” (7) than previous literacies. I would argue that the writing being done online today, particularly through new technologies such as wikis, blogs, and GoogleDocs, among others, easily fits in with Lankshear and Knobel’s imagining of new literacies, particularly in terms of “new ‘ethos stuff,’” as such writing is inherently collaborative. That is, within the “online world,” the notion of a single-authored text, so privileged within many areas of the academy, is virtually nonexistent; online forms of communication are collaborative in nature, so writing is reimagined as a collaborative process. This is not to say that scholars have not previously perceived writing as a collaborative process; rather, scholars have tended to publish and ask their students to compose single-authored texts, and such publication and distribution of single-authored texts gives the impression that writing is a process completed almost in isolation by individuals rather than a process of collaboration with other individuals, even if the final product is produced by a single person.

Furthermore, new literacies allow “people . . . to take . . . ‘bits’ of cultural production that are in circulation and use them to create new ideas, concepts, artifacts and statements, . . . [and to] make something significantly new out of the remixed components” (Lankshear and Knobel 12). As literacy scholars, we need to take such conceptions of literacy into consideration. With the constant development of new technologies, new tools for and means of communication, we need to consider the ways in which literacy itself is changing. New literacies are important new forms of communication, forms of communication that college students bring with them into the composition classroom and that influence the ways these students communicate within our classes. As Cynthia Lewis puts it,

The question is whether we want to make school literacy more engaging for students and more meaningful to their present and future lives in a digitally mediated world. If so, then we need to understand the shifts in practices and epistemologies that have taken place and consider how these shifts should inform our teaching of reading and writing. (236)

I believe that most instructors of composition are concerned with their students’ engagement in their writing assignments; that is, I think we all want our students to enjoy writing in response to our assignments because their enjoyment of the writing task usually makes their writing more engaged and a more engaging read. Sometimes, though, I fear that our assignments forget to incorporate that meaningful aspect Lewis hints at. I agree with Lewis, then, that it is important, in constructing writing assignments, that we take into account how the tasks we ask students to complete will be relevant to their everyday lives and their current and future work. Part of this process of writing beyond

the academy is collaborative. While compositionists have long recognized that writing is collaborative, in that we acknowledge our sources through citation and typed acknowledgements, scholars in the field of composition have continued to publish mostly single-authored texts and to ask our students to complete mostly single-authored texts for our courses. However, most writing outside of the academy today is more collaborative in nature; thus, at the very least, we should be examining such writing to see what it looks like, what new opportunities it affords, and how it may be influencing the notions of writing and literacy students carry with them into our classrooms.

Literacy, Identity, and Gender

While an analysis of the relationships among literacy and other social groupings such as racial or ethnic identities would be valuable and should be considered in future work, this project focuses on relationships among literacy and identities, both in terms of gendered identities and class identities. I am particularly interested in the ways in which gendered and classed identities influence the literacy practices undergraduate students bring with them into the composition classroom. In this section, I respond to existing scholarship on the relationships between gendered identities and literacy practices; in the section which follows, I turn to a discussion of the relationships between classed identities and literacy. In the chapters that follow, I will demonstrate how these categories of identification influence individuals' literacy practices within popular television series and in online fan communities.

Judith Butler's argument that "gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real" (xxviii) is particularly useful to my project. Obviously, as Butler and others who theorize about gendered identities have argued, gender is fluid, more a form

of performance than a definitive representation of an individual person. This notion that identity is fluid is also significant in considering the relationships between gender and sexual orientation. Identifying oneself as being gendered in a particular way means adopting social norms of gendered behavior. People who deviate from these norms of behavior are often ostracized in a variety of ways. But people are more complex than the roles we play in our daily lives; we act in particular ways with particular groups of people in order to fit in. Indeed, as David Buckingham explains, “our identity is something we uniquely possess: It is what distinguishes us from other people. Yet on the other hand, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind” (1). Identity is individualized and may be fluid, but it also serves as a marker, a form of categorization in individuals’ relationships with one another. It is impossible, in fact, to identify oneself without relationship to others, to social categories.

Literacy practices are intimately related to these forms of identification; by performing literacy practices in particular ways, we inadvertently identify ourselves as participants in particular social groups. Literacy practices are also gendered. Socially, girls are expected to perform literacy practices in one way and boys are expected to perform literacy practices in quite another way; those who do not perform literacy practices in these socially sanctioned ways risk being rendered deviant and ostracized. Both literacy and gender are social practices, forms of performance that follow a set of standards or rules of behavior. As Amanda J. Godley explains, “[C]hildren have been shown to use literacy to make sense of the versions of masculinity and femininity they see in their lives and to imagine themselves as actors of them. . . . By writing themselves into different gendered social categories—like that of the ‘good girl’ or the ‘adventurous

boy’—children try on different gendered practices and identities” (273). Girls’ literacy practices often involve obedience to morals or rules and “appropriate” behavior, whereas boys’ literacy practices often involve breaking the rules and being adventurous. Those boys who prefer to read and write as an intellectual endeavor are deemed effeminate, and those girls who prefer to seek out adventure beyond the written word and to bend the rules are deemed bad, overstepping their bounds. Literate practices allow children to try on different gendered roles, but only certain gendered performances are sanctioned; children who choose the “wrong” gender roles are ostracized, rendered deviant. According to Buckingham, “Identity is developed by the individual, but it has to be recognized and confirmed by others” (3). Thus, literacy is as much about understanding one’s place, knowing how to perform the *right* roles, as it is about knowing *how* to read and write; to appropriate James Gee’s definition of “powerful literacy,” literacy is reading and writing and performing in the “right” way for the “right” purposes (“What Is”).

Previous studies have suggested that appropriately gendered literacy practices for women involve emotional fulfillment and subscribing to normative social behavior, such as being polite and deferring to others’ (usually male) authority. In their study of representations of literacy in popular films, Bronwyn Williams and Amy Zenger found that “[r]epresentations of male characters reading and writing link them to literacy as a powerful commodity. . . . Representations of women associate them with writing and reading as private, emotionally charged activities” (30). Moreover, for women, being literate also means adhering to “politeness strategies.” Rhiannon Bury writes, “Politeness strategies must . . . be understood as gendered. . . . ‘[L]adies’ . . . would have been

expected to speak modestly so as not to draw unwarranted attention to their intellect” (132). Though she is discussing historical attitudes about appropriate female behavior, Bury observes such behavior carrying over into the online communities she observes. Her study supports earlier findings in Brown and Gilligan’s psychological study that “[v]oice training by adults, especially adult ‘good women,’ undermines . . . girls’ experiences and reinforces images of female perfection by implying that ‘nice girls’ are always calm, controlled, quiet” (61). These expectations of female behavior within culture carry over into the classroom as well as into online writing spaces in sometimes quite disturbing ways. Indeed, within the classroom, children are often rewarded for performing literacy in appropriately sanctioned ways and punished for deviating from normalized notions of how literacy practices should be enacted. Thus, socially sanctioned literacy practices are reinforced within the classroom, particularly among girls who seek to please their instructors, as did the girls in Brown and Gilligan’s study. And girls who do not seek to please their instructors often face serious consequences, both in and outside of the classroom, for their refusals to defer to these authority figures.

Individuals within online communities can operate outside these normalized notions of gendered behavior. Because within spaces on the World Wide Web individuals are not physically marked as belonging to particular gendered or racial groups, they have more freedom to play with their identities, even, at times, adopting identities that vary significantly from their “real world” ones. Obviously, there are dangers involved in these spaces, as the identity negotiation afforded by online spaces allows people to prey on others; however, online spaces also offer avenues for individuals who do not fit normalized social categories to explore more marginalized aspects of their identities.

Online spaces, thus, offer significant opportunities for developing young women to resist normalized notions of gendered behavior, particularly in terms of their literacy practices. As Michele Polak explains, “[C]yberspace allows girls to enter in search of an identity, in search of a voice. . . . A space to enter is exactly what the developing adolescent girl most needs” (178) because “by confining girls to the narrative of the conventional feminine, even in visual representation, girls’ voices are silenced” (181). Conventionally, “good girls” are supposed to behave morally and be literate but not *too* literate; online communities developed and maintained by young girls and women provide important spaces for resisting such conventional approaches to literacy. Furthermore, girls are taught to always defer to authority: “Silence is the perspective in which women accept the powerlessness they have experienced, believing they have nothing important to say; blind obedience to authorities is extremely important” (Bender-Slack 19). Again, online writing communities provide spaces in which women and young girls can resist these cultural expectations, can develop their literacy skills in spite of social conventions which discourage them from openly practicing their literacy.

Not only do online writing communities provide spaces in which individuals can develop new literacies, but they also provide space in which individuals can play with their identities in ways previously unavailable to them. Polak contends that “gURLs can find a sense of self [online] . . . , creating not only a girl space for their own voices, but a space for other girls to interact, argue, discuss, brag, and vent about anything with no limitation on topics tied to any traditional feminine narrative” (189). Indeed, cyberspace opens up new possibilities for identity negotiation. As Rebecca Black suggests, “individuals may be positioned in certain ways by categories that have been authored for

them; however, they also may engage in dialogic negotiation with these ascribed roles, as they choose to discursively represent and situate themselves in ways that may challenge or subvert standard expectations” (95). Without physical features marking them female, women and young girls can more easily negotiate their identities or at least resist categorization in online communities. And this opportunity for identity negotiation is, of course, not limited to women. However, within the popular consciousness, people are still expected to behave in certain ways, and those who do not will still face certain consequences within certain groups of people. Additionally, we cannot assume that because *some* girls and women are using online communities to resist normalized notions of femininity that *the majority* of girls and women are doing so. Moreover, access to such sites can be limited, so many young girls and women may lack opportunities to negotiate their identities in such spaces. Social class is a particularly significant factor in the kinds of identities girls are able to adopt—those who have less access to these kinds of communities may be less aware that they are available to be enacted. Ultimately, for a variety of reasons, most women and girls continue to perform traditional feminine traits, just as most men and boys continue to perform traditional masculine traits.

Despite the fact that women are discouraged from broadcasting their knowledge and their literacy skills too openly, literacy is still often presented as a feminized activity. Such social perceptions carry into popular culture; for instance, within the popular films Williams and Zenger analyze “[t]oo much dependence on conventional literacy is unmasculine, unheroic. Literacy is power, but only to a point” (86). Indeed, within U.S. culture or at least popular culture, literacy is typically associated with femininity; traditionally masculine men and boys are associated with a lack of (interest in) literacy

practices. As I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, within popular television series like *Modern Family* and *Community*, traditionally masculine male characters tend to read sparingly, and when they read recreationally, they tend to read particular types of texts, such as magazines and manuals which assist them in developing their machismo rather than their intellect. Intellectual development through literacy is reserved for less masculine or more effeminate men and boys.

Within the popular consciousness, literacy is a feminized skill; men who are too literate are “effeminate” or “gay,” which, of course, properly trained heterosexual men do not want to be. Of course, this is not to say that men and boys do not read at all or even that they do not read recreationally; often, they do. Rather, it is the texts they choose to read that tend to be gendered. Christopher Grieg and Janette Hughes explain,

Informed by essentialist mindsets for ‘understanding boys’ behavior and their orientation to learning and reading preferences, a familiar rhetoric is often deployed . . . , which explicitly and implicitly marginalizes poetry while frequently promoting non-fiction books, technical manuals, video games, and comic books as suitable ‘boy-friendly’ material. This narrow view reflects a deep and persistent attitude about acceptable literacy genres for boys. (91)

While Grieg and Hughes’s study deals explicitly with educational policies and cultural attitudes towards literacy in Canada, their description of “‘boy-friendly’ material” is strikingly similar to the kinds of texts marketed to boys in the United States, as well as many other cultures. Just as children’s toys tend to be gendered, so do children’s reading materials; certain types of books are marketed to boys and others are marketed to girls.

Even those books marketed to both genders of children follow particular conventions to ensure that they are appropriately “masculine” for young boy readers. For instance, when J.K. Rowling wrote her *Harry Potter* book series, she intentionally used her first and middle initials rather than her first name because she feared young boys would not read her books if they knew they were written by a woman. Interestingly, while the books feature a male protagonist, young girls and women are among the series’s most avid fans. Both Rowling and Warner Brothers studios (who bought the rights to the books and produced the film adaptations) have actively courted these female fans, as well, suggesting that it is culturally acceptable for girls and women to be interested in “male-oriented” texts. Boys and men who are interested in “female-oriented” texts, on the other hand, risk being ostracized and feminized, inappropriately gendered.

Such perceptions of literacy extend far beyond popular culture, and often influence the behavior of students and instructors within the classroom. Within classroom spaces, students are expected to behave in particular ways depending on their genders. Male students who are “appropriately masculine,” particularly male student-athletes, are assumed to be less literate than their more “effeminate” counterparts, as well as their female classmates. In her study of an urban high school classroom, Godley found that “male athletes were assumed to be the weakest readers and writers . . . In neither case were these assumptions based on, or aligned with, students’ actual grades” (277). Such findings are not uncommon in scholarship on literacy, especially within scholarship about teaching composition. Indeed, many first-time composition teachers are warned before they enter the classroom that they should not have high expectations for their male athletes’ literacy practices. These cultural attitudes towards male student-athletes’ literacy

practices raise important questions. What other troubling attitudes do we carry with us into our classrooms? What kinds of literacy practices are being privileged in this scenario?

Moreover, these attitudes towards male student-athletes' literacy practices reflect a larger cultural attitude towards masculinity and expectations of male behavior. Michael D. Kehler writes, "Localized settings such as schools provide boys and young men with a number of opportunities to construct different masculinities" (261-62). Yet, most young men and boys tend to reinforce normalized notions of masculine behavior. Indeed, "[t]he performances of masculinities or the ongoing accomplishment of masculinities provides young men with a certain kind of currency and value for navigating the cultural spaces of schools" (262). While Kehler is not directly referring to literacy practices here, these behaviors certainly extend to literacy practices. Within schools, boys and men are often encouraged to practice literacy in particular ways based solely on the fact that they are boys or young men. Once again, those young men and boys who do not adopt such masculinities are often ostracized, marked as inappropriately gendered. In high school in particular, heteronormativity is powerful; boys who do not perform masculinity in heteronormative ways risk severe consequences for their actions. It is unsurprising, then, that so many of these heteronormative behaviors and fears of appearing effeminate carry into the first-year college writing classroom.

Because U.S. culture generally expects men to behave in hyper-masculine ways, properly trained male students often exhibit these hyper-masculine tendencies in their reading and writing practices. For instance, Lad Tobin writes about "those male narratives that I have come to hate" (56) or "male hero-as-antihero narratives that I have

learned or grown to resist” (57). According to Tobin, such “narratives . . . focus in clichéd language on acts of machismo. And though there are many male students who do not write in this form and some female students who do, there seems to be a general understanding in the field, supported by most of the published literature, that these narratives constitute a common genre of adolescent male writing” (58). Indeed, the kind of writing Tobin describes is quite often found in the composition classroom. Most composition instructors have seen the kind of narratives that Tobin describes, narratives which appropriate the cultural trope of “male hero-as-antihero.” Given how frequently this image is dispersed within popular media, it comes as little surprise that many male students carry it with them into the classroom. In literacy narratives, male students often describe their literacy practices in very resistant terms, presenting literacy as something they have to do for school, not something they enjoy. Like the antihero narratives Tobin describes, such literacy narratives often result in a portrayal of everyday literacy practices (i.e. reading and writing for pleasure or emotional fulfillment) as feminine. These stories imply that boys and men read and write only when necessary for scholarly or economic gain.

Once again, online spaces can function as sites of resistance for such normalized views of literacy and gender. Boys and men, like girls and women might find it easier to resist socially sanctioned gender roles within online communities, utilizing online writing spaces to negotiate or play with their identities, perhaps even adopting identity roles they cannot adopt in “real life.” Rebecca Black suggests that “there are lessons to be learned from sites such as FFN [FanFiction.net], where the absence of imposed or ascribed social roles enables adolescents from a range of different backgrounds to act both as teachers

and as learners” (96). She argues that such spaces provide opportunities for young people to negotiate their identities without physical or cultural markings. In other words, within online communities, individuals are not hampered by social expectations of their behavior, which enables them to play more freely with their identities. However, Angela Thomas argues that, for adolescents at least, the distinction between “real life” and “online life” might not be so clear: “[W]ithin these communities, as in their offline worlds, children and young people are struggling to come to terms with how to gain and maintain power, how to communicate with their peers, how to attract the opposite sex, and how to gain a sense of belonging with others” (173). While the implication here that all adolescents are interested in “how to attract the opposite sex” is problematic, reinforcing heteronormativity, her point about young people utilizing online communities as a means of fitting in is, nonetheless, important to consider. Indeed, she adds, “My argument here is that the online world is not at all divorced from their real worlds, or from the struggles experienced in real worlds” (173). Thus, online spaces, at least of the variety Thomas examines, may not be as democratic or as subversive as one might expect given the possibilities for play and identity negotiation they afford. In studying online writing communities, then, we must be careful not to exaggerate the possibilities they create for identity negotiation because “real life” experiences and emotions continue to factor in to the ways people communicate within these spaces.

On a social or cultural level, literacy practices tend to be gendered. Literacy itself is often treated as a feminine activity, despite the fact that most men read and write to some degree. Yet, despite the fact that literacy is feminized and women are expected to read and write on a fairly regular basis, women who are *too* literate and/or *too*

knowledgeable are perceived as stepping out of their place socially. Popular media such as television shows tend to reinforce these norms of behavior, showing characters practicing literacy in particular gendered ways. As I have argued, though, these notions of literacy practices being gendered are socially constructed; real people do not always practice literacy in the particular ways they are expected to according to their gender. However, those who deviate from normative gendered behaviors are often treated as outcasts, socially marginalized for their defiance. Online spaces, such as fan communities, offer a space in which individuals can escape physical identity markers, trying on and playing with different identities. While I do not want to exaggerate the possibilities offered by these online spaces, which can be limited in many ways and which introduce concerns about access, I argue that online spaces such as fan communities deserve attention from literacy scholars. Increasing numbers of people are beginning to make use of such media, developing new forms of communication that literacy scholars should be studying. In particular, those of us interested in the intersections between literacy and identity should examine more closely how identities are negotiated within these online spaces, which allow for a certain level of anonymity. How does this opportunity for anonymity influence people's literacy practices? Even within these spaces, can we ever escape those aspects of our identities that mark us in certain ways within the "real world"? And if we cannot shed these identity markers, how do they continue to influence the ways we perform literacy?

Literacy, Class, and Taste

In the preceding section, I have drawn upon scholarship which demonstrates that literacy has significant ties to identity, particularly in terms of gender and sexuality, and

that those who do not practice literacy in socially sanctioned ways sometimes face serious consequences for their deviations. In this section I shift my focus to the relationships between literacy and class. Punishment for not performing literacy in socially sanctioned ways is perhaps more significant along class lines. Social class is one of the primary categories used to identify people in the United States. As a society, we pretend that this is not the case, but on the whole, individuals living in the U.S. are marked and identified according to their class backgrounds. Class is utilized to maintain distinctions between individuals. Literacy educators have worked hard to promote literacy practices that will enable working-class students to transcend their class backgrounds in order to “move up” in the world. However, there are many problems involved in this approach to education. First, it may be problematic to assume that “moving up” necessarily means leaving behind the working class; it may also be problematic to assume that everyone from the working class even wishes to do so. Second, as recent scholarship has shown, home communities are often significant barriers to certain types of literacy acquisition, which presents a wide array of dilemmas for literacy educators. Third, popular representations of class (when they exist) can promote problematic views of social class and reinforce social hierarchies that are difficult to combat in the classroom. That said, I believe it is worth examining popular representations of literacy, class, identity, taste, and cultural capital in order to better understand where our students are coming from when they enter our classroom both in terms of their own classed backgrounds and their understandings of how social class works. Such discussions will (and should) also inevitably alter our own understandings of class as teachers.

Class and identity have been shown to have important ties to literacy practices within much scholarship in the fields of composition and education. According to James Paul Gee, “Privileged children . . . often get an important head start before school at home on the acquisition of . . . academic varieties of language; less privileged children . . . often do not” (3). Thus, children who come from less economically advantaged backgrounds are less likely to speak and write within sanctioned forms of discourse when they enter the classroom; these kids are at a disadvantage because they come from homes where academically “approved” forms of language have not been privileged. Moreover, Donna Dunbar-Odom writes in *Defying the Odds* that “class marks us” (10) and “the primary concern of schooling is not what we learn but that we learn our place within the capitalist mode of production” (12). In order to “move up” in this capitalist system, those who come from the working class must leave their “home” communities behind: “School can certainly open doors to other worlds and other ways of living in those worlds for individuals, but those doors can easily swing closed behind them and leave families behind” (Dunbar-Odom 99). People who come from more privileged backgrounds, Dunbar-Odom argues, do not have to make such choices; they already have access to the ways of thinking and writing privileged by schools. Dunbar-Odom’s own experience of leaving behind her working-class family to become an academic underscores this claim. Through references to her own experience, Dunbar-Odom illuminates the fact that members of the working class often must abandon some sense of who they are and where they come from in order to attain cultural capital. This choice between retaining one’s “home identity” and one’s “academic identity” is typically more acute for individuals who come from working-class backgrounds than those coming from middle- and upper-

class backgrounds because, as Gee and Dunbar-Odom indicate, those coming from the middle and upper classes have already been “bred” to understand the “middle-class” literacy practices that are expected of them when they enter academic spaces.

Not everyone agrees, though, about how educators should address these class distinctions. Whereas Dunbar-Odom is concerned with this shift between the working-class self and the academic self that results from members of the working class moving into academic spaces, Lisa Delpit does not necessarily see such a shift as a problem: “[P]arents who don’t function within that culture [‘the culture of power’] often want . . . to ensure that the school provides their children with discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken and written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society” (285). For Delpit, education is about helping children access the language codes, the discourses they have not learned in their homes for a variety of reasons. Moreover, she says, not teaching children these codes, “imply[ing] to children or adults . . . that it doesn’t matter how you talk or how you write is to ensure their ultimate failure” (292). Indeed, there are certain sanctioned ways of speaking, thinking, and writing, those ways of speaking, thinking, and writing mark people as being members of certain social classes, and denying that these codes need to be taught to children guarantees that such class distinctions will remain intact.

Within popular culture, as within most culture in general, social class tends to be effaced: “The working class tends to be nearly invisible and almost mute” (MacKenzie 101). Unlike gender and race, which carry with them physical marks of difference, class is easy to ignore because (in most cases), especially in the college classroom where the vast majority of students who walk through the door are from the middle or upper classes

or have learned to exhibit the values of the middle and upper classes, it is nearly impossible to look at a person and determine with absolute certainty what class that person is a member of. Add to that the fact that class is rarely represented within popular culture. A close examination of the prime-time line-ups for five major television networks (NBC, ABC, CBS, FOX, and TBS) reveals that the majority of the shows aired on week nights (when the highest number of viewers tune in) deal primarily with middle- or upper-class characters. The lack of working-class characters on network television shows demonstrates that as a culture, the United States works hard to conceal the working class, to pretend that we are all members of the middle class. Moreover, within many of these television shows, characters who are clearly members of the upper class from a financial standpoint are frequently passed off as members of the middle class, reinforcing a perception that the majority of Americans fall within the middle class and further marginalizing the working class, who appear even further away based on their financial status.

The lack of representation of the working class on popular television series is reflective of a larger cultural attempt to erase or elide class differences. Class distinctions also influence everyday human experiences, in which those who have more financial capital tend to also have more cultural capital:

The embodied cultural capital of the previous generations functions as a sort of advance . . . which, by providing from the outset the example of culture incarnated in familiar models, enables the newcomer to start acquiring the basic elements of the legitimate culture, from the beginning, that is, in the most unconscious and impalpable way. (Bourdieu 70-71)

Cultural capital is, thus, inherited by younger generations within households where having certain types of knowledge is privileged, and those households tend to belong to members of the middle and upper classes. These individuals have both greater access to cultural capital and greater access to newer technologies and devices for developing their literacy practices. Thus, literacy scholars have been and need to continue paying attention to class disparities in conjunction with literacy practices and cultural capital.

Taste and cultural capital are typically associated with the elite (and sometimes with members of the middle class). In the introduction to *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu writes, “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (6), adding that “art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil [sic] a social function of legitimating social differences” (7). According to Bourdieu, then, taste, art, and cultural consumption all work to differentiate among groups of people, working to create a class system that privileges certain ways of thinking, speaking, writing, and other forms of engagement or conversation among people. That is, people are identified or marked as members of a certain class based upon their particular tastes or access to cultural capital. John Storey also discusses this issue of class privilege with regard to culture: “It would appear that to appreciate culture, one has to be already cultured—making culture look suspiciously like a class privilege” (17). Taste and cultural capital belong to the elite; in order to gain cultural capital, then, one must either be born into the elite class or become educated in elite ways of thinking, writing, and speaking, thereby abandoning in some sense her or his identity within a non-elite class.

Though I have been advocating the use of new media and new literacies in the composition classroom, then, I am well aware that as instructors we need to be mindful of

these class differences within our classroom spaces, making our classroom practices and assignments accessible to *all* students, not just those from more privileged backgrounds. Doing so will inevitably require dedicating some time to helping students who are unfamiliar with new media learn to utilize them and justifying our use of these media to both our students and others within academia. However, I contend that in order to participate as literate citizens in an increasingly technological world, students need to be aware of and know how to communicate through new media. While it is not our job as instructors of composition to teach students technological skills (how to use computers, how to type, etc.), it is our job to familiarize them with various forms of communication utilized by writers. If the composing process is becoming more tied to new media and new literacies, then, does it not follow that we should be bringing these media and literacies into our classrooms, ensuring that more individuals know how to write in these spaces?

Fandom

The two previous sections focused on ties between literacy and gendered and classed identities. This section focuses on fandom as a type of identity marker, exploring the relationship between fandom and cultural capital. Fandom is a type of identity marker; identifying oneself as a “fan” carries with it a certain weight that influences how others see a person. As Henry Jenkins points out, “the term ‘fan’[,]” which derives from the term “fanatic,” “was originally evoked in a somewhat playful fashion and was often used sympathetically by sports writers, [but] it never fully escaped its earlier connotations of religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession, and madness” (*Textual* 12). The term “fan,” then, tends to carry a negative connotation,

categorizing the fan as some sort of a freak, a person obsessed with the object of her or his affinity. Applications of the term “fan” also differ depending on the fan’s gender: “[T]he comic fan and the psychotic fan are usually portrayed as masculine, although frequently as de-gendered, asexual, or impotent, [while] the eroticized fan is almost always female (the shrieking woman . . .)” (Jenkins, *Textual* 15). Once again, those labeled “fans” tend to be portrayed as obsessive and freakish, as weirdos who care way too much about the things they are fans of.

Meanwhile, those who enjoy “higher” forms of art, tend to be categorized in quite different ways. Roberta Pearson points out that while numerous terms exist for participants in popular culture, such as “fans/buffs/enthusiasts/devotees/aficionados/cognoscenti/ connoisseurs[,]” few of these terms are utilized by individuals who enjoy so-called high culture (98). She also points out that “[t]he absence of a single agreed-upon name signals the invisibility in which power often cloaks itself. Those involved in popular or middle-brow culture are generally seen as fans . . . and the like; their firm categorization is a social judgment, sometimes a negative one. The adherents of high culture are similarly categorized, but the multiplication of labels avoids negative connotation” (98). Indeed, as Pearson goes on to demonstrate, there is a significant difference between labeling a person as a fan and labeling oneself as “‘admirer,’ ‘enthusiast,’ ‘devotee,’ ‘aficionado’” terms which “disassociated them from the excessive affect and hormone-induced behavior connoted by fan” (107). However, more recently, the term “fan” has come, at times, to carry a different meaning when adopted by the individual whom it describes. Indeed, the term “fan” functions almost as a badge of honor for those who participate within fan cultures.

By declaring oneself a “fan,” a person takes on a certain identity. This identity varies greatly depending on what one is a fan of.

Within U.S. culture, people are judged by what they like and dislike in often quite disturbing ways. Popular culture is one of the ripest areas for this judgment. According to John Storey’s history of popular culture, “the invention of popular culture as mass culture was in part a response to middle-class fears engendered by industrialization, urbanization, and the development of an urban-industrial working class” (16). Mass culture is categorized in stark contrast to high culture, the culture of the elite, and the distinction between the two echoes a fear of true democracy. In order to maintain this hierarchy of high and low culture, critics had to develop a sense that those who would be interested in elements of mass culture were intellectually (and perhaps even morally) inferior. Thus, critics of mass culture have developed the notion of the “cultural dupe”—an individual who cannot see that she or he is being oppressed by culture, particularly by her or his tastes within a culture. According to this logic, cultural dupes are often drawn to mass culture because they are easily controlled and fooled into seeing value in inferior products: “The more blunted our imaginations become, the more susceptible we become to the pernicious content of mass culture” (Storey 29). The only alternative, then, to mass culture is through education. After all, “Although education would never bring ‘culture’ to the working class, it might bring discipline, which in turn might remove the temptations of trade unionism, political agitation, and cheap entertainment” (Storey 20). In this schema, education is about controlling, not empowering individuals from the working class. Indeed, education is designed here as a way of reinforcing class

distinctions, ensuring that those who have the most power, money, and education control what counts as taste and culture.

Cultural capital also has important ties to the notion of fandom. People who are classified or who identify themselves as “fans” are traditionally assumed to lack cultural capital—because they glory in elements of popular culture (or mass culture), these individuals appear to have inferior tastes. Again, mass cultural is associated with a lower form of taste possessed by cultural dupes and the uneducated masses. Properly trained individuals will adopt interests in more elite forms of entertainment. Elite forms of entertainment, such as the opera or the Shakespearean theatre (both of which, of course, were stolen from the masses and appropriated into “high culture”), are “purer” than those consumed by the masses: “To successfully escape the culture industries, art had to supposedly ‘purify’ itself. Instead of representations of reality, it turned to representations of itself” (Storey 42). Ultimately, according to Storey, “what matters is not what you consume but how you consume it” (46). Fans defy the rules of social order by refusing to respond to culture in these sanctioned ways. By passionately engaging with their favorite cultural products, fans resist the move towards critical distance so privileged within elite and educational systems. According to Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, “[f]ans, for better or worse, tend to engage with . . . texts not in a rationally detached but in an emotionally involved and invested way” (10) of the type that is traditionally denigrated by the elite. As Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington point out, even within academic studies of fandom, “[f]or all their sympathy, early fan scholars who were outsiders to the fan communities they studied ultimately pulled back from their observations” (3). Within academia, as within other elite circles of culture, emotional or

“critical” distance tends to be privileged, for being emotionally invested in the object of study is deemed uncritical and, therefore, problematic. Of course, logic and emotion are not mutually exclusive and typically work in conjunction with one another, but members of the elite classes tend to resist emotional responses to objects of study in order to promote at least a semblance of objectivity. Once again, fandom openly defies these attempts at objectivity, creating, instead, spaces in which logical or reasoned and emotional responses to the works being examined are inseparable.

More recently, fan scholarship has shifted in many ways from observation to participant-observation as more, to borrow a term from Henry Jenkins’s blog “aca-fans,” have begun to publish scholarship on elements of popular culture of which they are personally fans. Indeed, in more recent scholarship on fandom, there is almost a requirement of “outing” oneself as a fan; much of this scholarship contains some sort of pronouncement that the scholar is a fan of whatever she or he is studying. Being an insider, knowing what it means to be a fan gives scholars within fan studies a certain amount of clout both with other scholars and with other fans. Again, fandom is an identity marker that fans today seem to wear proudly, and fan scholars seem to be taking part in that self-identification. For instance, Roberta Pearson writes that a friend suggested to her that “fans like himself engage in aesthetic reflection or are temporarily moved by cultural texts but that fans like me incorporate the cultural texts as part of their self-identity, often going on to build social networks on the basis of shared fandoms” (101-02). She goes a step farther than her friend, saying, “I accept the word ‘fan,’ where others would reject it, but apply it to those cultural texts most central to my identity” (102). Pearson openly acknowledges her fandom, citing it as a part of her identity. Thus,

her scholarship retains an emotional element that prevents it from exhibiting a complete critical distance. Jenkins similarly “outs” himself in the introduction to *Convergence Culture*: “I can’t claim to be a neutral observer in any of this. For one thing, I am not simply a consumer of many of these media products; I am also an active fan” (12). This shift towards acknowledging one’s affinities in scholarship is an attempt to legitimize the practice of fandom. However, despite moves made by scholars within the field of fan studies, fans continue to hold a marginal status within academia and within U.S. culture at large.

Because fans tend to be marginalized within social circles, treated as abnormal and sometimes as “freaks” who defy the rules of “natural” social decorum, they have had to make a choice about their social status—remain on the fringes or abandon their pleasures. Many fans have chosen to remain on the fringes, happily adopting a marginal status, wearing it as a badge of honor. Further, fans have used this marginal status as a means of subversion at times, undermining rules of behavior and etiquette not just by openly asserting their affinities but also by openly pilfering products of which they are fans, reappropriating this found material into their own products. According to Jenkins, “Fans have always been early adapters of new media technologies . . . Fans are the most active segment of the media audience, one that refuses to simply accept what they are given, but rather insists on the right to become full participants” (*Convergence* 135). Indeed, fans become actively, passionately engaged in the texts of which they are fans. While there are levels of fandom and, thus, levels of participation, fans do not passively absorb the things they are fans of (e.g. television shows, films, games, and so on); instead, they actively engage with those products, often appropriating them into new texts

and even new media, making them, in a sense, their own. Still, according to Rebecca Tushnet, “fans tend to see their legal status as similar to their social status: marginal and, at best, tolerated rather than accepted as a legitimate part of the universe of creators” (60). Thus, though fans actively engage with the products they love, they continue to recognize that their love is desired, but their creativity is not desired by the “owners” of those products. We are meant to look but not touch.

Interestingly, while fans are willing at times to subvert social norms, choosing to adopt marginalized social positions and poaching material from their favorite cultural products, they still develop their own social codes or rules of behavior. Despite the fact that there is often more freedom to write, to play, and to “be an expert” in online communities, these communities still have rules about what counts. For instance, as Jenkins discusses in *Textual Poachers*, “an individual’s socialization into fandom often requires learning ‘the right way’ to read as a fan, learning how to employ and comprehend the community’s particular interpretive conventions” (89). Other scholars have found similar results in their studies of online communities. Indeed, in “Hello newbie! ☺ **big welcome hugs** hope u like it here as much as i do! ☺,” Julie Davies writes, “[T]he Wiccan communities [Davies observed online] show an awareness of an inherited social history, of ties to an ancient community that articulated a prescribed code of conduct” (213). Furthermore, “Ritual language provides the community with identity and territory markers; to use the language betrays insider knowledge” (214). Though Davies is speaking here of a community of Wiccans rather than a group of fans following a television show, similar rules apply in fan communities of television shows. Being a member of an online community means learning and following the rules about what and

how to write and how to participate. Jenkins's discussion of the *Survivor* spoiler community offers further evidence of how this plays out in television show fan communities—members of the community became frustrated by ChillOne, a community member, claiming that by revealing too much information too accurately, ChillOne “hadn't ‘spoiled’ the season; he ‘ruined’ it” (51). Fan communities develop systems of rules for writing, and those who do not follow the rules can be rejected. The preceding sentence sounds strikingly similar to what happens in the classroom—those who “get” the rules of how to write (how to “play the game”) succeed; those who do not are rejected.

Methodology

Research in online fan communities is a complex process. Heidi McKee and James Porter ask an important set of questions about this research:

Should researchers treat the material in online spaces such as discussion forums, chats, or virtual worlds as published work by *authors*—and thus available to be quoted following fair use and copyright guidelines governing the public domain? . . . Or should such online material be treated as communications among *persons*—and thus the researcher is not so much a reader but an observer, studying the real-time or archived interactions of persons to which different use ethics apply? And even if it is clear to the researcher that she is an observer studying persons, are those observations in a public space when informed consent is not needed (like a street corner in a face-to-face study)? Or are the observations conducted in a private space for which informed consent might well be needed (such as

the face-to-face equivalent of conversations in coffee shops or in homes)?

And, importantly, who determines the public-private classification of particular online sites: site administrators? researchers? site users and participants? (5-6)

In order to conduct ethical research, research that fairly and accurately represents its participants, the researcher needs to answer these questions. Though participants in fan forums do not necessarily intend their work to be cited by others, by posting to online forums and thereby making their work available for public consumption, I would argue that these participants are at least, to some degree, “publishing” their work. By posting their ideas in online forums, participants in those sites invite response to their ideas. They write with the intention that others will read their work and respond to it. As a result, I believe the work that these users have posted in online forums is subject to fair use, and, thus, researchers have a right to quote from it, so long as they follow the same rules for quotation and attribution they would in response to any printed work. However, I believe that participants in these forums also deserve a certain level of privacy. By selecting usernames rather than using their own names on these forums, these participants choose to keep their identities private, and ethical research practices demand that researchers respect their participants’ privacy. Thus, I treat the work published within online forums as I would work published in a print text, but rather than citing the author’s name when I quote from these forums, I cite the username to protect these participants’ privacy.

In conducting research for this project, I applied a multi-pronged methodology, including textual analysis, case studies, surveys, and interviews. First, I apply textual analysis to both the television shows *Modern Family* and *Community* and the writing in

several online fan communities, including communities developed within a 300-level composition course at the University of Louisville. My project takes a similar approach to the work done by Bronwyn Williams and Amy Zenger in *Popular Culture and Representations of Literacy* and Rhiannon Bury in *Cyberspaces of Their Own*. I begin each of the first two chapters with close readings of the series I am analyzing. This dissertation is driven by several questions, including: How do people in the United States practice literacy? How does one's gender influence her or his literacy practices? How does one's social class influence her or his literacy practices? And, how do popular cultural representations of gender and social class influence individuals' performances of gender and class, as well as their perceptions of how they are "supposed to" perform literacy according to gendered and classed norms. Textual analysis of these television series enables me to answer these questions by demonstrating how gender, social class, and literacy are represented within popular culture. In conducting this textual analysis, I draw upon the theories of gender, class, literacy, fandom, and popular and participatory culture discussed above.

Then, I move into analysis of fan sites and forums dedicated to each series. *Modern Family* and *Community* were selected as subjects for this analysis because they are currently popular television series that have inspired deep engagement within online fan groups. Both series have recently completed their third seasons. In analyzing the representations of literacy and identity within both series, I watched every episode of each series several times, focusing in each chapter on episodes which dealt explicitly with issues of literacy (both in terms of characters actually reading and writing and characters talking about reading and writing), gender and class (again, in terms of how gender and

class are portrayed through the characters actions and dialogue). This textual analysis is designed to answer questions such as how literacy and identity are represented within each of the texts I am examining. However, I recognize, as DePew notes, that “[t]extual analysis limits researchers to informed speculation” (54). Thus, I apply other methods of research to this project, including case studies, surveys, and interviews. According to DePew, “[A]s researchers, we should be examining more features of the communicative situation rather than merely an artifact it produces. What else can we learn about digital rhetoric when we also study the rhetor’s intentions? The audiences’ response to the text? How local contexts shape this interaction?” (52). Textual analysis in and of itself does not allow us to answer these questions. Nor does textual analysis alone allow me to answer all of my research questions, particularly questions about how writers’ identities and personal backgrounds influence the ways in which they write, the ways in which they respond to images or representations of literacy and identity within their favorite television shows, or the ways in which they identify themselves. Thus, other methods, such as case studies and interviews are warranted.

Following in the footsteps of Rebecca Black, Rhiannon Bury, Angela Thomas, and Bronwyn Williams, I conducted case studies of several fan communities to explore their written responses to the television series’ representations of literacy and identity. In chapter two, I offer case studies of the Facebook fan page “Let Cam & Mitchell Kiss!” and the website of the “No Cussing Club.” Initially, I searched for fan sites dedicated solely to the series *Modern Family*, but at the time this research was conducted no such sites existed or had fan forums which I could analyze in order to answer my research questions. As I began writing the chapter, I recalled having read about the “Let Cam &

Mitchell Kiss” Facebook page, and I chose to cite it within the chapter because this group’s response to the heteronormativity of *Modern Family* not only influenced the way the series was produced but also influenced my own reading of the show. As I finished drafting the chapter, I read an article about the No Cussing Club’s response to an episode of the series, so I chose to include that group’s response, as well, in order to demonstrate a failed attempt for an online community to influence the production of a series. In chapter three, I provide a case study of the forum on the fan site *Dan Harmon Sucks*. As with *Modern Family*, I searched for fan forums dedicated to the series *Community*. The *Dan Harmon Sucks* forum was a top hit in a Google search for fans of the series, and I selected the site based on its highly dedicated fan base (which is reinforced by a 2012 article on *Vulture* of the 25 most dedicated fan communities). In chapter four, I provide case studies of three wiki-based fan groups developed in a 300-level composition course at the University of Louisville (these groups are dedicated to the series *It’s always Sunny in Philadelphia*, *Intervention*, and *Castle*). Prior to conducting this research, I obtained IRB approval from the University of Louisville to study both the online fan communities and the fan communities developed within the upper-division composition course.

Moreover, I selected these particular groups for this study because they represent currently active fan responses to the television series selected for this project and because they offer interesting insights into the guiding questions for my project. Conducting these case studies gives me a more holistic view, the “context as well as details” (MacNealy 197), of these online writing communities, focusing in particular on the ways in which fans are responding to images of literacy and identity within popular television series. In developing these case studies, I read several months’ worth of posts to the *Dan*

Harmon Sucks forum, all posts to the “Let Cam & Mitchell Kiss” discussion thread, the home page and mission statement for the “No Cussing Club,” as well as news articles related to the group, and all posts to the fan groups created within the 300-level composition course.

Though I became a member of the *Dan Harmon Sucks* forum in order to conduct this research, I do not participate on that forum, nor do I participate on the other public forums. Because I was the instructor for the 300-level course, the students enrolled in that course understood that I would be reading their posts to the course wiki, but I served as a silent observer to their fan groups. This method also allows me to more closely examine the ways in which participants negotiate their identities within the larger (online) communities in which they are participating. Of course, one danger of case study research is that the studies are limited to small groups of people or objects, and thus the results are not generalizable (MacNealy 199). However, case study research is still valuable because it allows us to observe how individuals’ experiences participating in these kinds of groups influence their literacy practices over time. Because this project is asking how popular representations of the intersections among literacy, gender, and social class influence individuals’ literacy practices, a long-term study of how individuals’ literacy practices evolved in response to these television shows was warranted. However, my own perception of how these individuals’ literacy practices evolved as a result of watching and writing about these series was not sufficient. I had to also consider the participants’ own perceptions of how their viewing of the shows, as well as their own backgrounds influenced their literacy practices.

Another concern raised by case study research (or any methodology for that matter) is the ethics of representation; are participants within the case study represented fairly and accurately. In order to ensure that the participants in this study have been represented fairly and accurately, I asked them to participate in follow-up interviews and respond to the case studies I had conducted of them³. In particular, because the participants in the English 309 course were my own students, I wanted to make sure that they felt that their work and ideas were respected and taken seriously both within and outside the classroom, and that they were under no obligation to participate as subjects of this study. While the course itself required them to participate in fan communities with their classmates and compose essays analyzing and reflecting on their work within those communities, they were in no way required to participate in this study. Most of them gave permission for me to quote from their fan communities and their papers in this project, and about half of them also agreed to participate in face-to-face interviews with me after the course was completed. Again, I believe it is essential to conducting this kind of research that we allow participants to have a voice in the project, to be able to comment on how they are represented within the work and to have the option of opting out of the project in order to protect their right to privacy.

I include both electronic and face-to-face interviews in this project. My selection process is simple; I contact active participants⁴ within these online fan communities and invite them to participate in my research study by completing a survey⁵. At the end of the survey, I ask participants if they are willing to participate in a follow-up interview with me either via email or in person. Of course, because I have selected particular individuals

³ For a more detailed description of how the research was conducted in my classroom, see chapter four.

⁴ Descriptions of participants in this study can be found in chapters three and four.

⁵ Copies of both the survey and interview questions are included in Appendix A.

to participate in this project based on my interest in their posts and because interview participants are self-selected, my results are somewhat limited, resulting in subjective analysis. Again, by incorporating a multi-pronged methodology, I counter some of this subjectivity by involving a variety of means of analysis, including the participants' reflection on and analysis of their own work in addition to my own. These participants' comments both in the survey and in follow-up interviews offer important insights into my work and into the field of composition. Of particular interest to our field is the fact that the participants on these forums share many of our values about literacy, which I will demonstrate in later chapters. Furthermore, I agree with DePew that "[b]y including the agents into data collection and giving them a voice in the reporting of the data . . . , researchers take a more ethical, and potentially more empowering position" (56). Thus, interviewing those whose work I cite seems appropriate, even necessary to ensure that my research is being conducted ethically.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. Chapter two, "Wake up and smell the internet, Grandma': Literacy, Identity, and Fandom in *Modern Family*," begins with an analysis of the series *Modern Family*. Within this analysis, I explore the intersecting relationships among literacy, gender, and fandom throughout the series. Focusing on several specific episodes, I discuss the ways the series reinforces traditional views of literacy practices as gendered practices. I also examine the ways in which the series reinforces a heteronormative view of gender. Later in the chapter, I discuss the ways in which social networking sites and other online sources have been utilized to protest aspects of the series's production. Ultimately, I argue that the use of social networking

and other fan responses to the series offers a significant view into the potential for social progress afforded by new literacies and new media.

Chapter three, “‘Just tell me the rules, and I will follow’: Literacy, Identity, and Fandom in *Community* and danharmonsucks.com,” focuses on the relationships between literacy, class, and fandom. Like chapter two begins with an analysis of *Modern Family*, this chapter begins with an analysis of the television series *Community*. Rather than offering a close reading of individual episodes of the series, in this chapter I focus instead on the show’s overarching themes of inclusivity, exclusivity, and community. Following this analysis of the series itself, I discuss the relationship between the series’s creator and showrunner Dan Harmon and his cast and crew, as well as his relationship with his fans. Through this discussion, I demonstrate how Harmon has redefined the role of the television showrunner, as well as the relationship a series’s creator has with his or her fans. Finally, I provide a case study of the fan forum on the site danharmonsucks.com, focusing on the ways in which the forum functions as a community.

Chapter four, “‘New Kids’ and ‘Armchair Fanatics’: Television Show Fan Communities and the Composition Classroom,” takes a pedagogical turn, offering a practical approach to integrating the ideas laid out in the preceding chapters into the composition classroom. The chapter provides case studies of three groups of students enrolled in a 300-level composition course at the University of Louisville, who developed fan communities through a shared course wiki throughout the fall semester of 2011. This chapter analyzes the ways in which each group negotiated the “rules” of participation and how issues of gender played into those negotiations.

The conclusion of this project suggests ideas for moving forward from this project. In this brief chapter, I review the concepts I have developed throughout the previous four chapters, arguing that further studies of television show and other fan communities deserve further attention as sites of inquiry. Further, I argue that projects like the one discussed in chapter four should be developed within composition classrooms. As we move towards an increasingly digital world, such projects enable students to develop new literacies and new ways of thinking not previously afforded. If we do not begin to incorporate such practices into our classrooms, we risk being left in the wake of new literacies and new technologies.

CHAPTER II

“WAKE UP AND SMELL THE INTERNET, GRANDMA”: LITERACY, IDENTITY, AND FANDOM IN *MODERN FAMILY*

Introduction

In a 2011 episode of the mockumentary comedy series *Modern Family*, Luke Dunphy (Nolan Gould) asks, “You know more people have died hiking than in the entire Civil War?” His sister Alex (Ariel Winter) asks, “Okay, *what* book did you read that in?” Luke replies, “Book? Wake up and smell the internet grandma” (“Mother’s Day”). This conversation draws on several stereotypes associated with U.S. culture, gendered identity, and the Internet. Ultimately, the conversation reinforces contemporary notions of male and female behavior (many boys are uninterested in intellectual pursuits, while certain types of girls are highly intelligent and constantly question everyone else’s ideas), as well as a belief that information disseminated online is inaccurate and anyone who reads it automatically and uncritically believes it. Moreover, the conversation suggests that young people have no need for or interest in books unless they are nerds (which, as I will discuss in more depth later, Alex is). The conversation further reinforces a larger social fear of information contained online, particularly information that is widely available, information that might “corrupt” young people’s minds, as it has clearly done to Luke. Still, in the United States and particularly within popular culture, a perception exists that young people today spend most of their time within virtual worlds, whether they’re using these spaces for fun or for work.

Popular television series like the mockumentary *Modern Family* tend to reinforce this notion. In the pilot episode, for instance, the show opens on a scene at the Dunphy family's home. Claire Dunphy (Julie Bowen) yells for her kids to come down to breakfast. Her fifteen-year-old daughter Haley (Sarah Hyland) enters the room texting and asks, "*Why* are you guys yelling at us when we're all the way upstairs? Just text us" ("Pilot"). The stereotypical teenage girl, dressed in a skimpy outfit and only halfway engaged in the conversation, Haley is completely reliant on her cell phone to communicate with her friends. Her sister Alex, on the other hand, stands in for a different stereotype of the pre-teen girl, one who utilizes technologies for academic success. For instance, when her parents Claire and Phil (Ty Burrell) decide the entire family needs to go a week without using technology, Alex complains, "I have a *huge* science paper due" ("Unplugged"). Whereas Haley uses technology primarily for social networking, Alex uses it primarily to be a successful student. Luke, meanwhile, uses technology to get information as quickly and easily as possible, even if that means approaching that information completely uncritically. Just as Haley's and Alex's uses of literacy and technology are gendered, so are Luke's.

Literacy, technology, and identity are thus intimately tied within portrayals of characters using literacy and technology on the show. Within *Modern Family* fan communities, literacy, technology, and identity also tend to work hand-in-hand. Indeed, fans utilize social media and other forms of new and digital media to respond to the series, to develop their own identities as fans of the series, and to influence the series's production. Technology and literacy, therefore, function as important parts of the fan experience in response to this and other popular television shows. In *Modern Family's*

case, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, social media and literacy practices function within fan culture as a means of protest against social norms of behavior and sexual identity. While fans have mostly refrained from overt critiques of the series, in one case, which will be discussed at length in this chapter, fan outrage over the portrayal of gay characters on the series ultimately and significantly influenced how *Modern Family* dealt with the issue. In a second case, which will also be discussed in more depth later in this chapter, fans angered by the use of profanity on the series also attempted to alter the production of the show to a less successful degree.

The Internet, then, which has served as a site of fear for so many adults in contemporary U.S. culture, has enabled protest to move in new directions not previously afforded by earlier means of communication. Moreover, fandom has come to carry a more positive weight as an identity marker in the age of new and digital media, which have enabled fans to enact positive social change in ways they previously could not. Unfortunately, the term “fan” continues to carry a certain negative weight among many, particularly among academics, eliding fan involvement in such important social movements. I argue, then, that as academics, we need to pay further attention to the positive moves fans are making online in order to enact social change, seeing them as small but nonetheless important moves towards the social progress we claim to hope for. Moreover, the kinds of participatory practices fans are engaging in within these online spaces are significant regardless of whether they ultimately effect social progress because they demonstrate new levels of engagement with issues of identity and social status, particularly with regard to gender and sexuality. In order to develop this argument, I begin this chapter with an analysis of gender and literacy practices within the series

Modern Family, demonstrating how the series simultaneously reinforces and attempts to subvert normative notions of the relationships between gender, identity, and literacy. Having analyzed the series's portrayal of the relationships between gendered identities and literacy, I move into an analysis of two fan-led protests against the show's portrayals of social norms of behavior and sexual identities in order to demonstrate the potential power of fan-led grassroots movements to alter the production of television series. Again, it does not much matter whether the fans ultimately change the directions the series take; what is more significant is the fact that fans are collectively participating in many of the same kinds of interrogations of identity and social status that we believe are important to develop, that we seek to get our students involved in, and those are the types of conversations that ultimately lead to social progress.

The Modern Family

As its title suggests, *Modern Family* is intended as a portrayal of the contemporary U.S. family. In the pilot episode, we are first introduced to the Dunphy clan: thirty-something stay-at-home mom Claire, thirty-something realtor Phil, fifteen-year-old daughter Haley, twelve-year-old daughter Alex, and ten-year-old son Luke. Next, we meet the Pritchett-Delgado family: sixty-something business man Jay (Ed O'Neill), who is Claire's father; thirty-something stay-at-home mom Gloria (Sofia Vergara), his second wife, who is younger than Claire; and ten-year-old Manny Delgado (Rico Rodriguez). Finally, we meet the Pritchett-Tucker family: thirty-something corporate (and later environmental) lawyer Mitchell (Jesse Tyler Ferguson), Claire's younger brother; thirty-something stay-at-home dad and former school music teacher Cameron Tucker (Eric Stonestreet); and newly adopted Vietnamese baby Lily, who is

aged to a pre-schooler in season three. It appears that we meet the Dunphys first because they are the most “traditional” of the three family units; in addition to their significant age difference, Jay and Gloria are a culturally diverse couple, she being Columbian and he being from the U.S., and Mitchell and Cameron are also obviously a non-traditional family, as they are a gay couple. From the outset, then, *Modern Family* both reinforces and attempts to subvert traditional notions of family, particularly of the “modern” family. Ultimately, its portrayal of this “modern” family proves to be stereotypical despite the show’s attempts to be progressive, as I will demonstrate throughout the following sections of this chapter.

Gender and Identity

“Gender[,]” according to Gayle Rubin, “is a socially imposed division of the sexes. It is a product of the social relations of sexuality. . . . Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities. It requires repression: in men, of whatever is the local version of ‘feminine’ traits; in women, of the local definition of ‘masculine’ traits” (“Traffic” 546). That is, gender is a fabricated category used to organize individuals into groups according to socially mandated behavior. As children, we are trained to adopt certain gendered characteristics, to behave according to certain rules of “masculinity” and “femininity” in order to fit into society. Those who do not behave in these socially sanctioned ways risk being ostracized and subsequently marginalized, even at very young ages. The consequences for not adhering to these social norms are great, and so we continue to “perform” gender in sanctioned ways in order to fit in. This need to fit in, to be “part of the club” carries with it a great deal of insecurity. Most people seem naturally to want to fit in with others and

part of that fitting in within U.S. culture means meeting norms of gendered behavior. Moreover, “[i]n spite of the fact that identities are not fixed, individuals have a sense of unity and continuity about their identity” (Ivanič 16). I would argue that part of this sense of “unity and continuity” involves both fitting in to and resisting social norms, particularly of gendered behavior. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter through my discussions of characters in *Modern Family*, several of the series’s main characters find pleasure in both reaffirming and resisting culturally expected behavior. Alex and Manny, in particular, take pride in performing identities that, while normative in that they are “socially imposed” categories, are simultaneously “deviant” categories, in that society marks members of those categories as “freaks” and “weirdos.”

Women and girls are expected to behave in particular ways, which include being submissive, meek, and, often, silent. Men and boys, on the other hand, are expected to be dominant, aggressive, and, often, violent. Women who are too assertive are often referred to as “bitches” and men who are too passive are considered “pussies” or, equally concerning, “gay.” These notions of “female” or “feminine” and “male” or “masculine” behavior are constantly reaffirmed in popular media, where girls and women are often portrayed as either unintelligent victims of patriarchal culture or “castrating bitches” and men are often portrayed as either violent and aggressive or passive and effeminate. These traits can be readily found on *Modern Family*, as the characters on the show pretty neatly fit into these categories most of the time. As I will discuss in the next section of this chapter, Gloria and Haley are clearly sexy and deemed less intelligent than other characters most of the time (though Gloria frequently and Haley on occasion prove themselves more intelligent than they ever get credit for), while Claire and Alex are

regularly treated as power-hungry and overly confident, and Lily is too young and receives too little screen time to have developed much of a character at this point in the series (though she increasingly demonstrates a somewhat disturbed personality). Nonetheless, as I will demonstrate in the next section of this chapter, while these female characters appear to fit into these gendered categories, they consistently break with these traditional roles; that is, they are presented as more complex, less defined by social expectation than what might appear on the surface. The same can be said of the male characters on the show. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, Jay is almost always portrayed as a violent and aggressive man, while the other adult men on the show are regularly presented as weak, passive, and effeminate. Luke and Manny fall into these categories, as well, Luke being violent and aggressive and Manny being more passive and slightly effeminate. At the same time, Manny is one of the most confident, assertive characters on the show, and Luke is consistently portrayed as unintelligent and a bit disturbed; thus, the series itself clearly does not intend to assert a message that men *should be* violent and aggressive like Jay and Luke, but should instead find a balance between violent and aggressive behavior and passive and effeminate behavior.

While the characters on *Modern Family* clearly fulfill particular gendered roles throughout the series as a whole, then, when looking at individual episodes and considering the characters' dialogue, the series also clearly presents its characters as complex, like "real" people, capable of shifting among a variety of roles, negotiating their identities throughout a variety of situations. Still, each character also very obviously fits a certain stereotype of gendered behavior, and the series frequently draws upon gender stereotypes like those discussed in the preceding paragraph in order to create comedy. For

instance, in the 2012 episode “Little Bo Bleep,” in preparation for a debate against town councilman Duane Bailey, whom Claire is campaigning to unseat, Phil and their kids work to “tame” Claire so that she will not come across as what the townspeople call her in the local newspaper—“angry and unlikeable[,]” which Alex points out is “the word men use for powerful women because they feel threatened” (“Little”). Of course, the family fails to tame her completely, as when Bailey announces to the audience that Phil was arrested the previous Valentine’s Day for breaking into another woman’s hotel room, stripping naked, and lying across her bed (having thought he was in Claire’s hotel room), Claire loses control, puts her hands on her hips, purses her lips, and scolds Bailey and the audience in her typical castrating fashion. Thus, while *Modern Family*’s writers and producers evidently want us to see these characters as complex and gendered identity as fluid and negotiable, the show ultimately reinforces gender stereotypes in its endeavors to create comedy, often at the expense of its own message. In the next several sections, I analyze *Modern Family*’s treatment of gender more closely, demonstrating how the series at many times fails to uphold its own message about gender and sexuality. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, this failure to entirely subvert stereotypes has become a concern for fans of the series, who find its treatment of gender and sexuality particularly troubling and have therefore taken online media to challenge *Modern Family*’s portrayals of gendered and sexual identities, ultimately influencing to some degree the production of the series.

“What ‘stuff’ do you have?”: Femininity in *Modern Family*

Femininity or female identity has long been a topic of concern for feminist scholars. Early feminists argued that women are traditionally oppressed and subjugated

by men, who seek to control them often through violent means. Women's place within U.S. culture has, thus, often been one of inferiority or silent subjugation to men⁶. Later feminists, however, have complicated this perception of women's place, arguing that early feminist moves have ultimately "essentialized" all women's experiences as being equivalent, ignoring differences of race or ethnicity, social class, sexuality, et cetera.⁷ Thus, it is important when applying a feminist reading to avoid reading women's experiences solely in terms of gender, recognizing instead the array of social categories into which women fit. That is to say, it is dangerous to read the female characters on a show like *Modern Family* as representative of women in general, as three of the five main female characters on the show are upper-middle-class white women from the United States, who have all lived in the late-twentieth and/or early-twenty-first centuries and have, thus, benefited not just from their positions as white members of an elite social class but also from the effects of the feminist movements of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Their experiences will also inevitably differ to some degree from Gloria's and Lily's, who, as women of Latina and Asian descent will unquestionably be affected by their cultural and ethnic heritages in ways that are different from one another and from the other women on the show. Because Lily is still so young, we have not yet seen much development in her as a character; as such, this analysis focuses on the other female characters on the show. Ultimately, though I want to avoid essentializing these characters, I focus here on one trait they all share because it is a central focus of the series itself—insecurity. More than anything else, *Modern Family* treats identity as a struggle

⁶ See for instance, Judith Fetterly's "On the Politics of Literature" and Luce Irigaray's "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine" and "Commodities amongst Themselves."

⁷ See for instance Audre Lorde's "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference."

against insecurity, as an endeavor to meet certain social rules about how one is supposed to behave.

Female characters on *Modern Family* exhibit signs of often intense insecurity regularly throughout the series. In one of the most poignant scenes in the second season, Gloria confronts Claire about her negative attitude towards Gloria at a dance both are chaperoning for their sons' sixth-grade class. Claire says that she is angry with Gloria "because this is *my* thing." Gloria asks, "Why can't it be *my* thing, too?" And Claire replies, "Because *everything* is your thing. This—this is the *one* thing that was my thing. . . I was the one that all the moms looked up to" ("Dance"). This response, characteristic of Claire's stereotypically controlling nature, shows the underlying insecurity that drives Claire; she is constantly trying to prove herself to other women. On the two occasions when Claire's mother appears on the show, it is clear that Claire feels this need to prove her worth to other women in an unconscious endeavor to win her mother's approval, which she has never had. If we were not certain by this point of exactly how insecure Claire is, near the end of the scene, she pulls a wad of paper towels out of her bra to show Gloria how much she wants to be like her. Claire's need for approval is compelling, making viewers sympathetic to her feelings of inferiority and her need to be admired. Further, this scene is one of the few occasions on which Claire stops being a control-freak and simply becomes a character we are meant to identify with.

But the scene is not just compelling because of Claire's meltdown. Gloria reveals a different side to her personality in this scene, as well. While she is almost always portrayed as an, at times, overly confident, sassy Latina (a stereotype which deserves further inquiry but is currently beyond the scope of this project), in this scene, Gloria,

too, expresses feelings of deep insecurity: “I hate how those women look at me. You think I don’t know what they’re thinking? ‘Oh, here comes the hot one with the big boobies that is going to steal my husband.’ Maybe they don’t let their kids play with Manny. I volunteer because I want them to see that there’s so much more to me” (“Dance”). Like Claire, Gloria recognizes that her status is tenuous, that she also needs the approval of other women, particularly for her son’s sake. Both women’s insecurities make them more compelling, relatable characters and emphasize an important aspect of female identity in contemporary U.S. culture. Because women are often trained to feel competitive with one another, it is little surprise that Claire and Gloria see themselves as competitors for men’s as well as other women’s affection. In a sense, then, the show is simply playing upon stereotypes in this scene—women are competitive, so they are engaging in competition in this scene. As I will discuss in the following section, Alex and Haley similarly view themselves as being in competition with one another, their own insecurities factoring into their performances of literacy on the series.

Nerds and Airheads: Female Identity and Literacy Practices in *Modern Family*

Phil: “It’s a movie theater, a library, and a music store all rolled into one awesome pad.”

Alex: “A library is a place where people get books.”

Haley: “A movie theater is a place where people go on dates.” (“Game”)

This exchange between Alex and Haley demonstrates two poles of adolescent female behavior. Young girls, it seems, have two choices—reading books and, it is assumed, being a good student or going on dates. These two types of girls—the nerdy girl who gets good grades but cannot or does not date, and the girl who dates and/or is

sexually active but is a complete moron—recur throughout popular culture, where women’s literacy practices have long been associated with concerns over sexual pleasure⁸. Concerns about women’s reading and writing practices, particularly those involving sexual desire (that is, women reading and/or writing about their own or characters’ sexual desires), have long proliferated within Western cultures, especially in critiques of popular culture from plays to novels to popular music, films, and television series. Within popular culture, girls and women who have sex for purposes other than procreation or marital companionship are somehow less intelligent or at least less likely to be academically successful. Sex, it seems, makes women dumber. In this section, I draw on examples from *Modern Family* to demonstrate how these attitudes about female literacy practices play out within the series.

One’s gender significantly affects her or his literacy practices and classroom behavior. Popular images repeatedly reinforce a notion that good female students are always prepared for class, raise their hands, sit quietly until called upon, and answer questions during class discussions. While this description of good female students’ behavior could certainly be applied to good male students’ behavior, as well, it is much more clearly and directly associated with female students, who are, as Brown and Gilligan demonstrate in their study of young girls’ psychological development, expected to be submissive towards all boys and men, as well as female authority figures. Specifically, “‘nice girls’ are always calm, controlled, quiet” (Brown and Gilligan 61), an image that appears again and again within popular culture. Moreover, good female

⁸ For discussions of women’s reading practices and sexuality during the early stages of the novel, see Brewer’s *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, Hunter’s *Before Novels*, and McKeon’s *The Origins of the English Novel*. For more recent discussions of female literacy practices and sexual desire, see the discussion of slash fiction in Jenkins’s *Textual Poachers* and Bury’s *Cyberspaces of Their Own*.

students are expected to be knowledgeable but not *too* knowledgeable. For instance, Dale Bauer discusses a dilemma female professors face:

Women's perceived excesses as professors, make them especially vulnerable targets, especially if those excesses are couched as ambition, or the concomitant need to control their public spaces. . . . Female professors face the dilemma of performing within acceptable limits, since they are still seen as violating the supposedly male space of the classroom.

Whether the classroom is a public sphere—and whether it is a masculine arena or a feminine one—is ambiguous. (558)

The more education a woman acquires, the harder she has to work to prove she has earned it. The more education a woman acquires, the harder she has to work to prove she does not think she is superior to others because of it. When men work towards professional degrees, they are applauded and congratulated for their efforts (as they should be). When women work towards those same degrees, they are often accused of being elitist or of overstepping their bounds. Thus, because women's academic achievements are not as highly prized or privileged in U.S. society as men's, women must work harder to prove they are still who they were before—they are still meek and nurturing, and they do not feel superior to others, especially to men. And this need to appear meek and submissive is perhaps more acute for female students even than for female teachers, who still have a certain degree of power, even if that power is often subject to challenge.

Moreover, women are expected to practice literacy in particular ways. Within popular culture and larger cultural perceptions, women's literacy practices are typically

perceived as “private, emotionally charged activities” (Williams and Zenger 30). Such portrayals of women’s literacy practices proliferate within popular media, particularly in films and television shows like *Modern Family*. When women’s literacy practices are not “emotionally charged,” they are often tied to intellectual development. But girls who read and write for such purposes are often presented as nerdy and less physically and/or sexually appealing than those who do not. *Modern Family* simultaneously reinforces and subverts these images of female literacy practices through the characters of Alex and Haley, who represent two sanctioned poles of female behavior—the nerdy virgin and the sexy airhead. Both characters slip in and out of these roles in order to fulfill certain plotlines, but throughout most episodes, they effectively fit into these categories. Thus, it seems that within the world of *Modern Family*, just as in the larger culture in which it participates, women and young girls must choose among very few roles—they can be “good,” smart, literate girls, or they can be “bad,” sexy, unintelligent girls, but they cannot be both, at least not at the same time. Within popular media like *Modern Family*, then, female sexuality and literacy are directly connected to one another.

In a 2010 episode, Claire interrupts a fight between her daughters, and Haley announces that they are arguing because “Alex read my journal.” Alex insists, “I did not. *Why* would I even want to read your *stupid* journal?” To which Haley replies, “Because it contains the contents of a *life*, and you don’t have one!” (“Not in”). Just like the conversation that opens this section, this conversation reveals the roles Haley and Alex are supposed to fulfill—Haley is stupid and utilizes literacy only to fulfill her emotional needs, and Alex is smart and enjoys reading and writing but lacks social skills. Through its portrayals of these two characters, the series reinforces a notion that girls have to

choose between these two roles. As Haley puts it to Alex, “Now, do you wanna be smart, or do you wanna be popular?” (“Strangers”) because, obviously, she cannot be both. By keeping a diary on her laptop, Haley remains properly in her place, using literacy only to serve her emotional needs. There are few occasions on which we see Haley utilizing literacy, and these include texting friends, reading glamour magazines, and studying for exams, which always proves to be a frustrating experience for her. Alex, on the other hand, seems to enjoy reading. In the episode “Dude Ranch,” for instance, Alex sits on the edge of a swimming pool reading the book *Freakonomics*. The message is clear—Haley is cool, popular, and sexy; Alex is a nerd.

A season two episode opens with Haley studying with her tutor David. When Claire unexpectedly walks back into the kitchen to pick up something she forgot, she catches Haley and David making out. Haley nonchalantly says, “We only do this when I get one right” (“Mother Tucker”). For Haley, physical pleasure is a reward for the “pain” of intellectual work. She only behaves like a good student if she knows she will be rewarded with some sort of physical pleasure. Though it is implied near the end of the first season that Haley is still a virgin when she wakes up to find her boyfriend Dylan on her bedroom floor and says, “Now my parents are gonna think we did it!” (“Airport”), all evidence suggests that her virginity will not last much longer, especially as she begs her parents to let her go on overnight trips with Dylan. Haley further demonstrates her lack of interest in being a good student in a season two episode when she receives her “average” SAT scores and subsequently informs her parents that “I’ve been thinking about it lately and I might *not*” go to college (“Musical”). Clearly, Haley is entirely uninterested in intellectual pursuits unless they come with a reward, usually a sexual reward. While she

might be the type of girl many young girls want to be—sexy, beautiful, and popular—Haley is regularly portrayed as a moron, a girl who should not be emulated. Moreover, though she engages in appropriately gendered literacy practices, her “literacy narrative” is one of failure.

In contrast to her sister, Alex is constantly studying; she is also consistently represented as the nerdy girl—the one young girls do not want to become (though the show hints that girls should *want* to be like Alex, young girls typically fear being perceived as nerds or “know-it-alls,” so most are unlikely to emulate her completely.) In opposition to Haley, Alex has successful literacy practices; according to the show, she is to be emulated to a degree in terms of her work ethic. Alex reads both for school and for her own pleasure. She is a nerd, but she takes pride in her nerdiness. When Gloria tells her, “You’re beautiful,” Alex replies, “I’m not. But that’s okay. I’m the smart one” (“Come Fly”). Alex enjoys being “the smart one,” the source of the “family’s hopes and dreams” (“Someone”). Similarly, when Alex, her siblings, and Phil try to tame Claire for her debate against town council member Duane Bailey, Alex initially goes along with them in this process, but at the end of the episode Alex admits, “I think it’s cool you’re running for town office. It’s totally nerdy, but that’s kind of my thing” (“Little”). Again, identifying herself as a nerd is a point of pride for Alex. She also finds pleasure in developing her literacy practices. When Haley complains about her mother making her study too much, saying, “I have been studying all weekend. No friends. No phone. Just me alone with books. I feel like Alex[,]” Alex responds, “You’re never alone when you have books” (“Earthquake”). Reading and writing and other forms of intellectual development are sources of pleasure for Alex, and through watching her character, young

girls are encouraged to seek pleasure in similar ways. Whereas Haley's literacy narrative is one of failure, Alex's is one of great success.

On the other hand, Alex also oversteps her bounds at times in terms of appropriate literacy practices for a girl—she becomes a show-off or a know-it-all, falling into the trap Dale Bauer describes of “performing within acceptable limits” (558). While preparing her valedictorian speech for eighth grade graduation, Alex rehearses, “It’s ironic that I stand up here representing my classmates, when for the past three years most of them have treated me like I’m invisible. It’s my own fault. I was obsessed with good grades instead of looks, popularity, and skinny jeans” (“See You”). Though she tells her horrified sister that “[p]eople *want* to be challenged. They’re gonna respect me for it” (“See You”), it is abundantly clear that Alex intends the speech as an indictment of classmates who have spent the past nine years mocking her intelligence and making her feel bad about herself. Alex has not yet learned her place as a young woman within U.S. culture, and she needs to be tamed before she can fully function as an appropriate role model for young girls. And the episode concludes with her following Haley’s advice, but Alex slips in one last snarky remark when her classmates congratulate her on her speech: “Seriously?” (“See you”). Thus, the show sends a mixed message; we are supposed to think that Alex thinks she is better than others, but at the same time, we are supposed to see her as a positive role model for young girls. We also learn that, while both girls take pride in their respective roles, both also feel very insecure at times, wanting even to trade places with one another on occasion. The very speeches that highlight their pride also reveal their deep insecurities; both recognize their status as tenuous. In the sections that follow I will

demonstrate how these same feelings of insecurity and the need for positive reinforcement from others affect the show's male characters, as well.

Being “part of the man club”: Masculinity in *Modern Family*

Within U.S. culture, certain behaviors tend to be associated with masculinity. Traditionally masculine men tend to be romantically interested in women, be concerned with exhibiting sexual prowess, enjoy watching sports, like reading texts that do not require much work, find pleasure in building and/or fixing things, engage in or enjoy watching violent behavior, and be emotionally distant, particularly with other men. Indeed, there is a certain “code” of behavior, according to which boys and men are expected to behave. According to Thomas Newkirk, “The boy code sets narrow constraints in which boys must construct their relationships; these restraints offer a safety shield, allowing expressions of friendship while protecting the boys from appearing ‘gay’” (126). This notion of masculinity is often reflected and/or reaffirmed through popular media. For instance, on *Modern Family*, this archetype of the masculine man is represented through the character of Jay, whom, despite their aversions to his behavior much of the time, all the other male characters on the show somewhat inexplicably look up to and seek to emulate at times. Phil, in particular, is desperate to win Jay's approval by behaving like him. Gendered identity, then, plays a significant role in the show. All the male characters on the show want to, as Cameron says of Mitchell, “feel like . . . part of the man club” (“Old”). At the same time, the show subverts the notion that this kind of male behavior is desirable by consistently critiquing Jay's behavior and featuring several male characters who regularly fail to fit the mold. Rather than Jay, we are typically encouraged to identify with one or more of the other adult men on the show. Thus, while

the show seems to reinforce stereotypical masculine behavior, the series ultimately contends that traditional masculinity is not entirely desirable and may, in fact, be a hindrance. In this section, I highlight several episodes to demonstrate the ways in which *Modern Family* subverts normative masculine behavior, arguing instead that actual men are more complex and, therefore, more interesting than the ideal.

On *Modern Family*, all of the male characters struggle with a desire to appear “manly” enough to fit in with the other men they encounter. Jay serves as the prototype of the appropriately gendered man—his behaviors set the standard for masculine behavior, and while the other male characters do not attempt to mimic or mirror Jay’s behavior, they certainly seek his approval, wanting him to see them as manly. For instance, in the third season premiere, Phil explains, “I’ve been practicing like crazy all my cowboy skills—shootin’, ropin’, pancake eatin’. Why? Because sometimes I feel like Jay doesn’t respect me as a man” (“Dude”). This quote reflects a central concern of the show—insecurity. Every character on the show suffers from often intense insecurities. For three of the four adult men, this insecurity about being masculine enough is paramount. And winning Jay’s approval is not their only concern. Cameron, for instance, worries about how he is perceived by his partner when Mitchell makes him breakfast in bed on Mother’s Day: “You think of me as Lily’s *mother*! I’m your *wife*! I’m a woman!” (“Mother’s”). To add insult to injury, when they go to a picnic with Lily’s play group, the other parents insist that Cameron be in a photograph of all the mothers because “You’re an honorary mom.” Mitchell tries to apologize for his own and the others’ behavior by telling Cameron, “We’re just a new type of family. You know, they don’t have the right vocabulary for us yet. Th-they need one of us to be the man” (“Mother’s”). Cameron is

understandably not appeased by this assertion; it seems like a pretty halfhearted apology for heteronormative behavior. Indeed, rather than being equally offended by his society's insistence upon applying heteronormative standards to their relationship, Mitchell just accepts it as the way things are, which he would likely not do if *he* was the one being treated like a woman. Unfortunately, given its other concerted efforts to undermine social attitudes about masculinity, the show ultimately reinforces homophobic attitudes, which insist that all romantic couples must consist of a "masculine" figure and a "feminine" figure.

Despite its ultimately heteronormative attitudes, the show does attempt to subvert normative notions of what constitutes manliness. The qualities that make Jay appropriately gendered fit neatly within social norms, including watching sports, building and fixing things, and resisting emotional bonds with other characters, especially men. Jay also frequently exhibits a violent attitude toward other male characters. In the episode "Benched," for instance, Jay becomes violently angry and threatens Manny and Luke's basketball coach for yelling at the kids on the team. Later, Jay again becomes viciously angry when he and Manny ride to the mall with Phil and Luke and another man steals Phil's parking space. Seeing that Phil remains calm and has no intention of confronting the "snake," Jay tells Manny and Luke, "Boys, here's the only thing you got to know about being a man—never let someone take what is yours" ("Dance"). Jay does not just undermine Phil's authority here, but he also associates being a man with behaving angrily and violently. Later, Jay says that perhaps the boys would benefit from behaving more like Phil. The series, then, *reflects* cultural attitudes about masculinity, by associating "being a man" with anger and violence, but it also *subverts* the notion that manliness

necessarily has to involve anger and violence by upholding Phil's character as the more appropriate role model for young boys.

While Jay certainly meets the cultural standard of masculinity, he clearly does not represent *Modern Family's* vision of manliness or masculinity. Instead, the other three adult male characters (Phil, Mitchell, and Cameron) serve as examples of how men should behave. On one of the rare occasions when Phil stands up to Jay, he asserts, "I get that I wasn't your first choice to marry Claire, but it's been eighteen years, and there hasn't been a day when I wasn't a loyal husband to your daughter and a great dad to your grandkids, so if we've still got a problem now, it's your problem" ("Dude"). During this speech, Phil defines manliness quite simply as being loyal and supportive of one's family, a view quite clearly upheld by the series itself. A conversation between Cameron and Jay from an earlier episode further exemplifies this view of manliness:

Cam: "Mitchell just wants to feel like he's—part of the man club." . . .

Jay: "I just think it's crazy, that's all. So what if he can't swing a hammer. Look at all he has done. Law school, great career, providing for his family, that's manly, too, isn't it? I mean in the classical sense."

Cam: "Well, yes, I mean I think it also takes a big man to quit his career as a music teacher and raise a child."

Jay: "You're a man, too, Cam." ("Old")

Manliness (and perhaps also masculinity) is again defined here as supporting one's family in a variety of ways. *Modern Family*, thus, drawing on what might be seen as "the classical sense" of manliness, argues that manliness means being supportive. While "providing for . . . family" is certainly a traditional element of masculinity, the show

clearly attempts to redefine masculinity by associating this element of masculinity with three characters who are regularly portrayed in ways that would seem effeminate in most social circles. As I will demonstrate in the next section, these two models of “masculine” or “manly” behavior are reinforced in Luke and Manny, particularly with regard to their literacy practices.

“I *have* a book already”: Male Literacy Practices in *Modern Family*

Luke: “Dad, I need help. I was supposed to keep a journal all summer. It’s due today” Claire: “Wow, first day of school and you’re already behind?”

Luke: “I’m dead.”

Claire: “All right. Tell me how far you’ve gotten.”

Luke: “Okay. ‘June 21. Found a stick.’ ‘June 22.’ That’s it.” (“Run”)

This conversation, which Luke has with his parents in the second episode of the series, is fairly representative of Luke’s literacy practices, which are rarely displayed. Later in the season, when Luke receives a book for a Christmas gift, he complains, “I *have* a book already” (“Undeck”). Again, Luke demonstrates his contempt for literacy in this complaint; literacy is a form of punishment, not a form of pleasure. Manny, on the other hand, takes great pleasure in reading and especially in writing. In the pilot episode, Manny asks Jay to drive him to the mall to see a sixteen-year-old girl for whom Manny has written a poem expressing his love: “I put my thoughts into words and now my words into action” (“Pilot”). For Manny, then, literacy is its own reward, a way of conveying his feelings and sharing who he is and what he believes with important people in his life. Just like young girls, then, it seems that young boys fit into two categories with regard to

literacy, at least within the world of *Modern Family*—nerdy and effeminate or violent and stupid.

Studies of boys' reading and writing practices have shown that many young boys prefer to read and compose texts that are violent or otherwise inappropriate in nature. According to Thomas Newkirk, "[T]he materials that boys try to import must often violate stated or unstated rules of appropriateness" (xix). Within U.S. culture, boys are trained to find pleasure in these kinds of "inappropriate" texts, so it comes as little surprise that when asked what they want to read and/or write about, they choose these kinds of texts. Further, as Christopher Grieg and Janette Hughes discuss in their study of poetry and boys' reading practices in Canada, "poetry is currently gendered differently than other literary genres . . . [,] marked as 'unmasculine' and more closely affiliated with 'feminine' values such as emotion, reflection and introspection than say fiction or non-fiction" (92-93). While I would not necessarily agree that fiction and non-fiction are less associated with "emotion, reflection and introspection" than poetry, I do agree that poetry tends to be gendered "feminine" because it does tend to focus primarily on the writer's emotions. As a result, young boys tend to be uninterested in poetry, as they are often uninterested in most literary works, because they do not want to appear to be effeminate, or worse "gay."

Modern Family's two young male characters take very different approaches to literacy, as demonstrated above—Luke resists it, and Manny glories in it. It comes as little surprise that Manny, the less traditionally masculine of the two, enjoys writing poetry and songs, while Luke only engages in literacy practices when he is required to do so. As his parents explain:

Phil: “Well, there’s book smart, and then there’s street smart.”

Claire: “And then there’s Luke.”

Phil: “Some people ask ‘why?’ Luke asks ‘why not?’”

Claire: “I ask why a lot” (“Coal Digger”).

Luke clearly represents a certain type of young boy, then, one who is not necessarily unintelligent but who avoids intellectual pursuits to his own detriment. His pleasure in life comes almost solely from engaging in violent and aggressive behavior. In a first-season episode, Luke is working on a collage and presentation on Vincent Van Gogh. At the end of the episode, he practices his presentation for Alex: “Why did he paint *The Starry Night*? Maybe because the sky is beautiful, and everybody likes looking at it, and it reminds us that something’s up there watching over all of us—aliens, who could be here in a second to liquefy us and use us as fuel. So wake up, people. We’re next” (“Starry”). What seems initially to be a “normal” presentation about Van Gogh swiftly shifts to a science-fiction influenced, violent image of the destruction of humankind. While the show does seem to suggest at times that Luke might be slightly disturbed, having him undergo a psychological evaluation in one episode, he clearly represents a particular type of young boy, one not uncommonly found in the elementary or middle-school classroom, but one who is troubling to teachers, nonetheless. Newkirk writes of a young boy similar to Luke, “[a] reclusive student, obsessed by video games . . . , his stories are complex series of battles with complex weapons in which a band of friends single-handedly kills off the enemy, both mechanical and human” (136). Luke, too, is obsessed with videogames (which he plays with his “best friend,” eighty-something-year-old next door neighbor and racist curmudgeon, Walt) and regularly engages in violent

behavior. And yet, though Luke occasionally appears to be somewhat disturbed, he is regularly portrayed as a “normal” young boy.

Manny is clearly portrayed as the more abnormal of the two young boys. While Luke is engaging in typical boyhood pursuits like shooting off rockets, playing video games, and avoiding such “feminine” activities as reading and writing, Manny spends most of his time reading and writing and acting like an adult. In a third-season episode, Manny complains to Gloria, “I have a big report due, and the teachers don’t seem to care about the substance. All they care about is the flash” (“Hit”). No typical twelve-year-old boy would have this concern. Clearly, Manny is an anomaly. While Luke is playing video games, Manny is writing poetry for his various romantic interests. In the episode “My Funky Valentine,” for instance, Manny’s entire plot revolves around what Mitchell calls the “theft” of Manny’s “intellectual property” by a school bully. Unfortunately for Manny, even after the girl learns that Durkas stole Manny’s poem and passed it off as his own, she continues to find Durkas adorable and Manny loses the girl, as he always does. Like Alex, Manny is “nerdy,” and, thus, he always misses opportunities for romantic involvement. Girls, it seems, prefer Luke types just as boys prefer Haley types. Thus, his lack of appropriate “masculine” behavior is a consistent hindrance to Manny. Just as young girls are encouraged to strike a balance between behaving like Haley and behaving like Alex, then, it seems that young boys are encouraged by the show to strike a balance between behaving like Luke and behaving like Manny.

Cultural Capital, Fandom, and Identity in *Modern Family*

In a 2010 episode of *Modern Family*, Manny anxiously awaits the arrival of his date Whitney (Kristen Schaal), a girl he met “in the online book club. We both like

vampire fiction and the romance of eternal life” (“Fifteen”). Gloria excitedly opens the door upon Whitney’s arrival, only to learn that Whitney is a thirty-something-year-old woman, who thinks Manny is an adult. As audience members, we can forgive Whitney’s mistake, understanding why she proclaims, “He just seemed so mature online. . . . I mean, what kind of eleven-year-old talks like that?” (“Fifteen”) because we regularly witness Manny behaving like an adult (albeit a somewhat unusual adult), wearing a burgundy dinner jacket, reading the morning newspaper while drinking tiny mug after tiny mug full of espresso, taking steams, and complaining about “kids today.” His perception is much too astute for a boy his age. In a third-season episode, Manny demonstrates his maturity when he says, “Poor Reuben, huh? Having to rebuild his whole life at age 12.” Luke, just a few months younger than Manny, replies, “Yeah, that blows.” Manny, in his adult-like fashion, scolds Luke, “I know we’re both shaken up, but let’s watch the language” (“After”). Again, this bit of dialogue exemplifies Manny’s behavior, showing why an adult might mistake him for another adult online. Thus, the episodes’ writers successfully justify Whitney’s mistake in choosing Manny as a potential mate.

Throughout the episode, Whitney becomes a stand-in for the female book fan—a socially awkward, dowdy-looking woman who is so obsessed with reading books and with the fantasy of a fellow book lover as a potential lover that she does not understand how to attract a man. The episode’s portrayal of Whitney as a female fan is fairly representative of larger cultural stereotypes of female fans, who are treated as obsessive. Though Whitney is not sexualized, as Jenkins argues female fans tend to be, “manifested in the images of screaming teenage girls” (*Textual* 15), she is certainly deemed inappropriately involved in her fandom and, thus, out of touch with how real romantic

relationships work. Enter Gloria. This stunningly sexy woman gives Whitney a make-over, showing her how to accentuate her beauty so that she can attract men through her looks rather than her intellect. Of course, in this case, Gloria's plan backfires because Whitney is so caught up in her fantasy world of romance novels that she falls in love with the next man she sees, a fellow vampire romance fan, Cam. Thus, the episode ends with the image of the female book club member declaring her love for a gay man to the cameraperson. Whereas we could forgive Whitney for failing to realize that Manny was a child due to his adult writing style, we cannot forgive her for failing to recognize that Cameron is "obviously" gay. As Katie (Leslie Mann) informs Cam in season three after he believes he has successfully flirted with her at a bar, "It's obvious" Cam's gay because of "[t]he way you talk, and walk, and dress, and your theatrical hand gestures" ("Treehouse"). As viewers, we are left to judge Whitney for her failure to pick up on these clues, to see her as socially awkward and deficient. Female book fans, then, are portrayed as socially inept, unable to understand social cues and norms of human behavior.

This portrayal of Whitney's character is symptomatic of a larger cultural view of fan behavior, particularly female fan behavior. Female fans are either sexually and culturally deficient or "erotic spectacle[s] for mundane male spectators" (Jenkins, *Textual* 15). Indeed, female fans' "abandonment of any distance from" (15) the objects of their fandom is viewed as a significant problem socially, particularly among the elite. As Jenkins eloquently explains,

The stereotypical conception of the fan, while not without a limited factual basis, amounts to a projection of anxieties about the violation of dominant

cultural hierarchies. The fans' transgression of bourgeois taste and description of dominant cultural hierarchies insures that their preferences are seen as abnormal and threatening by those who have a vested interest in the maintenance of these standards (even by those who may share similar tastes but express them in fundamentally different ways). (*Textual* 17)

Fans' behavior is deemed most problematic because of their lack of emotional distance from the objects of their fandom. Within academic circles, in particular, and other elite social groups, in general, being too emotionally attached to a cultural product makes it impossible for a person to approach it objectively.

While female fans are represented as obsessive but sexually deficient, male fans are represented in similarly negative ways. As explained above, Manny is a fan of vampire romance fiction, and he clearly does not represent the typical pre-teen boy; his behavior is more reflective of an adult but an effeminate one. While staying in a hotel room with Luke, Manny complains, "I can't have nice things" ("Hawaii") after Luke ruins the room's iron by using it to make grilled cheese. Luke, of course, is presented as the "typical" pre-teen boy, one who is more concerned with making mischief than following the rules of social decorum. Manny, then, becomes one stand-in for the male book fan. The other representation of a male fan in the series is Cam, who is not just a book fan but also a sports fan. In one episode, Cam even goes so far as to paint his face orange and blue to watch a football game at Jay's house ("Coal"), an act that might be mocked within many social circles, but which does not attract the same level of contempt as being a loyal fan of certain popular media, such as popular book series. If Cam were to

wear this makeup publicly and on a regular basis or were he to shout or paint other parts of his body, it is worth noting, his behavior would warrant a stronger reaction. But he does not do that; he simply paints his face for a family get together, so whereas Manny's fandom and Whitney's fandom are mocked, Cam's seems to be relatively overlooked. Mitch mocks him briefly for wearing face paint, but after that, his behavior is treated as normal. After all, as Jenkins notes, "sports fans (who are mostly male and who attach great significance to 'real' events rather than fictions) enjoy very different status than media fans (who are mostly female and who attach great interest in debased forms of fiction)" (*Textual* 19). It is fitting, as well, that Whitney's preference is for vampire romance fiction, which is currently both extremely popular and strongly denigrated within many academic circles. Sports, meanwhile, are never treated with the same level of distaste among members of society; they are simply treated as a part of culture. Thus, the show sends a message that certain kinds of fandom are acceptable, even normal, while others are freakish. Being a fan in and of itself is fine, even normal; being *too much* of a fan is a problem, though.

Despite the fact that Whitney and Manny are both treated as obsessive freaks as a result of their chosen fan practices, *Modern Family* does not uphold traditional notions of taste. In fact, the series also mocks academic and elite or "high culture" fan practices. Claire and Phil pride themselves in being intelligent, even intellectual. Indeed, when Phil justly criticizes her ability to use electronic devices after she breaks his "brand-new, very expensive" television remote control, telling her, "Well, honey, when it comes to anything electronic, you're not exactly the best student" and speaking to her in a condescending tone, Claire replies, "I am very smart. I had a 4.0 in college. How about

you?” Phil answers, “I was almost that despite my substantial commitment to cheerleading” (“Fifteen”). They both equate intelligence with GPA, and, thus, think of themselves as highly intelligent people. But their personal tastes tend to diverge pretty significantly from normative “intellectual” tastes. Indeed, as Jenkins explains, “Unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise, the fans assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons” (*Textual* 18). While Phil and Claire cite their academic achievements as evidence of their intelligence, then, they resist academic pursuits in favor of developing their own cultural tastes. By proxy, *Modern Family*’s writers assert that individuals should develop their own tastes rather than simply adopt proscribed ones.

Moreover, through Claire and Phil’s behavior, the series mocks elite tastes. During the second season, Claire and Phil reveal that they are huge fans of bad science fiction and fantasy movies when they decide to go see the movie *Croctopus*. In the same episode, Alex complains of her classmate and educational rival, “Sanjay’s dad’s a surgeon and his mom’s a professor. I can’t compete with that. I’ll just have to do the best I can with what I was given” (“Our Children”). While Phil simply replies, “Good for you” (“Our”), Claire is embarrassed, and her embarrassment intensifies when they run into Sanjay’s parents at the movie theater, so she decides that she and Phil should go see the foreign film Sanjay’s parents are going to see. Phil responds, “Why do I have to watch a French movie? I didn’t do anything wrong” (“Our”), suggesting that watching a French movie is a punishment rather than something one might do for pleasure. Partway through the film, Phil leaves and sees *Croctopus* alone. As they leave the theater, Sanjay’s parents ask what they thought about the film, and Claire, adopting an academic

tone, says that the film failed to impress her. Of course, the fact that Claire and Phil are able to make such critiques, mimicking academic tones, demonstrates that they possess a certain level of cultural capital associated with the middle and upper classes. That is, as upper-middle-class college graduates, Claire and Phil have learned how to resist elite attitudes and beliefs about culture and taste by first learning and participating within elite educational systems. Indeed, without having been properly trained in such a system, the two would lack the requisite knowledge to critique it. Of course, their intellect is also undermined at the end of the scene when, referring to one another as “doctor” and “professor” they attempt to push open a “pull” door and end up looking like fools. Still, the episode’s message is clear—cultural capital and elite notions of taste are overrated; individuals should choose for themselves what to like, and those who do not do so, like the Patels, are dupes. While the show encourages viewers to develop their own tastes, then, it suggests that elite tastes are worthy of mockery; that is, the series seems to assume that elite tastes are based on pretension, on wanting to appear intelligent, rather than on personal preference. This portrayal of elite tastes, then, is perhaps just as dangerous or problematic as the academic view that, as Plato recommended, “[e]ducation . . . must stand in opposition to popular culture, even to the point of censorship” (Newkirk, *Misreading* 3). That is to say, just as it is wrong for academics and other intellectuals to denigrate what is popular simply because it is popular, it is equally problematic for those who prefer more popular forms of culture and media to assume that individuals who enjoy more elite forms of entertainment do so only to seem superior to others.

“Let Cam & Mitchell Kiss!”: How Facebook Affected *Modern Family*’s Production

Up to this point in this chapter, I have focused on the series itself, demonstrating how issues of identity and literacy play out within *Modern Family*. Through my discussion of representations of literacy, gender, and fandom on the show, I have demonstrated that the three are intimately connected to one another. I argue, as well, that for all its claims of being a progressive show, the series ultimately reinforces normative behavior by placing its characters in stereotypical roles and situations in order to promote comedy. These issues play an important role in fan response to the series; thus, it is necessary to understand how they play out on the show itself before considering how fans are responding to it. In the following sections, I shift my focus to *Modern Family* fans, demonstrating how they have utilized literacy within online communities to discuss and at times protest the series's dealings with issues of identity. Fans of the series have picked up on this issue, making it a subject of critique within their online communities. Specifically, numerous fans have objected to the treatment of Cameron and Mitchell's relationship on the series, utilizing social media to protest the portrayal of these characters on the show. While most online fan protests are ultimately ineffective in terms of altering the production of the series, this movement had a significant impact on the series. More important, this protest demonstrated the power of literacy and new media in creating collective response to social issues raised within popular television series like *Modern Family*.

In an article published in *The New York Times* about a season two episode of *Modern Family*, columnist Bruce Feiler quotes from an interview with the series's co-creators and several cast members, noting in particular their responses to fan outrage over the treatment of Mitchell and Cameron's relationship, specifically the desexualization of

these characters throughout most of the series. Eric Stonestreet confesses, “While I appreciated that fans care about our characters, . . . I never understood why people put their focus on ‘Modern Family,’ a show that introduced a loving, grounded gay couple on television who adopted a baby, and accused it of being homophobic” (qtd. in Feiler). Though Stonestreet makes a fair point—the show does present an openly gay couple in a positive light, an image that is severely lacking within much popular culture, particularly among major characters on television series (i.e. most gay characters on television tend to be side characters and are often utilized for comic relief)—it is really no wonder that fans and critics alike find the portrayal of Mitchell and Cameron’s relationship problematic and even offensive. Moreover, a straight man who plays a stereotypically gay character (one who, at times, borders on appearing a caricature of gay men) may not be the best spokesperson for the progressive nature of the series. Indeed, the fact that Stonestreet is not gay and that the only gay man who plays a role on the show (Jesse Tyler Ferguson) is denied the opportunity to comment on the subject makes the show’s claim to progressivity questionable. Further, series co-creator Christopher Lloyd’s defense of the show’s subversiveness, that “[t]here are different ways of being challenging. To find real, raw emotional moments about the difficulties of growing up, the challenges of dealing with children or unresolved stuff with your parents is as real as dealing with a big crazy event like a rape or a crisis of faith. Politics or talking about God can rile people” (qtd. in Feiler), while compelling, refuses to deal with the reality that *Modern Family* consistently treats Mitchell and Cameron’s relationship as asexual. Thus, while the series features a prominent gay couple and thereby attempts to “normalize” homosexual relationships, it ultimately falls short of its claims of progressivity and subversiveness.

Feiler writes, “But all the attention on Mitch and Cam’s lip life overshadowed deeper strands that make the show even more probative of contemporary culture” (par. 10). In other words, “quit complaining about the lack of kissing and see how progressive this show really is.” While I would argue that the series is subversive in many ways, I cannot help being deeply disturbed by Feiler’s, Lloyd’s, and Stonestreet’s refusals to engage with the issue at hand—why do *Modern Family*’s creators continue to insist that the portrayal of a gay couple with an adopted daughter is progressive but refuse to acknowledge that Mitchell and Cameron’s relationship is not equivalent to Claire and Phil’s? Why do we witness sexual encounters between Claire and Phil but not between Mitchell and Cameron? Moreover, why do we not witness sexual encounters between Jay and Gloria? Ultimately, why is Claire and Phil’s sexual behavior the norm against which all other couple’s behavior must be compared? Why is their sex the only sex that matters? By repeatedly showing Claire and Phil’s sexual behavior and hiding the other adult characters’ sexual behavior, the series reinforces what Judith Butler calls “compulsory heterosexuality” (xxviii). Indeed, *Modern Family* participates in a system which, as Gayle Rubin contends, “permeate[s] . . . ideas that erotic variety is dangerous, unhealthy, depraved, and a menace to everything” (280). That is to say, *Modern Family* normalizes (middle-aged adult, consensual and marital) sexual behavior, treating all other sexuality as abnormal, as something to be kept hidden behind closed doors. While, due to programming laws, which, as Rubin indicates make “it . . . legal for young people to see hideous depictions of violence, but not to see explicit pictures of genitalia” (290), the series could never satisfy queer theorists’ desire for art that “chafes against

‘normalization’” (Edelman 6), the series could more satisfactorily represent non-heterosexual identities.

Cameron and Mitchell are consistently desexualized on the show; Claire and Phil, on the other hand, are free to engage in sexual behavior in a variety of ways. In the pilot episode, Luke gets his head stuck in the banister, and Phil has to extricate him. When he asks Claire where the baby oil is, she begins to say that it is on the nightstand in their bedroom and then, realizing that reveals something about their sexual behavior, tells him he will have to find it (“Pilot”). Later, when the couple tries to create a romantic Valentine’s evening by roleplaying at a hotel bar, Claire, caught up in the moment, removes all of her clothing and walks into the bar wearing nothing but a trench coat. As they move to their hotel room, her coat gets stuck in the escalator, and she has to borrow Gloria’s coat in order to leave (unsurprisingly, Gloria reveals here that she has gotten stuck in the same situation before) (“My Funky”). In yet another instance, Haley, Alex, and Luke walk in on their parents having sex on the morning of their anniversary. While Claire and her children are all humiliated by the situation, Phil treats it as perfectly normal (“Caught”). The message is pretty clear—consensual sex between married, heterosexual adults is normal and perfectly palatable to U.S. audiences. One viewer comments on this message in response to the Vulture’s article “Cam and Mitchell Kiss on Modern Family: Short and Sweet”: “We wonder why four gay teens have committed suicide in the past three weeks when something as ordinary as a kiss between two characters playing a committed gay couple on TV makes news. Meanwhile, how many straight couples were kissing and more on TV last night, but it was all considered normal enough to ignore” (NELSPHIGHERG). In fact, viewers would find it strange today not

to see Claire and Phil engaging in sexual acts with one another, as the portrayal of sexual behavior among heterosexual adults is a standard part of the contemporary U.S. sitcom. However, sex acts between non-heterosexual couples are still treated as aberrant, no matter how innocuous they might seem to progressive viewers.

During the series premiere, Mitchell mentions that his father always knocks loudly before walking into any room to avoid having to see Mitchell and Cameron kissing because one time he accidentally did, and Jay cannot handle seeing Mitchell's homosexuality in action. Cameron responds, "I wish my mother had that rule. Remember?" ("Pilot"), which seems to imply that Cameron's mother witnessed a sex act the couple was engaged in. Other than this quick reference, Cameron and Mitchell's sex life seems nonexistent. To defend the fact that we never see Cameron and Mitchell's romantic or erotic behavior, the series's creators devised a plan, carried out as I described in the previous section in the episode "The Kiss," wherein Mitchell avoids "*public* displays of affection" according to Cameron. Again, Cameron's assertion is clearly intended to suggest that Mitchell has no problem expressing his affection in private, as Cameron emphasizes the word "public" in his critique. Nonetheless, this move seems like a cheap ploy on the producers' part to avoid actually dealing with the justifiable critiques leveled at the series for never showing Mitchell and Cameron overtly engaging in sexual behavior. Moreover, the emphasis on the word public implies that Mitchell has no problem with private displays of affection, while even those displays rarely occur on the show. Indeed, as a contributor to the Facebook campaign "Let Cam and Mitchell Kiss on Modern Family!" writes, "That doesn't explain why we've never seen them kiss or be affectionate in the privacy of their home. . . . Seems like that fear of same sex public

displays of affection by a character translates to the PORTRAYAL of same sex affection by those running the show” (Javier). Why is it Mitchell, one of only two openly gay characters on the show, who suffers from this fear of public displays of affection? And why is it that Phil and Claire and Haley and Dylan, the two stereotypical heterosexuals couples on the show do not have the same problem?

Christopher Lloyd points out in one interview that “[w]e did an episode recently where Mitchell and Cameron were in bed together listening to their baby monitor. . . . And we thought for sure that this would get us in trouble, but there was none” (qtd. in Smith). What Lloyd fails to acknowledge here is that the image of Cameron and Mitchell in bed together in the scene he mentions is entirely sanitized—there is nothing sexual about it, and it could easily be any two adults in any kind of relationship (sexual or not) lying next to one another within the scene. While it is uncommon, then, to see a gay couple in bed together on television today, and, thus *Modern Family*’s portrayal of this scene is progressive to that end, there is nothing overtly sexual about Mitchell and Cameron’s relationship, and that is why fans who want the show to promote gay rights are so offended by its portrayal of this relationship.

Clearly, the series is actively resisting any overt displays of gay characters engaging in sexual behavior in order to maintain its fan base. Indeed, conservative fans of the show might be “offended” and turned off by the image of two men kissing on the show and might thus stop watching the show. And some conservative fans *did* have that reaction. Responding to the article “‘Modern Family’: Cameron, Mitchell Share ‘The Kiss,’” one fan writes, “The kiss was not necessary. The show is certainly the funniest thing in a long time but now I have to give it up. I don’t have to see gay men kiss to have

my life in sync with the world. The gay relationship was very obvious and comfortable on this series, the kiss was too much for me and too much for primetime in my opinion, and yes I have the right to a conservative opinion” (nanagirl). Evidently, the portrayal of what to most progressive fans was an innocuous and “understated” (JMAHAK) kiss between Mitchell and Cameron was highly offensive to more conservative fans like the one quoted here. Thus, *Modern Family*’s creators clearly are subversive from certain audience members’ perspectives. By only rarely showing the more romantic aspects of Cameron and Mitchell’s relationship, the creators hope to subvert conservative notions of homosexuality as aberrant.

On the other hand, a significant portion of the series’s fan base begged producers to address their concerns, going so far as to create a Facebook fan page titled “Let Cam & Mitchell Kiss on Modern Family!” The page has been liked by 13,014 Facebook members, indicating that there is strong support for its aim. Moreover, in response to the article “Facebook Campaign Seeks *Modern Family* Cameron-Mitchell Kiss” on the *New York Magazine* website Vulture, a fan comments, “This fact is really one of the reasons I cannot enjoy the show. They’re supposed to be this happy couple and all they can do is share chaste hugs” (RUNYON). Indeed, the fact that the series refuses to portray the romantic aspects of Mitchell and Cameron’s relationship while simultaneously broadcasting Claire and Phil’s exploits suggests that its producers are not really comfortable pushing boundaries when it comes to sexuality, regardless of fans’ opinions on the matter. It seems pretty evident at this point that the series is more concerned with maintaining its fan base than with pushing boundaries. When Mitchell and Cameron finally do kiss, it is a quick peck on the lips, and the two are framed by other characters;

viewers who were not watching very carefully missed it, as evidenced by comments like “I didn’t even notice it when it happened” (DANIELF23) and “honestly I completely missed the kiss while watching last night. if it wasnt [sic] for this article I never would have known that they actually did it” (JMAHAK) in response to the Vulture’s article “Cam and Mitchell Kiss on *Modern Family*: Short and Sweet.” Clearly, the series wanted to appease (or shut up) these fans without actually dealing with the issue at hand. Kids watching the show might learn to see gay couples as “normal” and “equal” to straight couples, but gay children and teens watching the show clearly learn that their sexual identities are still marginal, still ultimately unacceptable within U.S. culture at large.

“What the Fudge?”: The No Cussing Club Takes on *Modern Family* . . . and Loses

Whereas the “Let Cam & Mitchell Kiss on Modern Family” Facebook campaign was successful, if begrudgingly so, a more recent campaign by a group called the “No Cussing Club” was less successful. The No Cussing Club, according to its website, is an organization founded by then-fourteen-year-old McKay Hatch (an eighteen-year-old student at Brigham Young University in January 2012 at the time of his campaign against *Modern Family*) to protest the use of cuss words. Hatch links the use of curse words to bullying, and his website boasts that a “Two Year School Study links No Cussing Club To **64%** Drop in **Profanity** and **90%** drop in **Bullying!**” The site also claims to have “Over 20,000 Members Worldwide!” Hatch’s campaign attracted the attention of the Associated Press in January 2012, with numerous online news outlets reporting on his attempts to convince ABC to pull the *Modern Family* episode “Little Bo Bleep.” According to Hatch, “Our main goal is to stop this from happening. If we don’t, at least ABC knows that people all over the world don’t want to have a 2-year-old saying the ‘F-

bomb' on TV" (qtd. in Elber). Hatch and his followers took particular issue with this episode because they felt it was inappropriate for a young child to use the "F-bomb." However, the group began on shaky ground for several reasons, most significant of which is that the actress who plays Lily, Aubrey Anderson-Emmons is nearly five years old, an age at which many young children pick up on words like the one she uses, is actually saying the word "fudge." Of course, in the episode itself, the word is bleeped and the editors have pixelated the screen over Lily's mouth to make it appear that she is saying the curse word Hatch is concerned about, but she never actually says the word.

When the Facebook group "Let Cam & Mitchell Kiss on Modern Family" began its campaign, while many people did not understand the group's message, it received a great deal of support. Many people, *Modern Family's* producers included, seemed to understand why the members of that group took issue with the show's portrayal of Cameron and Mitchell's relationship, even if they thought that the group members were overreacting to the situation. The No Cussing Club received a much different response. When the story of the group's protest was posted online, thousands of people began posting comments, many of which attack Hatch and his group. For instance, one comment reads, "'No Cussing Club.' I would be embarrassed if this person was my child. I would think if I am paying for your education, you have more important things to do than form idiotic groups to impose your views on everyone else. Again, this fool will do nothing but make sure the ratings for this show go through the roof. Good job crusader" (Methodical). Another post says, "Can these people get a life? Why don't you morons speak out against college hazing and binge drinking?" (Chris D). Both Methodical and Chris D use the comments section to engage in hateful attacks on Hatch and his

followers, which weakens their otherwise persuasive arguments against Hatch's campaign. Such attacks are not uncommon in online culture, and are one of the potential drawbacks to online fan cultures, as well. Regardless of how problematic one might find Hatch's campaign, the mean-spirited responses to it are more problematic, promoting the violence and hatred that marginalized groups are constantly trying to avoid.

Despite the fact that Hatch's campaign failed in terms of convincing ABC to pull the episode or persuading a significant number of people to agree with his argument, the campaign still had an impact. Roughly 20,000 comments were posted just in response to the article posted about Hatch's crusade on Yahoo!, which suggests that a significant number of people read the story and found it worthy of response. While *Modern Family's* producers were not persuaded to change the show, they certainly gained some publicity from the campaign, even if it was not the kind of publicity Hatch hoped to develop. It is also interesting that, as in the case of the Facebook group protesting the portrayal of Mitchell and Cameron's relationship, Hatch and his followers are using literacy as a form of protest against what they perceive as significant social problems. Further, protests of Hatch's campaign have also been performed through writing, suggesting that literacy affords individuals an opportunity to engage in debate about social issues, which they find lacking in other venues. Of course, as we see in the comments quoted in the preceding paragraph, sometimes that written protest takes a very negative form; perhaps when people do not have to meet the person they are attacking, they are more willing to engage in mean-spirited or hateful language against that person. Nonetheless, the literacy practices afforded by new media and online technologies have altered the way in which fan culture develops and works. Moreover, online media have altered the production and

reception of television series in the twenty-first century, making fans more visible and more powerful in shaping the production of their preferred television programs.

Literacy as Protest and Power

Oppressed individuals and groups have long used literacy as a means of protest. For instance, the United States was founded by groups of people who believed themselves to be oppressed and utilized written documents to declare their independence. Later, freed or escaped slaves wrote about their experiences as enslaved people to condemn the institution of slavery. Literacy is a form of power—it enables individuals to draw widespread attention to important social issues. The advent of new and digital media has only made such forms of protest and discussion more widely available or accessible. Fans of popular television series like *Modern Family* have begun to realize the significance of such media in protesting issues of significant social import. In an earlier section, I focused on one such example—*Modern Family* fans’ protest of the portrayal of Mitchell and Cameron’s relationship on the show. While the series seems to receive very little (at least visible) attention online, the Facebook fan page dedicated to the “Cam and Mitchell kiss” received over 10,000 “likes” and the attention of numerous news media outlets. Clearly, this fan protest has had an impact.

Of course, there is a question of how significant this fan page’s impact has been. After all, series co-producer Steve Levitan announced at a BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) event that he found the critiques of *Modern Family*’s portrayal of Cameron and Mitchell’s relationship “unfortunate” as an explanation of the character’s lack of displays of affection was “part of the natural development of the show” (qtd. in Guider). However, as I discussed earlier, fans were not buying this claim. *If* the plot was

already in the works, why did *Modern Family*'s producers wait so long to announce it? Assuming that Levitan's claim is legitimate and the producers did intend from the outset to write Mitchell's fear of public displays of affection into the series, that does not negate the impact of this fan group on the production of the series. Clearly, Levitan, Lloyd, and the cast had some familiarity with the fan page and felt it necessary to comment on it during interviews. Moreover, the fan page caught the attention of numerous media outlets and Mitchell and Cameron's kiss became a big news story when it finally happened on the show. Thus, whether these fans of *Modern Family* altered the Mitchell-Cameron plot line is ultimately irrelevant. What is more interesting and more significant is the fact that these fans became rightly dissatisfied with the portrayal of a gay couple on mainstream television and took to social networking media, utilizing literacy practices, to effect social change.

Despite the fact that the show clearly refuses to deal with the larger issue at hand—the treatment of gay adults in U.S. culture, it is important to consider the power of fan influence at work here. A relatively small group of people—13,014 in a world of seven billion—began an online campaign demanding that two gay characters on a popular television series be permitted to kiss, and they won. Thus, being a fan in the twenty-first century means something very different than it ever has in the past; it means having an influence on cultural products, having a voice in how those products are produced and disseminated. Fans' influence on *Modern Family*'s portrayal of Mitchell and Cameron's relationship fulfills an earlier prediction of Henry Jenkins's, that "fans of certain cult television shows may gain greater influence over programming decisions in an [sic] the age of affective economics" (*Convergence* 62). *Modern Family* is by no

means a “cult television show,” as it is currently one of the most popular series on television; however, the rest of Jenkins’s statement applies—*Modern Family* fans have, indeed, swayed certain developments within the series through their fan activism, whether that influence has been positive (in the case of forcing the series’s producers to address the overt discrepancies between the treatment of gay and straight couples on the show) or negative (insofar as fear of conservative fans walking away from the show has prevented the show’s producers from presenting Mitchell and Cameron’s sexuality as normal). Moreover, it is particularly interesting that, in a society that constantly complains that young people today “can’t write” and are “bad readers,” young viewers of a popular television series like *Modern Family* are utilizing literacy practices in order to engage with elements of popular culture they find problematic.

CHAPTER III

“JUST TELL ME THE RULES, AND I WILL FOLLOW”: LITERACY, CLASS, AND FANDOM IN *COMMUNITY* AND DANHARMONSUCKS.COM

Introduction

In a first-season episode of the sitcom *Community*, Buddy (guest star Jack Black) attempts to infiltrate Greendale Community College’s “coolest” study group (a group made up of seven of the show’s main characters). As the episode opens, Buddy sits at the group’s study table and says, “I’m sure you guys have a natural rapport and timing, and, you know, you’re scared that adding a new member might throw everything off its natural—” In the middle of his sentence, the show cuts to its opening credit sequence, after which Buddy finishes his thought: “rhythm, but I feel like I know you guys already. So you know, let me in. Just tell me the rules, and I will follow” (“Investigative Journalism”). Much of the experience, both intellectually and emotionally, of watching a series like *Community* is being “in” on the joke, feeling like one is a part of the community. Within the series itself, side characters like Buddy constantly try to become part of the study group, and the show’s audience is meant to identify with these characters’ efforts to fit in. The desire to know “the rules” and willingness to follow them mirrors the desire of most college students, who just want to know what they have to do to succeed in the classroom. Buddy wants to join the study group, he explains, in order to

have clout at Greendale. In a similar way, college students are most interested in moves they can make in order to have academic success.

What makes *Community* different from most other television series is its surrealist approach to comedy and its highly active web presence, by which I mean the fact the show has spawned a series of popular webisodes, as well as a strongly loyal online fan community. Moreover, series creator and showrunner for the first three seasons Dan Harmon is known for his own active online presence via his tumblr and Twitter accounts. While Harmon's online persona can be problematic for a variety of reasons that I will discuss later in this chapter, he is known for engaging actively, in both positive and negative ways, with his fans. In fact, he speaks passionately about his fans in a July 2012 interview after his firing from the show. Of the third season, Harmon says, "At this point, I was doing it *for* the fans. These are people who will make you weep. These are sixteen-year-old girls who decide they want two characters to be together, so they make YouTube videos where—they, they spend more time editing them than the people that edit the television show" ("Dan Harmon on"). Again, Harmon is known for engaging in problematic ways with his co-workers and at times with fans, but it is always evident that his fans' response to his work is highly meaningful to him.

Also making the series different from others is the fact that whereas the showrunners for most television series are responsible for the overall vision of the show but not necessarily for every aspect of the series itself, Harmon has played a significant role in the development and production of *Community*, and every person involved in the series insists that *Community is* Harmon's vision. Thus, Harmon's firing from the show after the third season inevitably signals a significant shift in the show's direction for the

fourth season. What has been known as a quirky cult series is likely to alter drastically in the near future, which has left many fans and critics of the series predicting that the series will die in the thirteen episodes ordered by NBC for the 2012-2013 season. Nonetheless, though fans and critics have suggested that the series is basically over after Harmon's firing, its web presence has continued to grow. For instance, on *The Onion's* entertainment news site *The A.V. Club*, *Community* has been the subject of numerous articles, including the article "Community Mid-season Finale Review Comments Reach 30,000, Possibly Attain Sentience," which explains that the number of comments posted in response to that particular episode review was "unprecedented for our site, since before this, we'd never had an article hit 5,000, to say nothing of the 10,000 comment goal review I set for those crazy kids more as a joke/dare than an actual mission" ("Community Mid-Season"). Clearly, many of *Community's* fans have developed an active web presence to be reckoned with.

The show itself may not garner the viewership of all-time top-rated sitcoms like *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, but it has a very committed group of fans, who see the show as a powerful work of art worthy of more recognition. *Community* is an innovative sitcom, drawing upon popular culture in interesting and meaningful ways. Moreover, the series is interesting from an academic standpoint. In order to understand *Community*, one must be a very active television viewer. Not only does the series frequently draw on elements of popular culture, requiring viewers to have a certain level of pop-cultural capital to be in on the joke, but it also utilizes sophisticated narrative techniques to invest viewers in each episode. For example, a season three episode, "Documentary Filmmaking Redux" is shot entirely as a documentary parodying the 1991 documentary *Hearts of Darkness*. Though

Hearts of Darkness is mentioned during the episode, only those who have actually watched the original documentary will fully appreciate this parody. Being a part of *Community*'s community, then, means having pop-cultural capital, being in on the joke. Furthermore, the series is interesting from a compositionist's perspective in its treatments of literacy and narrativity. Many episodes throughout the series play with conventional narrative structures (see, for instance, the quote from Jack Black's character above, where his line is interrupted by the show's opening credit sequence, disrupting the traditional narrative structure of a sitcom), asking viewers to reassess notions of what constitutes narrativity. Because the series is set at a community college and many scenes take place in the library, literacy also plays an active role throughout the show, as characters have ready access to books and writing tools. Moreover, because the characters on the show are students, professors, and college administrators, academics can easily and readily see themselves and their students as participants in the show.

In the sections that follow, I offer a brief overview of the series *Community*, demonstrating the ways in which this unique series utilizes self-referentiality, parody, quotation, and allusion in order to develop a new kind of pop-cultural capital among its viewers. Through this pop-cultural capital, Harmon and the show's creative team attempt to democratize television, making the series more broadly accessible than other television series by encouraging viewers to become involved in the series through active viewing and online communication and community-building. As I discuss later in this chapter, Harmon and gang fall short of this goal by producing a series which requires intense intellectual engagement and a sophisticated knowledge of popular culture accessible to only a small segment of people. On the other hand, the series glorifies popular culture

and a particular nostalgic view of the world. Though this worldview appeals to a very select audience, it nonetheless creates a community of people who are highly engaged with the shared experience of watching and writing about *Community*, as well as deeply invested in their online community. *Community* itself is an ambitious and innovative show that deserves further attention, but its creator and fans provide an even more interesting case study, as they demonstrate the power of new media to develop community engagement.

The Show and Its Characters

Community is set within the fictional Greendale Community College in Colorado. Storylines within the series revolve around a study group comprised of seven college students, a teacher-turned-student-turned-security-guard, and the school's dean (each of whom is described in more detail below). Each season of the show has this study group meeting to study for a particular course (Spanish 101 in season one, Anthropology 101 in season two, and Biology 101 in season three), but as the series progresses, plots deviate further from the study group's coursework and further into their personal relationships (both with one another and with other people in their lives). Early episodes of *Community* adhere to a fairly traditional sitcom format. They are shot with a single camera, and the first several episodes involve fairly traditional plot structures, with characters encountering a problem and trying to resolve it by the end of the episode. As the series progresses, the plots become much weirder and more innovative. The writers begin to play with concepts like narrative structure and crossing media akin to what Henry Jenkins calls "transmedia storytelling" or telling a story across a variety of media (8-9). Whereas in transmedia storytelling, the same story arc might carry from a film to a video game to

another film like in the *The Matrix* trilogy (Jenkins 96), in *Community*, such media crossing occurs within the show itself, as in the episode “Digital Estate Planning,” in which half of the episode takes place within a video game. Later episodes of the series also typically involve some sort of parody of a popular film, television series, video game, role playing game, or other medium. Moreover, *Community* obsessively draws on elements of popular culture, expecting its audience members to bring a certain level of pop-cultural capital to their viewing of the show. Thus, much of the experience of watching a series like *Community* is knowing the reference; whereas many other popular television series that make regular pop-cultural references offer contextual clues to help viewers who do not immediately understand the reference get the joke, *Community* offers no such assistance—you either get the reference or you go and find out what it means on your own.

Community's cast consists of nine main characters and a number of recurring characters. Jeff Winger (Joel McHale), in his late thirties, is returning to school to earn an undergraduate degree, having fabricated a Bachelor's degree, earned a law degree, and worked as an attorney at a prominent law firm until his secret was discovered and he was fired. Abed Nadir (Danny Pudi) is a twenty-something male attending college in hopes of becoming a filmmaker. A walking encyclopedia of popular culture, Abed understands life and relates to other people through references to popular films and television series. Britta Perry (Gillian Jacobs), in her late twenties, “dropped out of high school because I thought it would somehow impress Radiohead” (“Pilot”). Shirley Bennet (Yvette Nicole Brown) is a single mother (who later reunites with her ex-husband), around the same age as Jeff, who attends Greendale in order to earn a business degree and start up a small

business. Annie Edison (Allison Brie) is an eighteen-year-old woman, who is obsessed with earning good grades and moving on from Greendale as quickly as possible. Troy Barnes (Donald Glover) is a former high school classmate of Annie's who attends Greendale after losing a football scholarship due to an injury. Pierce Hawthorne (Chevy Chase) is a sixty-something-year-old bigoted white male and heir to a profitable business, who attends Greendale recreationally in hopes of making friends after seven failed marriages and a terrible relationship with his father. Ben Chang (Ken Jeong) and Dean Craig Pelton (Jim Rash) are the Spanish-teacher-turned-security-guard and the dean of the college, respectively, and both wish to be part of the study group.

Early in the series, Jeff appears to be the main character of *Community*. The series premiere opens with a speech by Dean Pelton, and, though the camera pans over many of the series's main characters throughout this scene, the camera ultimately lands on Jeff, who is being bombarded with information by Abed. Many episodes, particularly early ones, also conclude with some sort of speech by Jeff which sums up the "message" of the episode, as he tells the other characters what they have or should have learned. Though these speeches are largely sarcastic and intended to mock the concept of the now-formulaic voice-over recap of the episode (such as appear in other contemporary sitcoms like *Scrubs* and *Sex and the City*), the characters do learn something within each episode, and we as viewers are expected to recognize something about human nature through these speeches. Of course, it is significant that when the camera first lands on Jeff, Abed is speaking. We follow Jeff throughout the first episode, but Abed is also constructed as a main character within the opening scene. While we identify with Jeff, then, hearing Abed's speech in the same seemingly unending flow of words that Jeff hears, we also

identify with Abed, in several episodes literally seeing the world through his eyes as he documents daily activities on campus through film.

Literacy, Identity, and (Pop-)Cultural Capital

Literacy and identity, particularly in terms of social class play an interesting role in the series *Community*. As I discussed in Chapter One, literacy and social class are intricately tied to one another—the social class into which one is born or in which one participates largely determines her or his literacy practices and tastes. As Pierre Bourdieu puts it, “all cultural practices . . . and preferences in literature, painting, or music, are closely linked to educational level . . . and secondarily to social origin” (1). Indeed, because literacy is a social practice, it is influenced heavily by one’s education as well as one’s class background. Moreover, “[w]hat one reads or writes, in what context, and for what audience, is frequently a subtle way of revealing social bonds and affiliations” (Williams and Zenger 43). Of course, individuals are not always aware or conscious of the fact that they reveal their “social bonds and affiliations” through literacy; that is to say, individuals often are not aware that they are trained to view literacy in a particular way because of where they come from or whom they associate with. To a certain degree, different types of literacy practices are bred into various cultural groups through informal as well as formal education (informal here meaning within individual social groups such as families, friends, neighborhoods, and so on, as opposed to formal institutions like schools). James Paul Gee explains that these practices are initially learned within the home, where those who are more privileged are more likely than those who are not to learn the kinds of literacy practices and tastes that are expected of them within the classroom (3). More important, as Gee rightly points out, the ability to understand and

follow the rules is fundamental to academic success; thus, the stakes are much higher for those who do not grow up learning the rules and how to follow them, particularly when it comes to reading and writing the “right” things in the “right” ways.

Brian Street argues that “literacy is ideological, and therefore involves imparting a point of view as well as simply teaching a technical skill” (212). If watching television can be perceived as a type of literacy practice, and I would argue that it is because it can involve the kinds of close reading and analytical skills often applied to reading other types of literary texts, then television series are also “ideological and . . . [involve] imparting a point of view.” Most often, this point of view reinforces traditional notions of gender, class, and taste. Because most characters on most television series are presented as middle class (even when, often, they would actually be members of the upper class in real life), the medium itself tends to conceal issues of class distinction, even as they bubble under the surface. Characters might struggle financially as a part of a plot for a particular episode, but, in general, class status tends to be a non-issue within most television series. In large part, this concealment of class concerns is due to the fact that television is “an elite controlled institution” (Lembo 27). Indeed, “[w]hereas members of the working class have access to other outlets—books, journals, corporate communications, radio, and television stations—their access is as consumers, not producers, of the content” (Lucas 184). People who write television series are members of an elite class. Most of them have been educated at elite institutions. It should come as little surprise, then, that the writers of these television series seem to lack an awareness of legitimate class issues. Moreover, the fact that certain tastes and ways of thinking are upheld by most television series is also unsurprising, given that the majority of producers

of television series come from a particular, elite background, which promotes a particular type of cultural capital.

Furthermore, many popular television series support Bourdieu's notions of the interrelationships between cultural capital and taste and one's class status, demonstrating that members of the working class have less access to cultural capital and sanctioned taste than do members of the elite and middle classes by proxy of their birth, a view echoed in Gee's work on language and learning. While cultural capital does not necessarily "belong to" the economically advantaged—it is not a direct result of one's economic class status (one can be very wealthy and lack cultural capital just as one can be relatively poor and still have some cultural capital)—it encompasses a set of attitudes, values, and ways of thinking that are commonly associated with the middle and upper socioeconomic classes. To echo Bronwyn Williams and Amy Zenger's point above, having cultural capital, like engaging in literacy practices, "is a subtle way of revealing social bonds and affiliations" (43). Having cultural capital equates with having "good taste(s)," appreciating the "right" things in the "right" way. Of course, while many popular television series reinforce the kind of cultural capital Bourdieu discusses, one which relies on knowledge of elite values, shows like *Community* encourage a different kind of cultural capital, which I call pop-cultural capital. Still an elite set of values and tastes in its own right, pop-cultural capital involves an awareness of a particular set of popular texts and references. Whereas cultural capital often relies on an appreciation of cultural products that are elite, pop-cultural capital involves cultural products associated with "mass culture," which would typically be deemed suspect by members of the elite. Nonetheless, in order to have access to pop-cultural capital, one must still be well versed in a particular set of values and way

of thinking that is available only to a small segment of the population; developing pop-cultural capital requires a great deal of time and money spent immersing oneself in popular culture.

Narration/Narrativity and Meaning-Making

Also important to this discussion of literacy and identity in relationship to the series *Community* is a discussion of narrativity or narration. Narration and more specifically the writing of narratives has been the subject of much debate in the field of composition. In particular, the use of personal narrative or other forms of personal writing has been heavily debated. Of course, probably the most famous debate about the efficacy of such personal writing occurred between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae in the 1990s. According to Elbow, personal writing has value because it “render[s] experience” (137) in ways that literary texts do. Such experience rendering is important, Elbow argues, because it makes both the writer and the reader invested in the written word. Moreover, “stories attract and hold readers, drawing them ever more deeply into a conversation they might otherwise miss or abandon” (Perl, et al. 307). Narrative is valuable, then, in terms of investing readers in the written work. Narrative is also valuable in terms of allowing writers to “engage in reflection, to consider important matters of purpose and audience, to practice and refine elements of craft” (Sullivan 43). While all of these aspects of narrative are important, I think the element of reflection is particularly significant to the narrative process, particularly from an educational perspective. Being able to reflect on one’s experiences as well as one’s work is an important part of the educational process and the development of critical thinking. Narration is one way (and a useful one at that) of reflecting on our past experiences,

considering what we know already and what we have yet to learn. Further, narration is a way of understanding how we have come to identify ourselves in the ways that we have, as well as where we fit in the world.

This relationship between narration, reflection, and identity-formation is tied to our psychological development. According to psychologist Jerome Bruner, “The child . . . learns . . . that what you do is drastically affected by how you recount what you are doing, will do, or have done. Narrating becomes not only an expository act but a rhetorical one” (87). In this discussion of “getting the right story” (86) and “mastery of the canonical forms” (87), Bruner demonstrates that narration enables children to make sense of their lived experiences, as well as to understand their place in the world, from a very young age. Further, the “capacity to render experience in terms of narrative is not just child’s play, but an instrument for making meaning that dominates much of life in culture” (97). This narration does not necessarily need to be linear; instead, narrative can move through time in a variety of ways. The key point of Bruner’s discussion for my work is the fact that, regardless of its structure, narration allows us to make sense of our experiences in ways that we otherwise could not. This concern with “getting the right story” is also important in terms of Dan Harmon’s attempts to control the narrative about his firing, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

Television and Participatory Culture

In addition to understanding the relationships between literacy, identity, and narrativity with regard to a show like *Community*, fan practices and the concepts of participation and active viewing are significant. Scholarship in fan studies has demonstrated that fans’ practices deserve further attention, that there is a value in the

work being done within fan communities, and that fan identities have significant ties to both the notion of cultural capital and literacies. Participation within television show fan communities online and face-to-face discussions of television shows among fans requires a certain level of rhetorical and interpretive skills. Moreover, participation, like literacy and fandom, tends to be gendered and classed. Literacy, and more specifically new literacies, also has important ties to participatory culture. For instance, many members of online fan communities play with material from their favorite texts to create new materials, which are often worth examining. According to Michel de Certeau, “This mutation [of found material into something new] makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient” (xxi). Furthermore, these fans are actively engaging with their favorite elements of popular culture, demonstrating that participation within popular culture is an active, engaged process. As Cynthia Lewis contends, “it is the practices [enabled by new technologies] . . . that are central to new literacies” (230). Such practices could be argued to include the active watching and discussion of television series in online communities.

Reading means more than just scanning words on a printed page or a computer screen; it now involves a broader array of activities, including analyzing, interpreting, watching/viewing, and understanding texts (among probably many additional processes), which also encompass a broader spectrum of written works, both print and visual. Watching television, like reading, is not simply a passive process. It is a complex activity or set of practices which draw upon people’s literacy practices. As Michael Saenz explains, “Watching television is an active social practice, and analyzing television a problem in analyzing a complex institution which continually establishes connections for

viewers' production of culture" (585). When people watch television shows, they do not simply sit and stare at the screen, passively absorbing what they see. Sure, there are moments when, as Margaret Morse argues, television becomes a "nonspace . . . [a] dreamlike *displacement* or separation from its surroundings" (103), where individuals watching television lose themselves in the experience, distracted, not engaged. However, I contend that watching television is an active, literate process, a form of reading that involves critical thinking, reflection, and understanding, all values of the year writing classroom. In this chapter, I demonstrate how these literate processes play out within the *Dan Harmon Sucks* forum. In the next chapter, I will show how the same processes play out within the classroom.

Most people, when they watch television, do not do so in a completely distracted manner on all occasions. In fact, many people watch television as part of a larger social act. For Morse, "[t]elevision is . . . premised upon private reception in an environment isolated from events 'out there,' which determine the conditions of life outside the home" (106). On the other hand, "television is the main source of shared images[,] one that shapes perceptions of a national identity (107). Thus, while television viewing can occur in isolation, television is also part of a larger social practice. Watching television, then, is never a completely isolated practice; it is always a sociocultural practice, even if there is only one person in the room while the television set is turned on. For instance, as Henry Jenkins points out, people frequently watch television, particularly reality shows such as *Survivor* and *American Idol* with groups of friends or family members, talking about the show during commercial breaks and after it is over. Even those who watch these shows on their own frequently discuss them with peers and co-workers at school and work the

day after they air. Such discussions frequently involve active engagement with the shows, built on the premise that viewers are experts on the content: “*American Idol* . . . lies at the intersection between youth and adult tastes, allowing everyone to show some expertise” (81). I believe that the majority of people feel pretty confident discussing what they have seen on television; because television is viewed more as entertainment, as viewing for enjoyment and pleasure, people feel like they understand it better than they do print texts. However, television shows are often quite complex and require just as much background knowledge in order to “get” the point as any complicated text. *Community* offers particularly strong evidence that television series can be so complex, as I will show in this chapter.

In responding to television series through fan fiction and other written responses within fan communities, fans of television series often participate in critical readings and reflection on these shows, which depend upon active engagement while watching their favorite shows. Jenkins argues that certain fan sites engage in a form of “[c]ollective intelligence [or the] . . . ability of virtual communities to leverage the combined expertise of their members. What we cannot know or do on our own, we may now be able to do collectively” (27). The development of collective intelligence in online fan communities provides further evidence that television viewing is an engaged, active, literate process. Jenkins also contends that “spoiling is so popular among college students . . . [because] it allows them to exercise their growing competencies in a space where there are not yet prescribed experts and well-mapped disciplines” (52). Anyone, it seems, can be an expert in an online community. Online communities provide a space in which people who are

not scholarly experts in subjects can feel like they have some authority and a right to speak about what they know. Such confidence building is integral to education.

Quotation, Allusion, Self-Referentiality and *Community*

An analysis of *Community* as a series would be incomplete without a brief discussion of its postmodern practices. Of particular interest to my discussion of *Community* and its fan culture is John Storey's discussion of the relationship between popular culture and postmodernism. In this chapter, Storey focuses on Frederic Jameson's definition of postmodernism as a "'schizophrenic' culture" (Storey 65): "To call postmodern culture 'schizophrenic' is to claim that it has lost its sense of history (and its sense of a future different from the present). It is a culture suffering from 'historical amnesia, locked into the discontinuous flow of a perpetual present'" (65). To exemplify this notion that postmodern culture "feeds vampirically on the past" (65), in Storey's interpretation, Jameson suggests that "rather than a culture of pristine creativity, postmodern culture is . . . a culture of quotations" (66). In Jameson's estimation, then, postmodern culture involves a "complacent play of historical allusion" (qtd. in Storey 66). Storey takes issue with this claim, and I agree with him. Jameson views postmodernism as locked in "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion" (qtd. in Storey 67). According to this logic, postmodernism is obsessed with a false reality, one that refuses to see the past as what it really was, but rather what the creators of popular culture want the past to have been. Furthermore, Jameson's use of phrases like "complacent play" and "random stylistic allusion" suggest a lack of creativity or substantial endeavors on the part of producers of contemporary popular culture to create something new, innovative, or intellectually

engaged. I would argue that series like *Community* roundly disprove such a view. Certainly, *Community* glories in nostalgia and pop-cultural references which are geared towards a very specific audience, but its writers very carefully and consciously select cultural references, weaving them together in a uniquely creative way. Storey prefers Jim Collins's view that "part of what is postmodern about western societies is the fact that the old is not simply replaced by the new, but is recycled for circulation together with the new" (71), a notion which can be readily applied to series like *Community*.

Rather than viewing *Community*'s postmodern endeavors as "schizophrenic," "random cannibalization," or "complacent play," then, it is more useful to think of what *Community* does in terms of self-referentiality. According to Angela McRobbie,

It is no longer possible to talk about the image and reality, media and society. Each pair has become so deeply intertwined that it is difficult to draw the line between the two of them. Instead of referring to the real world, much media output devotes itself to referring to other images, other narratives. Self-referentiality is all-embracing, although it is rarely taken account of. . . . Self-referentiality occurs within and across different media forms. . . . It is these recurring fictions and the characters who inhabit them which feed into the field of popular knowledge, and which in turn constitute a large part of popular culture. It would be difficult not to know about Victoria Principal, it would be impossible not to know about *Dallas*.
(17-18)

McRobbie's points about self-referentiality are particularly useful in analyzing a series like *Community* because of the series's obsessive dependence on intertextuality and pop-

cultural references. *Community* relies on its audience to have a complex knowledge of popular culture. For instance, in the first-season episode “Modern Warfare,” the entire campus of Greendale becomes a war zone as the students engage in a massive paintball war to earn priority registration for the next school year. The episode parodies action films, drawing on major tropes from that genre, including Jeff-as-action-hero wandering around in boots, camouflage pants, and a tight white tank top and Troy saying his name, laughing, and hugging him as he enters a classroom as though they have not seen each other in a long time. When the episode first aired, it was praised as one of the most ambitious, innovative episodes of the series, and it immediately became a fan favorite. During season two, a follow-up two-part episode aired as the season finale. “A Fistful of Paintballs” and “For a Few Paintballs More” parody westerns in addition to action films, again drawing on major tropes from both genres. In this case, the episode titles serve as direct references to Clint Eastwood’s iconic films. Both episodes serve as examples of the kind of self-referentiality McRobbie describes; just as it would be impossible for a viewer not to know *Dallas* in McRobbie’s conception, within the world of *Community*, it would be impossible not to know action movies, westerns, video games, and so on.

Community also engages impressively in self-reference, by which I mean making allusions to itself as a body of work. The third-season episode “Curriculum Unavailable” offers one of the most notable examples of such self-reference. In the episode, the “Greendale Seven” (Abed, Jeff, Britta, Troy, Annie, Shirley, and Pierce) have been expelled for inciting several riots. The first riot occurs earlier in the season, as Abed and Troy fight over whether they should build a pillow fort or a blanket fort throughout the school. This fight turns into a school-wide battle, in an episode shot entirely as a Ken-

Burns-style documentary (“Pillows and Blankets”). Another riot occurs after their classmate Alex “Starburns” supposedly dies in an explosion caused by a meth lab in his car (he is revealed standing in front of a mirror, shaving off his star-shaped sideburns in the season finale, indicating that he faked his own death). At this point, the gang suggests that Greendale is like a prison from which there is no escape except death, causing the other students on campus to riot, and resulting in the group’s expulsion (“Course Listing Unavailable”). Ultimately, Abed realizes the group has been expelled as part of a coup by Chang, during which he has kidnapped the dean and replaced him with a look-alike, but initially no one believes him, so Abed is forced to participate in therapy sessions.

The others join him in the first session, during which the therapist tells them that they have fabricated Greendale in their minds, and they are actually recently released patients from a local mental institution. As he explains this, we see a series of flashbacks to the group dressed in hospital gowns reenacting scenes from throughout the series. Jeff and Troy jump up and down on a bed, imagining themselves jumping on a trampoline in a reference to the season two episode “Aerodynamics of Gender.” Britta, meanwhile, points her fingers at people and makes noises with her mouth to indicate that she is shooting them with paintballs (“Curriculum”). This use of self-reference is impressive for a number of reasons, particularly the fact that it demonstrates a careful attention to detail on the writers’ part, as well as an expectation that viewers will bring a comparable level of attention to watching the show.

This concentrated engagement with the show extends beyond watching individual episodes. For instance, the first-season DVD set comes packaged with the comic book *Kickpuncher: Bone-Crunchin’ Badass Collector’s Edition!* written by Troy Barnes and

drawn by Jim Mahfood, based on the fictional *Kickpuncher* film franchise with which Troy and Abed are obsessed. The comic itself might be seen as an example of what Henry Jenkins calls “transmedia storytelling” or telling a story across a variety of media (19-20). The character Kickpuncher is a clear reference to 1980s and 1990s characters like Robocop and the Terminator. Not only would one need to understand the reference to *Kickpuncher* on the series itself to fully appreciate the comic, then, but one would also need to understand the earlier cultural products that *Kickpuncher* parodies, as well as the genre of the comic book in general. Far from “complacent play,” *Community* actively parodies a variety of (popular) cultural products, encouraging its viewers to actively engage with these parodies, developing their own pop-cultural capital, as well as developing their own cultural products in response to the series. Beyond watching the show, Harmon seems to expect his viewers to engage with the series and with him online via fan communities and his own social networking accounts. Though viewers are by no means required to participate in online communities in response to the show, those who do will often have a richer experience in watching the show, seeing themselves as a part of the series’s larger community.

Active Audience Engagement and *Community*

Like *Seinfeld* and many early-twenty-first-century series (*Arrested Development*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Mad Men*, to name a few), *Community* features a group of characters who are hardly likeable and, at times, even downright contemptible, yet compelling. With surreal plots and deeply flawed characters, *Community* seems poised to join the ranks of *Arrested Development* and other critically revered but low-rated television series. Indeed, its very status has always been tenuous. Still, *Community*’s

hard-core and slightly growing fan base has pushed hard for NBC to continue airing the series, and NBC seems to be listening. During the third season, for instance, NBC pulled the series off its Thursday night schedule promising that the season would air in its complete form at a date to be determined. Because NBC initially refused to set a return date for the second half of the season, most fans and critics assumed the series would never return. However, when NBC announced that *Community* would return and air the rest of its third season in mid-March, the move invigorated the series's cult fan base. Even more interesting, leading up to the March 25, 2012 premiere, NBC aired a promo featuring clips from a documentary-style episode, and inviting viewers to "experience the entertainment event of the year." Clearly, NBC's producers wanted the return of *Community* to be a grand event, and it was.

Community's failure to garner a large audience is ultimately unsurprising. The series is weird, to say the least. *Community*'s plots glory in surrealism and "inside jokes." To fully appreciate and understand the show, one must be very well read and very conscious of popular culture, a fact that contributes heavily to the show's strong fan base as well as its low ratings. Viewers have to work to appreciate the show, and, in general, most people watch television in order to escape, to relax and be distracted (Buckingham 110). Still, those who actually do the work of watching shows like *Community* find both intellectual engagement and pleasure in the process. Each episode of *Community* makes a number of pop-cultural references, which are geared to an audience born between the mid-1970s and early 1990s. Further, many episodes throughout the series are parodies of popular films and television series with which this audience is expected to be familiar. For instance, the season two episode "Advanced Dungeons and Dragons," revolves

entirely around the study group trying to prevent a peer from committing suicide by playing a game of *Dungeons and Dragons* with him. Through the entire episode, the group sits in their study room playing the game. The episode is narrated through a voice over by an otherwise unknown actress, who subtly mocks the group through her description of their role-playing: “And so it was that the group began to describe themselves walking. And as they described themselves walking, so did Abed confirm they walked” (“Advanced Dungeons”). The tone is certainly mocking. Add to that the fact that the character whose life the group is trying to save is nicknamed “Fat Neil,” and it is easy to read the episode as mean-spirited. However, the writers (one of whom is the inspiration for the Fat Neil character) clearly know a great deal about the game, giving the impression that they have at some point played it themselves, so the episode plays as both a mockery of and an homage to “geeks,” particularly individuals interested in role playing games.

As with any creative or artistic work, there are times when this playing with conventions and surrealism works and times when it falls flat. And much of the perception of it working or falling flat depends, of course, on the audience. For instance, most fans of the series tend to enjoy episodes like “Advanced Dungeons and Dragons”; however, those who have never participated in or at least observed role playing games will likely feel alienated from the episode, perhaps understanding its message but not necessarily finding the episode itself appealing. For this reason, one of the most controversial episodes of the series is season three’s “Digital Estate Planning,” an episode which takes place at Pierce’s recently deceased father’s estate. In this episode, Pierce is forced to play a video game in order to earn his inheritance. The room is filled with eight

chairs where the characters must sit and play the video game. Each character has her or his photograph taken for a computer-generated avatar to participate in the game.

Ironically, though these “avatars” resemble the actors, they look like early Nintendo or SuperNintendo entertainment system characters rather than more contemporary video game characters, which tend to look much more realistic.

Clearly, the episode is geared towards a very specific audience—adults who were born between the mid-1970s and early 1990s, who are most likely to have played these kinds of video games as children or teenagers. The episode received a mixed response from fans—some loved it, finding it well orchestrated both visually and in terms of its humor; others felt it was an interesting episode but found the comedic aspects lacking. In a review of the episode on danharmonsucks.com, one fan writes, “Being a huge gamer, ‘Digital Estate Planning’ was in my view, one of the best video game homages I’ve seen on television. What really worked for me was that it wasn’t just focused on hitting on all the tropes and being video gamey” (Koepp). Indeed, the episode is impressive in terms of its incredible ambition and innovation, but, like many of *Community*’s more innovative episodes, it appeals to a very narrow audience. Within a few days of the episode airing, news broke that *Community*’s creator and show-runner Dan Harmon had been fired. To many fans who follow news about the series online, the firing was hardly surprising, as Harmon had been publicly feuding with Chevy Chase, and the series was regularly criticized for its failure to appeal to a broad audience. After watching “Digital Estate Planning,” I could understand why Harmon had been fired—more than any other episode of the series, this episode seemed far too insular to its small community of fans,

supporting Sony Entertainment’s case for firing Harmon. If Sony’s and NBC’s goal is to garner a broad audience, Harmon has no interest in helping them fulfill that goal.

“Getting the Right Story”: Controlling the Narrative through New and Social Media

In March 2012, a reporter for *The Huffington Post* conducted a now-infamous interview with Chevy Chase about his role on *Community*. During this interview, Chase stated that “I have creative issues with this show. . . . It’s like being relegated to hell and watching ‘Howdy Doody’ for the rest of your life” (Furlong). The interview appeared online shortly after Chase left a “profanity-laden voicemail” (Furlong) on Dan Harmon’s phone, which Harmon promptly played for laughs during a “part stand-up act, part Q&A/therapy session” performance (O’Neal). Harmon initially denied rumors that he had engaged in this feud with Chase but ultimately took to his blog to address the story:

I’m not really supposed to be commenting on the situation, which I think is great advice, because anything I say will extend the story and cause more fans discomfort. . . . But . . . [i]t feels dishonest not to acknowledge it, it feels rude to the caring fans of the show . . . because every choice I make, I try to make for the good of the show, and the show is not an expression of my ego or entitlement, it’s an expression of my desire to make strangers happy. (“Not That”)

By commenting on the story even though he is “not really supposed to” and mentioning the fans who “fight to protect” (Harmon, “Not That”) his creative work, Harmon is able to control the narrative that unfolds about himself and his role on the show, as well as to insist that what follows—the ongoing feud with Chase, the show being renewed but for a

shorter season, and, finally, Harmon being fired—is not entirely his fault. Harmon writes, “I made the horrible, childish, self-obsessed, unaware, naïve and unprofessional decision to play someone’s voicemail to me. . . . I was thinking about myself and I was thinking about making people laugh” (“Not That”). By acknowledging his mistakes and apologizing, Harmon garners sympathy from fans and critics of the show. Of course, it helps that Chase has long had a negative reputation (O’Neal) and fans frequently blame television networks for canceling their favorite television shows. Nonetheless, by taking ownership of his remarks and admitting that he is somewhat self-absorbed, Harmon also gains some credibility; by acknowledging his human fallibility, Harmon makes himself sympathetic because, after all, everyone who reads his tumblr and Twitter posts has also made mistakes and can relate to his story.

Harmon is savvy enough to know that using social media will not only gain him more attention but will also allow him to control the narrative that unfolds in the news about him. However, just because Harmon is savvy and utilizes social media to control the story does not mean he is not sincere in his apologies. He has a long history of engaging with fans, who deeply admire him and his work, as I will demonstrate in the sections that follow. That he admits to his own folly, as I have already said, makes him sympathetic, and it makes his story more convincing. Ultimately, he serves as an example of the consequences of not following the rules—by creating a tense situation both in the production of the show and in his interactions with Chase, as well as by refusing to restructure the show to appeal to a broader audience, Harmon breaks both social and professional rules. Thus, his firing from the show might be read as a punishment for refusing to adhere. Nonetheless, social media enable Harmon to have the final word on

the story, placing him in a powerful position. Watching his story develop online has provided significant insights into the power of new and social media, particularly in terms of what stories get told and who controls them.

Ironic Distancing and Identity Formation on the Dan Harmon Sucks Forum

In order to more fully demonstrate the impact of Harmon's work on his fans, in the following sections, I provide a case study of the Dan Harmon Sucks fan site and forum. While the series is still relatively new, having just recently wrapped its third season, and this forum's membership is small, participation in the site has evolved in interesting ways over time. Whereas many longer-running series have waned in popularity within online discussion boards, *Community* has a strong and consistently growing online fan base. Currently, the forum has 188 members, 31 of whom are classified as "active." These "active" members are also fairly prolific, posting lengthy comments in response to recent episodes and often even returning to earlier forum discussions to elaborate on their earlier points. Discussions on this forum tend to be polite or at least civil. While participants often disagree with one another, they do so respectfully, drawing on evidence from the show to support their claims rather than attacking one another's ideas. Of course, the forum contains the following statement under the heading "General Rules": "Be excellent to each other . . . wait that's from Bill and Ted. Don't join just to trash the show (unlikely but it's the internet so . . .)." Perhaps, then, participants are simply trying to follow the rules. Regardless of why participants interact how they do, though, the forum has a clear tone of respectful, intellectual debate and discussion about the show.

Very little time is spent on the forum in negotiating the rules; members tend to simply follow the rules established on the site under general rules without question. Of course, some members still test the boundaries through individual posts. One of the more interesting conversational devices utilized on the forum is what many would consider profanity or the use of “curse words.” While there is no official rule on the forum regarding the use of profanity, occasionally a participant will use a curse word and follow it with a statement like “There’s no cussing on here.” I have observed that it is more common for younger members of the forum to use this language than it is for older members, which comes to me as little surprise. For teenagers and young adults, cussing often seems to be a rite of passage or a way of marking or identifying oneself as an adult or at least as being mature enough to make one’s own decisions. Given that most members of this forum identify themselves as being between the ages of sixteen and twenty (though several identify themselves as being in their early thirties, these members are more rare), it is pretty unsurprising, then, that occasionally, participants will insert these words into their posts as a way of testing the rules or negotiating their positions on the forum.

The name of the site itself also provides an interesting insight into its forum participants. Like the “Survivor Sucks” site before it, Dan Harmon Sucks pays tribute to *Community* and its creative force by expressing distaste for Harmon. It is a kind of ironic distancing popular among young adults and teenagers; applying negative terminology to things that one actually likes in order to appear distant and uninvested in it. In this view, being too emotionally attached to something makes one vulnerable, capable of being perceived as “weak,” a deeply imbedded fear in most people who are beginning to define

themselves as adults. Members on the forum regularly criticize Harmon for being “an asshole,” a term he applies to himself via his tumblr account: “I’m a selfish baby and a rude asshole and not a person to trust with your feelings” (“Not That”). At the same time, Harmon clearly has a strong relationship with his fans, and they admire and respect him despite the fact that he is well known for engaging in rude and offensive behavior towards his coworkers, as well as his fans. For instance, one forum member writes, “I respect Dan, for everything he has done. And you can see from his interviews that he beats himself up and is hard on himself. He cares about the show a lot more than the new show runners will” (actuallyliam). This view of Harmon is frequently echoed on the forum, where members perceive Harmon’s firing as a betrayal of their trust by Sony and NBC. Further, as one member explains, “what they did was literally kill the soul of the show” (Jecht). Like many other members on this forum, Jecht perceives Harmon’s role as integral to the success of *Community*. Despite posturing themselves as “Dan Harmon haters,” then, forum members clearly demonstrate a strong respect for the series’s creator.

In addition to demonstrating a strong respect for Harmon, members of this forum also demonstrate a strong respect for one another. Particularly interesting is some members’ concern with ensuring that all members of the forum are in on the jokes. For instance, escape goat, who has been a member of the forum since September 2011, began a thread in February 2012 titled “International Fans: Missed Inside Jokes?” While the show itself seems to promote an attitude of “you get the joke or you figure out what it means on your own,” then, forum members are concerned with helping one another to be a part of the joke. Participants in the forum, like the characters on the show itself, clearly identify themselves as a real community of people, who are deeply invested in their

shared experiences responding to the show. This communal experience is also what drives many forum members to the site to begin with. Responding to an interview conducted via email during the summer of 2011⁹, Anthony, a nineteen-year-old participant on the forum told me he initially became interested in online television show fan communities because “I was discovering more and more shows that I loved but didn’t have very many friends in ‘real life’ who were interested in all of those shows, so I turned to the internet.” Anthony is not alone in this desire to connect with others over a shared interest in series like *Community*. Austin, a thirty-three-year-old participant on the forum explains, “As much as I try to avoid it, the appeal of being a member of a group of people with similar interests is almost irresistible [sic].” Those who seek out this kind of community will certainly find it via the Dan Harmon Sucks forum.

Getting it Right: Writing Rules on the Forum

Also interesting is the choice of topics of discussion on the forum. Most of the time, members of the forum focus on writing-related issues within their conversations. For instance, when news broke that Harmon had been fired from the show, members of the forum immediately took to the site to proclaim their concerns that a Harmon-less *Community* would result not just in creative changes to the series overall, but to the writing of the show in particular. On the thread “Dan Harmon out as Showrunner,” a forum member writes, “I like Dan’s mind I think it’s full of wonderful ideas and character, but I think he often doubts himself or is too self-deprecating to really write these characters. He made these well-rounded characters and they’ve evolved, so little over season 2 and 3” (actuallyliam). This comment provides interesting insight into

⁹ For a more detailed description of the interview and participants, see the next section of this chapter. See Appendix A for a complete list of the interview questions participants answered.

actually Liam's perception that the show has lost much of its appeal during the third season due to Harmon's problematic approach to the series's writing. As Harmon explains on his blog, "I was what you might call a... hands on producer. Are my... periods giving this enough... pointedness? I'm not saying that you can't make a good version of *Community* without me, but I am definitely saying that you can't make my version of it unless I have the option of saying 'it has to be like this or I quit' roughly 8 times a day" ("Hey"). By his own admission, then, Harmon is not just heavily involved in the show's writing, but is also often an overbearing force, insisting that the show is produced in a particular way.

Harmon does not exaggerate his role on the show or really any showrunner's role here. According to Todd VanDerWerff, "Every aspect of the show will bear the showrunner's stamp in some way or another, and if he or she isn't happy with, say, a set design, that will be changed. It's an immensely powerful role" ("Why Dan"). Because the showrunner exerts such strong control over the writing, direction, and production of a television series, Harmon's exit from *Community* will undoubtedly play a major role in each of these areas in the show's coming season. It is no wonder, then, that Harmon's fans are worried about the direction the series will take in his absence. Though Harmon may not receive the writing credit for each individual episode of *Community*, how the show is written clearly falls under his purview, as he noted in his blog.

Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that forum members on danharmonsucks.com make so much of the series's writing. Several of the participants on the forum predict that Harmon's absence will result in a "dumbing down" of the series. One participant writes,

In Digital Exploration of Interior Design (313) Abed says, ‘I shouldn’t have to compromise my craftsmanship to placate mediocrity.’ Dan could have said that exact same line to NBC when they told him to make the show have a wider appeal. *Community* is an amazing work of art . . . And NBC wants to force it to have a wider appeal in order to placate the mediocrity of modern television. (StevenRayBrown)

While these forum members’ critiques of NBC are somewhat unfair, as NBC’s executives were not the ones who fired Harmon, and NBC is a business whose function is to make money through advertisement, and that income is dependent on overall viewership of the show, StevenRayBrown’s comments still highlight a significant point about the overall limitations of television show development. In order to be deemed successful and remain on the air, television series must appeal to a broad audience. This need to appeal to a broad audience often results in what individuals like StevenRayBrown perceive as a “dumbing down” of television.

Of course, it is a matter of personal taste. Who is to say that *Community* is intellectually or artistically superior to other television series (the most popular object of these forum members’ mockery being *The Big Bang Theory*, which has aired in a competing timeslot and is currently the highest-rated sitcom on television)? Of course, it is somewhat understandable why *Community* fans might become frustrated by the promotion of shows like *The Big Bang Theory*. For instance, @HarrisoninHFX writes on Harmon’s Twitter feed, “Proof that we are living in the darkest timeline” with a close-up photograph of a newspaper article, which reads, “*The Big Bang Theory* is a show of considerable substance. The cleverness of the writing, the intricate development of the

characters inside their relatively confined outlines, all amount to an admirable richness. Of course, right now such shows are being pushed to the margins” (Harrison). Ironically, *The Big Bang Theory* has amassed a number of award nominations and wins, whereas *Community* has frequently been shut out of most television award shows. Furthermore, to suggest that *The Big Bang Theory* is “being pushed to the margins” is an incomprehensible claim, as that series is among the highest rated sitcoms on television.

Harrison’s critique seems to be aimed more at the assertion that *The Big Bang Theory* is a clever show than at the claim that it is being marginalized. Such critiques of more popular sitcoms are common among *Community* fans. For example, ChaosRed suggests, “The truly bold and innovative episodes will now be deemed too weird . . . and instead we’ll just get *Friends* cast in a community college” (“Re: Dan Harmon out”). While I understand ChaosRed’s point here, I think it overlooks the fact that *Community* and *Friends* are shows designed for different purposes and with different audiences in mind. Moreover, I think it is problematic to assume that any show which appeals to a broad audience is inherently “bad” or “dumb.” It is a form of gate-keeping and elitism that might alienate potential participants on the site as well as potential viewers of the show. Though I would argue against many members of this forum who suggest that *Community* is “better” (intellectually, stylistically, artistically, and so on) than other popular sitcoms today as an objective rather than a subjective “truth,” however, I sympathize with StevenRayBrown and ChaosRed’s points. *Community* is a show that challenges its viewers to think in complex ways about what is happening on their television screens, and many people do not want to do that. Television is still primarily perceived as a medium of entertainment, an escape from the struggles of daily life.

On the other hand, the existence of increasing numbers of complex series like *Community* demonstrates that many people do turn to television as a means of intellectual development, as well. Insisting that programs appeal to a much larger audience, then, results in exactly what these forum members fear—a compromise or an unwillingness to take as many creative risks on most popular television shows. Such demands are particularly problematic for series like *Community*, which appeal to a much younger audience, one that is less likely to sit down to watch a show on Thursday nights at 8:00 p.m., and more likely to watch it on a delay either via a DVR or other recording or online. As Harmon points out in his interview with Marc Maron, the current television ratings systems are not even designed to account for these types of viewers. In fact, it is likely that a show like *Community* actually receives higher numbers of views and/or viewers than the ratings systems are capable of tracking. Furthermore, I would argue that the fact that so many people participate in online forums and face-to-face discussions of popular television series suggests that, in fact, people are highly engaged with the shows that they watch, that they find them *both* entertaining and intellectually stimulating at different times and for different reasons. With shows like *American Idol*, then, most conversations tend to revolve around the entertaining aspects of the series—who sounded or looked the best, who would make the best recording artist, and so on—while with shows like *Community*, most conversations tend to revolve around the artistry involved, particularly the writing and production of the series. Both kinds of discussions involve engagement and focus on the viewers' part.

Participants on the *Community* forum also frequently comment on their own writing practices within their posts. For instance, actuallyliam writes, “I know I rambled

and I haven't actually checked my punctuation, but I needed to get my thoughts out there in a sort of agreeing and rambling fashion" ("Re: Dan Harmon out"). *How* one writes, not just in terms of what he or she says but also in terms of how effectively he or she proofreads and/or edits the post, is of particular interest to these participants. Like actuallyliam, escape goat expresses concern with his writing on the forum when he posts a fan fiction piece. While he does not concern himself with mechanical issues like actuallyliam does, escape goat worries about how others will respond to his work. He titles the thread "Fan fic (be nice)" and introduces the post with the request, "Please be nice." After receiving positive feedback on his work, escape goat writes, "You really like it? ... YAY! Im painfully aware of the things I could fix" ("Re: Fan fic"), and he goes on to describe some of his concerns about the plot structure. Later, in response to another forum member, he writes, "[I]f you want a smarter plot structure, you may have to find a better writer" (escape goat), followed by a laughing emoticon. When it comes to sharing their ideas, members of the forum are often self-deprecating and express an acute awareness of their audience. Despite the fact that forum discussions are generally respectful, then, members still worry about how they will be judged in response to their words, whether those words are quick responses to an episode or lengthier interpretive works like escape goat's fan fiction.

This concern with audience response was reaffirmed through my electronic conversations with some forum members. During the summer of 2011, I sent a survey to 20 members of the forum and received five responses. Of those five responses, two came from nineteen-year-old males, one from a thirty-two-year-old male, one from a thirty-three-year-old male, and one from a sixteen-year-old male. Because the study focuses on

adults, the sixteen-year-old's responses were not included in this data. All respondents agreed to participate in follow-up interviews, which were conducted via email¹⁰. The questions posed on the survey focused primarily on participants' literacy practices in online fan communities, as well as their educational backgrounds. Of the four adult males who responded to the survey, all had attended college in some form, and the two in their thirties had completed or nearly completed Associate's degrees, while the younger two were currently working on Bachelor's degrees. When I asked them what most concerns them about writing on forums, three of the four responded, "correct spelling/grammar/punctuation," two answered, "saying the right thing," two answered, "saying things in the right way," and one answered, "being an insider" and "sounding intelligent." That most of the respondents noted concerns with "correct spelling/grammar/punctuation" did not really surprise me, as I have found through work in both the classroom and university writing centers, that most writers tend to perceive spelling, grammar, and punctuation as significant concerns in the writing process, often at the expense of what most writing instructors and tutors would consider "larger concerns," such as idea development, analysis, reflection, offering support for one's claims, and so on. As Anthony put it in his interview, "Even the smallest error in grammar and punctuation can make an opinion seem less informed." I believe that this comment reflects a larger cultural perception that good writing can be achieved through good attention to the "rules" of writing, an attitude, which, again, many students bring with them into our classrooms.

¹⁰ Copies of both the survey and interview questions may be found in Appendix A at the end of this dissertation.

More telling and interesting to me is the fact that two participants (Anthony and Trevor) answered that they are most concerned with “saying the right thing” and two (Neil and Trevor) with “saying things in the right way.” Once again, these responses show a concern with “the rules” and with “getting things right,” which I think are common in most writing scenarios and seem particularly worrisome to undergraduate students. Like the characters in the series itself, these participants want to fit in, as reflected in Anthony’s concerns with “being an insider” and “sounding intelligent.” They want to know that other people are interested in and willing to engage with their ideas in ways that most students want to, as well. Of course, one could argue that the fact that these participants are all students might influence their responses; they might also express these particular writing concerns because they know that I teach English composition courses, and they assume that I think those particular writing issues are large-scale concerns. However, I do not think so. One of the respondents to my survey, a forty-two-year-old housewife who administers a *True Blood* fan video blog with her younger sister, told me that she is also most concerned about “correct spelling/grammar/punctuation” and “sounding intelligent” because “i have trouble spelling and my grammer and punctuation isnt very good and i dont want most people to know that . . . so i wont get made fun of . . . and since my sister is a college grad and she usually gets me in these sites i dont want to embaress her or make her defend me.” Melinda dropped out of high school and got married at a very young age to escape a dangerous home life, so she was unable to develop many of what most people would consider “basic” writing skills. Her perceived failures as a writer make it extremely difficult for her to participate as fully as

she would like on fan forums. She offers an acute reminder of the potential social ramifications of failure to adhere to “the rules.”

Only one of the four participants, Austin, selected “none of the above.” A thirty-three-year-old student working on a Bachelor’s degree in Liberal Arts, having already completed two Associate’s degrees, Austin values the communicative aspects of the fan community; he is less concerned with what he says or how he says it than in how participants interact with one another on the forum: “My biggest concern in the online forums and communication is just general politeness. But I think Society is starting to get to an understanding of how an electronic culture keeps itself civil. A forum is a place for people to communicate, same as any other, why should it be the only communication in the world rife with ‘trolls’ and ‘flame wars’?” His concern with “general politeness” extends to the forum itself, where he engages in respectful conversation with his fellow participants. Again, there is little overt negotiation of the rules happening within the forum discussions, yet there is an implied rule that participants will engage in the kinds of respectful discourse Austin calls for. Forum members like Austin constantly assess their purpose and audience and engage in discursive practices which demonstrate an awareness of both. Furthermore, their conversations on the forum consistently focus on matters of writing—how the show is written, how they themselves write, and so on.

Interestingly, though they talk a great deal about writing on the forum, particularly with regard to their own writing practices, the forum members who responded to my survey and interview questions do not perceive themselves as writers. Anthony explains that he does not consider himself a writer because “I haven’t received proper training or written anything major yet.” Though he does not define what he means

by “proper training” or “anything major,” Anthony clearly believes that being “a writer” involves a particular set of skills that he has not yet (and may not ever) attained. Austin’s explanation of why he does not consider himself a writer is more detailed: “[T]o me, a ‘writer’ is a person who has a manuscript that goes to a publisher, then a hard print is produced and sold in a bookstore. From Magazine to Technical Manual to Science Fiction novel to Self Help book. . . . [B]y my own criteria I am not, though I have always dreamed to be.” For Austin, then, the title “writer” goes hand-in-hand with the process of publication—to be a writer, one must be published. I find it particularly interesting that Austin does not deem the writing he does via the forum as “published” work, as he has made it publicly available to anyone who has access to the Internet. Yet he makes a clear distinction between writing that is publicly available and writing that is produced for financial gain. Again, I think both Anthony’s and Austin’s comments about what constitutes “a writer” are reflective of larger cultural assumptions about what makes one “a writer”—assumptions that many undergraduate students bring with them into our classrooms. It might be useful, then, to use forums like this one to discuss with students how we define what it means to be a writer, as well as what constitutes publication.

Conclusion

Both the television series *Community* and the Dan Harmon Sucks fan forum dedicated to that series offer interesting insights into cultural attitudes about literacy and identity. Moreover, both provide useful opportunities to investigate these attitudes, particularly in thinking about how they influence the work students do within the college composition classroom. As I have demonstrated through my discussion of Dan Harmon’s use of new and social media throughout his term as showrunner for *Community*, narration

and “getting the right story” hold an important place within our contemporary digital world. By using Twitter and tumblr accounts online, Harmon has successfully constructed and controlled the story of the production of *Community*, as well as Sony’s reasons for firing him from the show. He is also largely responsible for the narrative about what it means to be a student at a community college, at least according to the series. While Harmon gains some credibility through the fact that he actually attended a community college and participated in a study group, which served as the inspiration for the series (Hyden), and while the series itself does deal overtly with issues of class status through frequent mentions of the characters’ lack of financial stability and need to earn degrees to improve their socioeconomic status, the series still participates within “an elite controlled institution” (Lembo 27). Harmon seems to disagree with this point; in a July 2012 interview, he says, “I aspire to mainstream success. Television is a populist, derivative, democratic medium” (“Dan Harmon on”). However, Harmon seems to conflate the roles of the *audience* and the *producers* of television here.

Lembo is right—the medium itself is controlled by the elite, who tell “the masses” what they are supposed to like by carefully selecting which programs even make it to air before individuals have a choice in what they watch. Of course, in Harmon’s defense, he says that he “aspire[s] to mainstream success,” rather than that he has actually achieved it. While early on in the series’s development, he admits that he thought the show was broadly appealing, he confesses that he actively sought a different audience with *Community* during the third season: “I think in the third season you can see me start to go, ‘Never mind—just give me a good review in the *Times*’” (“Dan Harmon on”). Clearly, then, though Harmon argues that television is a democratic medium, and he is

right to say that networks like NBC are looking for the broadest possible audience, he is not ultimately interested in making his show broadly appealing. He wants to impress his audience—fans and critics alike—with complicated concepts and innovative structures; far from appealing to what he calls “the masses,” Harmon is writing for an elite audience.

Moreover, *Community* targets an audience of people who are currently attending or have attended college. Indeed, those who have attended college, regardless of the type of institution, are likely to have a deeper, more meaningful engagement with the show because they will understand its premise more fully and be in on the jokes. A significant concern about the series early on was its presentation of community college, which is hardly representative of most real community colleges. At Greendale, students can live in dormitories on campus and the dean actively engages with students on a regular basis, while running around in a variety of costumes. Verisimilitude is hardly a concern for *Community*'s writers. And yet, much of what the show tells us about life within a community college rings true. The students at Greendale differ significantly from students at more elite institutions. They are diverse, they are mostly nontraditional students, they have experienced life, and they may take a long time to finish school. Nonetheless, the series is unlikely to appeal to individuals who are legitimately struggling financially on a daily basis. The show still promotes a level of cultural capital that those individuals are less likely to possess.

In spite of all of those facts, the series *Community* and the *Dan Harmon Sucks* fan forum dedicated to that series offer interesting and valuable insights into the ways in which online spaces such as discussion forums, blogs, and social networking sites are used to foster community. The show itself is clearly designed to engage its viewers in

conversation. That the first-season DVD set comes packaged with a comic book based on an obscure character in a fictional film discussed by characters on the show demonstrates that *Community*'s producers want its viewers to engage with the series beyond watching the show itself. That Dan Harmon regularly writes on his blog and tweets about the show, his other work, and his life in general and then invites fans to converse with him via Twitter about all of these things shows that he is genuinely interested in developing a community of people who are interested in his work and in which he is an active, highly engaged participant. Few series inspire this kind of intense dedication. Few showrunners and creators are as interested as Harmon in participating in such communities. Like Jack Black's character Buddy, who so desperately wants to be part of the group, Harmon and his fans want to be part of a community. As teachers of writing, we should be paying attention to what these community members are doing and saying. After all, the practices in which they are engaging ultimately reinforce the legitimacy of our scholarship and our arguments about the value of writing as a form of communication and engagement.

CHAPTER IV

“NEW KIDS” AND “ARMCHAIR FANATICS”: TELEVISION SHOW FAN COMMUNITIES AND THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

Introduction

Popular culture and fandom have useful applications within the composition classroom, particularly in terms of engaging students in literacy practices with which they are comfortable. A growing body of research has demonstrated that most undergraduate students feel knowledgeable about many elements of popular culture (Alvermann; Buckingham; Williams, *Tuned In*; Williams, *Shimmering*). My take on this research, which stems in part from my own experiences in the classroom, is that students' expertise in these subjects lends itself to a deeper engagement with classroom activities that draw on their existing knowledge. While we cannot assume that all undergraduate students are familiar with or versed in particular elements of popular culture, in the United States, it seems pretty safe to assume that most are aware of at least some aspects of popular culture like television, film, music, and gaming, at least in a general way, because these media so heavily proliferate throughout this culture. Therefore, I think it is productive to develop classroom projects which engage students in cultural products with which they are familiar in order to discuss the concepts we privilege within the field of composition, such as being literate (and what that means), thinking critically, developing a writerly voice, joining a conversation, negotiating one's identity, and so on, through discussions

of popular and participatory culture within which students feel as though they are building upon existing knowledge or expertise.

During the fall semester of 2011, I decided to test out my theories about television show fan communities, literacy, and identity within the “safe” space of a classroom setting. I was teaching a new course, English 309: Inquiries in Writing, with a focus on popular and participatory culture, using Henry Jenkins’s *Convergence Culture* as the course textbook. According to the University of Louisville’s course catalog, English 309 “[f]ocuses on responding to differing rhetorical situations at an advanced level in appropriate modes for diverse audiences. Emphasizes creating and revising substantial writing projects. Develops critical reading and writing abilities in multiple genres.” The course fulfills an Arts and Sciences requirement for written communication in an upper-level composition course. Most students enrolled at the University of Louisville are traditional students (between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five). In addition, many commute to school, have one or more part- or full-time jobs, and are first-generation college students. Enrollment in English 309 is capped at twenty-two students, who are generally required to compose at least ten pages of formal writing in addition to other informal work for the course. In the fall of 2011, when I taught this course, ten men and eleven women enrolled. Of the twenty-one students taking the course, sixteen were between the ages of nineteen and twenty-two, and five were between the ages of twenty-seven and thirty-eight. Most of the students enrolled in this section of English 309 were in their second-to-last or last semesters of college, though several were in their second or third year of coursework. Additionally, about half of the students enrolled had part- or

full-time jobs, and two had children.¹¹ Of those twenty-one students, ten participated in follow-up interviews after completing the course. In addition, all twenty-one students enrolled in the course gave permission for me to cite their wiki posts and papers in this project.

Having learned through years of teaching experience that students comprehend difficult concepts more readily when they put them into practice rather than simply reading about them, I developed an assignment sequence which required my students to form their own television show fan communities on a course wiki, contributing weekly posts in response to the most recent episodes aired, and later to compose an essay reflecting on and analyzing their experiences participating in these groups¹². In many ways students' reactions to the assignment confirmed my expectations that students would enjoy watching and discussing their favorite shows but not necessarily demonstrate a deep engagement with the literacy practices involved in their participation in these groups, but in other ways, the students approached the assignment in powerful and surprising ways, which will be the primary focus of this chapter. More than anything else, this project reaffirmed one of my long-held beliefs that, given the opportunity and the freedom to be creative, engaged students will consistently surprise and inspire through their work.

Admittedly, this project grew out of my own interest in fan communities in response to the research I have been conducting on television show fan communities. Once I entered into the world of fandom, I just thought it was very cool and exciting to see how actively people responded to and engaged with their favorite media, particularly

¹¹ For more biographical information about the specific participants cited in this chapter, see Appendix C.

¹² Copies of both the fan community (wiki) assignment and the paper assignment can be located in Appendix B.

in terms of how enthusiastic these fans were about reading and writing, practices generally deemed boring and burdensome within U.S. culture at large, and I hoped to bring that energy into my classes. I wanted my students to feel enthusiastic about the work I was asking them to do, and this project evolved in large part from that desire. It was exactly the kind of project I would have enjoyed as a student, and I expected them to feel the same way. Though the students in my class were initially skeptical about the project, their written and spoken responses to the project suggested that they did ultimately enjoy it and that it altered their worldviews at least to a small degree. As Andrew, a twenty-one-year-old student explained to me during an interview in January 2012 (two months after completing the project), “It made me feel more intertwined with the show and with the people I was talking to. More of a common ground of something with, in this situation with another person in the class, with something we have in common.” More than anything else, in their reflections on the project, the students involved expressed pleasure in having found such “common ground” with their classmates through this project.

This pleasure translated into a deeper engagement both with the fan community and the paper they were asked to write in response to it. As Ashley, a twenty-one-year-old student told me in a separate interview, “That was one of my favorite papers that I wrote for your class because of . . . not just analyzing, but it’s more relatable.” Like Andrew, Ashley enjoyed the project because it allowed her to share her passion for a particular television show with others in the class, while simultaneously engaging in literacy practices that enhanced her analytical skills. These enhanced analytical skills are the most important benefit afforded by this project. While I wanted students to enjoy the

project, I designed it primarily as a motivational tool to engage students in the kinds of literacy practices and critical thinking skills the University of Louisville deems important. Critical thinking involves a recognition of what we know and what we have yet to learn. Thus, it is important to draw on students existing knowledge in helping them to develop the ways of thinking and writing we want them to develop in our courses. This project draws heavily on students' knowledge about popular culture, asking them to reflect on and analyze their favorite television shows, as well as their own reading and writing practices.

In the preceding chapters, I have been arguing that television show fan communities offer a ripe space for collaborative writing, as well as for developing and negotiating one's identity as a writer. This chapter offers a pedagogical application of these concepts, demonstrating how what I have learned through my observations of online television show fan communities can be utilized in the college composition classroom. Developing projects such as the one I describe in this chapter enables instructors to engage students in writing projects that are interesting to them and allow them to perceive their work as part of a larger cultural practice. While the emphasis here is on television show fan communities as writing communities, the concept of writing communities developed through this project is by no means limited to television show fan communities. Indeed, the purpose of this project is to persuade students to view writing as a collaborative process, an attempt to develop what Jenkins and others call "collective intelligence," a process of pooling a group of people's knowledge to develop the best information possible (*Convergence* 27). That is to say, the project engages students in participatory literacy practices through the use of a wiki in order to create a sense of

community and rapport both in and outside the classroom, while simultaneously encouraging students to develop new literacy practices through the use of this medium.

English 309 and Television Show Fan Communities

As stated above, English 309 is a course focused on developing reading and writing skills at an advanced level. Students enroll in the course to fulfill a written communication requirement for Arts and Sciences majors. Few students enrolled in the course are English majors, so the course is treated as a general education course rather than a discipline-specific course. Nonetheless, because the course is taught primarily by faculty and graduate students within the field of Rhetoric and Composition, it tends to focus on the kinds of literacy practices deemed important within the field of Rhetoric and Composition. That is, students enrolled in the course are generally expected to read and write with an awareness of a variety of rhetorical principles. This section of English 309 focused on fandom and participatory culture with Henry Jenkins's *Convergence Culture* as the assigned textbook. The course began with a discussion of popular and participatory culture. Students were asked to compose a "Popular / Participatory Culture and Literacy Narrative" about their experiences with literacy and popular and/or participatory culture. In class, our discussions on this topic tended to focus on the students' uses of and/or resistance towards social media and technology. Next, we discussed the Jenkins's final chapter "Photoshop for Democracy," in response to which students were assigned a "Creative Social or Political Commentary." Because part of the television show fan community project asked students to analyze the social and political commentaries happening within the series they were watching, this earlier project also helped us to develop a framework for the kinds of discussions they would be having in response to

their shows. Both of these projects were designed to give the class a framework or scaffolding for discussing popular and participatory culture. We spent time in class defining both, drawing on Jenkins's definitions of each as a starting point for our discussions. Both projects also led to discussions and definitions of literacy, literacy practices, and new literacies, which would serve as an additional focal point for the course, particularly in terms of how students reflected on their experiences participating in the fan community.

In preparation for the wiki portion of the assignment, I also asked the students to visit the website televisionwithoutpity.com (TWO P), select a television show they were interested in, and read some of the fan fiction and forum discussions related to that series. After visiting the site, the students each wrote a one- to two-page response, reflecting on what they saw on the site and what they learned about fan communities by visiting the site. Mostly, this assignment was designed to give them a sense of what one type of fan site looks like prior to participating in their own. However, it also prompted a class discussion about how people respond to their favorite television shows, both emotionally and critically. I wanted them to understand that fan communities tend to adopt similar practices to those we engage in within academia—pushing beyond initial visceral or emotional responses to a text and analyzing them from a more critical perspective. Though we discussed their responses to the TWO P site, and we discussed their own fan communities in class on occasion, we did not really discuss their responses to their selected shows because each group was dedicated to a different series. Instead, we had more general discussions about the ways people participate in fan communities,

particularly through writing, as well as the ways in which people negotiate their identities within online spaces.

Because I wanted the students to write about current television series as new episodes aired, the fan community project itself began several weeks into the semester during the fall season premiere week. I felt that it was important for the students to write about current shows in large part because I wanted them to analyze the ways in which the shows were commenting on current social and political issues and events. For instance, as I will discuss later in this chapter, one group focused its discussions on the ways in which *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* parodies shows like *Toddlers and Tiaras*, making a larger commentary on issues such as pedophilia and the objectification of children. The goal of this project was for students to push past their initial emotional responses to their selected television series and focus on *why* they had those reactions, as well as to analyze what was happening within the show. While some groups were more “successful” at this than others, all students enrolled in the course demonstrated a stronger rhetorical awareness after the project than they did before it.

The project itself contained two major parts—a television show fan community and a reflective and analytical paper about that community. Students were asked to make weekly posts to the wiki over a seven-week period with limited guidelines. Their objective was to respond to their group’s selected television series, analyzing rather than summarizing what occurred during that week’s episode. The instructions for the assignment also reminded students to be courteous and respectful towards one another within their online discussions. Television series were selected by students in the class. I passed around a blank sheet of paper, asking each student to write down the title of a

television show they wanted to write about, and we selected the shows that received the most votes on that list. Students then chose which group they wished to join based on the top six shows selected by the class (*Jersey Shore*, *The Office*, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, *Intervention*, *Adventure Time*, and *Castle*). Because students self-selected into these groups, I assumed they would be more invested in their responses to them. However, that was not always the case. While most students took the assignment seriously and participated regularly in their communities via the wiki, many did not.

Moreover, because I allowed the students to select the TV shows they wrote about and did not require groups to contain the same number of members, some groups ended up with just two to three members, while others had four to six. Had every member of the class participated equally, this unequal distribution of group members might not have mattered—in fact, as I will discuss later in this chapter, one of the groups (*Castle*) which had only two members produced one of the most engaged discussions in the class. Unfortunately, not every member of the class participated in the project, and some groups (*Jersey Shore*, *Adventure Time*) ultimately had only one active participant. Of course, any collaborative project is dependent upon all members contributing to the process and the final product, and no matter how often I reminded students to keep up with their posts, several either disappeared from the class or accepted failing grades on the assignment.

After the wiki portion of the assignment was completed, students were asked to compose an essay in response to their fan communities, reflecting on the experience of participating in the project, and analyzing their group's page, particularly in terms of their own and their group members' literacy practices and how individuals negotiated their identities on the page. While the assignment guidelines included a list of questions for the

students to answer in their papers, I also encouraged them to add to that list of questions and to write about other reactions they had to the project that might not fit within that list. I was interested in leaving room for students to be creative with this project, and their papers ultimately reflected their unique interests and responses to the project. Whereas the wiki provided a more innovative medium for the production of writing within the class, and while it encouraged the students in the class to begin to think of writing more complexly, the paper itself followed a more traditional format. In future courses, I might encourage students to use a Web 2.0 technology to compose their reflective/analytical responses to the wiki project in order to reaffirm the value of new literacies.

In the sections that follow, I provide case studies of three of the six groups (*It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, *Intervention*, and *Castle*). I have selected these three groups because they had the most active and engaged discussions in the class. Because some of the other groups did not engage in the project as actively as these three, there is not a great deal of material to draw from in discussing their work. In addition to treating each group as a case study, I provide textual analysis of each group's wiki page, as well as its members' papers. Through this textual analysis, I demonstrate how the students utilized the two media to disseminate their writing, as well as how their compositions on the course wiki influenced their literacy practices within the more traditional medium of the hard-copy paper. Finally, I draw on material from my interviews with several members of these groups after the completion of the course in order to incorporate as many of their own thoughts about the project as possible.

Scaffolding, Expertise, and the Zone of Proximal Development

Scaffolding is an effective means of helping students develop and build upon existing knowledge within and beyond the classroom, which is why, as I have noted above, I utilized it within my English 309 course, developing projects that built upon one another towards the fan community assignment. Isabelle Thompson explains that scaffolding involves “a balance between encouraging student responsibility and ownership and guaranteeing successful student performance” (419). While Thompson focuses on scaffolding within the Writing Center, her ideas can certainly be applied to the classroom, as well. Such scaffolding can also be utilized within the classroom between teachers and students, as well as among students and their peers. In the classroom, this kind of scaffolding might involve a teacher, like Wood, Bruner, and Ross’s tutor, “‘controlling’ those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner’s capacity, thus allowing him [or her] to complete only those elements that are within his [or her] range of competence” (90). The scaffolding process also involves a form of critical thinking, an ability to “*recognize* a solution to a particular class of problems before . . . [being] able to produce the steps leading to it without assistance” (90). Ultimately, the goal of the scaffolding process is for students to be able to complete tasks on their own.

This process does not end with the completion of a single task on one’s own; rather, scaffolding involves a process of employing knowledge gained in one task in another. Moreover, “motivational scaffolding is not concerned immediately with doing a particular task. Instead it intends to establish an environment where students willingly undertake tasks or revise ideas” (Thompson 446). Still, even motivational scaffolding has to begin with experienced individuals (teachers and peers) assisting less experienced individuals in the development and application of knowledge, as happened within my

English 309 course, where students with previous experiences participating in fandom assisted their peers throughout the process. Developing knowledge is always a collaborative process. Further, scaffolding and the development of collective intelligence relate to Lev Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development (86). Again, the process involved here is collaborative; it is a process of developing knowledge with assistance from others or as part of a group.

Such collaboration can be valuable not just in developing knowledge but in establishing rapport. According to Thompson, "scaffolding" has value "not only in teaching but also in establishing rapport with students" (418). Rapport building is an essential part of the classroom. I believe that people learn best when they are engaged or invested in the work they are doing. Having a strong classroom rapport among students and their peers and between students and their instructor is an important part of this engagement. Part of this process of scaffolding and rapport building also involves acknowledging and drawing upon students' existing knowledge or potential areas of expertise. In their study of boys' literacy practices, Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm argue that "[k]nowing students as people allows us to relate to them and teach them as people" (21). Smith and Wilhelm suggest that asking students to share their interests in music is one valuable way to do so (21). By acknowledging that students are people with expertise in certain areas outside the classroom and showing them that we value that expertise within our classrooms, we can help them to develop confidence in their growing knowledge within the classroom, as well. The project discussed within this chapter relies on motivational scaffolding, asking students to work within the zone of

proximal development, using their existing expertise to develop a sense of collective intelligence while developing their analytical and reflective skills.

Even if they are not or do not feel that they are experts in television shows, students regularly display a great deal of knowledge about television series. Most if not all students have watched at least one television show on a regular basis before entering the college composition classroom. Moreover, they understand the conventions of a variety of types of television shows (e.g. sitcoms, drama series, mockumentaries, dramedies, etc.), and when called upon to discuss those conventions, they can do so fairly astutely. As Bronwyn Williams explains in his study of undergraduate students' television viewing practices, "students made . . . comments about programs such as *The X-Files*, *ER*, *NYPD Blue*, *Law and Order*, . . . using words such as 'focus,' 'intensity,' 'complicated,' and 'intelligent.' Their comments focused on the need to pay close attention because of the complexity of the shows. This kind of watching is neither distracted nor mindless" (*Tuned In* 46). When asked to talk about what happened in a television show they have recently watched, most if not all students can readily and effectively summarize the episode. *Analyzing* the episode often proves a bit more difficult for many students. Through this project, then, I utilize motivational scaffolding and the development of collective intelligence through a wiki-based fan community in order to help students hone their rhetorical and analytical skills.

New Media and New Literacies

New ways of writing such as texting or Tweeting (among many others) require that writers abbreviate their word choices in order to send messages to others within the strict character limits afforded by these technologies. Some educators scoff at the

inclusion of these new literacy practices in discussions of literacy, arguing that they promote laziness or a lack of concern for the “rules” of writing. However, as Jennifer Stone demonstrates in her study of teenagers use of popular websites, “[I]t is crucial to attend to the ways in which literacy education is caught up in creating, perpetuating, and possibly changing power relationships. . . . [B]y focusing on a limited view of literacy that excludes digital literacies such as those of popular websites, schools serve to create larger social divisions rather than equalizing access” (52). Stone’s concern with the hierarchical nature of literacy education is part of a larger body of scholarship discussing the ways in which talking about the “rules” of writing ultimately alienates certain students within the classroom. She contends that paying attention to the kinds of materials teenagers are engaging with in popular websites enables us as educators to resist these class hierarchies by placing value in the kinds of literacy practices these students are engaging in.

Of course, Stone cautions that “we cannot merely celebrate these literacies; nor should we destroy the pleasures of popular culture. At the same time, there is certainly a need for schools to start helping students to unpack what these texts do and how they do it” (61). Presumably, by paying attention to these literacy practices, by “helping students to unpack what these texts do and how they do it,” we can subvert the class system that deprivileges certain ways of thinking, reading, and writing. Unfortunately, I fear that the kinds of discussions that might result from a project like Stone’s could ultimately reinforce the very hierarchies they attempt to disrupt by asking students to “unpack” these popular texts. Is that simply a cultural critic’s code for recognizing why school-sanctioned texts are “better”? While I agree with Stone’s point that we should not simply

“celebrate” what is popular, I cannot help but feel that academic attempts to “unpack” texts often ultimately result in the kinds of interrogations of popular culture that reinforce taste-based hierarchies. That is to say, school-approved texts often become the barometer for acceptable or tasteful reading and writing. As Pierre Bourdieu puts it, “art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil [sic] a social function of legitimating social differences” (7). By applying academic standards of judgment to popular texts, cultural critics often devalue those texts, seeing them as representative of lesser “tastes” than academically approved works¹³. Thus, there is a danger in the kind of “unpacking” Stone recommends. In this project, then, I discouraged students from privileging certain kinds of texts (in this case television series) over others, recognizing that perceptions of what makes “good programming” are taste-based rather than objective distinctions. Still, Stone’s call for instructors to bring discussions of popular texts into our classrooms is important and deserves further attention.

Of particular interest for the purposes of my project is Stone’s appeal to teachers to “no longer treat reading as being solely about print or about the understanding of individual texts . . . [and] to address a full range of modalities being used by young people. Likewise, we need to help them understand the ways in which such texts are situated in relation to other texts and contexts” (60). Again, I quote Stone cautiously here because I think it is problematic to assume that students are not already aware of these other texts and contexts with which their work is engaging, as can be seen in my discussion of *Community*’s fans in Chapter Three. Indeed, I think that we often underestimate how much students already know about the concepts we deal with in our

¹³ For a further discussion of how academic analyses tend to devalue popular texts, see Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington, eds., *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*.

composition courses. On the other hand, I believe that, while students are often already engaging in these kinds of practices in their writing outside the classroom, they may often be unaware of the ways in which the rhetorical moves they make in their “real world” writing are similar to those we ask them to engage in within the classroom. Furthermore, some students may simply be unfamiliar with the vocabulary used in academic settings to discuss these concepts, or they may not yet have learned or adopted the move of critical distancing so privileged within academia. While I think it is dangerous, then, to assume that students are unaware of these textual and contextual elements of their writing, I also believe it is worth having these conversations with students because it may make them more conscious of the moves they are making in their writing and how those moves participate within larger cultural practices. Moreover, in this project, while I discouraged students from thinking of certain shows as inherently or objectively “better” than others, I simultaneously encouraged them to consider how the intended audience and purpose of different series influence their production and reception, asking them to consider their selected shows from a variety of perspectives, including the critically distanced perspective privileged within academia.

Studies of new and digital literacies, new media, and particularly writing via Web 2.0 technologies, like Stone’s work, have focused on the benefits of collaborative authorship¹⁴. It is my hope that this project adds to this existing body of scholarship demonstrating a useful way these concepts can be brought into the college composition classroom at any level. Of course, some instructors might worry that projects like the one I describe in this chapter lack rigor—that they are, in a sense, too “fun,” taking away

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of new literacies, particularly Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel’s views on them, see Chapter One.

from the academic purposes of college composition courses. However, as Jessica Dockter, Delainia Haug, and Cynthia Lewis have recently suggested, the concept of academic rigor, which tends to encourage critical distancing or a non-affective response to the work being done in the classroom, needs to be more inclusive, allowing for a combination of emotional and critical response. Broadening the definition of rigor, they “define *critical engagement* as a stance that combines critical distance with immersion and emotional investment” (418; their emphasis). In other words, a project can be rigorous, intellectually challenging, and still be engaging, even pleasurable. For instance, Debra Journet writes of a *Lost* fan community, that literacy practices within the community “encompass the analytic and interpretive skills that readers traditionally bring to a complex narrative text. They also entail new kinds of critical interactions among readers and authors and therefore new ways to construct and respond to narrative” (198). While Journet is interested primarily in how *Lost* fans respond to the narrative structure of a given text, her discussion of the rhetorical moves members of a fan community make in their online discussions is significant to my project, demonstrating that literacy practices within a given fan community can be just as rigorous as literacy practices in any other reading or writing situation. Moreover, as Williams explains in his study of students’ literacy practices online, “students online know audience is a very real community with the ability and interest in responding to their work. When students are part of an audience, they expect to be able to respond to the ideas and writing of others. . . . Participation is the name of the game” (*Shimmering* 35). Students understand, then, that writing in a variety of online communities, such as social networking sites like the ones

Williams describes, is an engaged, collaborative process, which requires a certain amount of rhetorical awareness.

Why a Wiki?

Wikis have had a longer history in composition classrooms than they have in composition scholarship. However, scholars have increasingly emphasized the efficacy of this particular technology in the past few years¹⁵, perhaps in response to the growing number of instructors utilizing wikis in their classrooms. A benefit to the use of wikis is that they “can more thoroughly integrate the roles of author and reader. . . . On wikis, collaborative authorship can be a given rather than an exception, and the relationship between participants in a wiki space can change accordingly” (Lundin 433-34).

Moreover, readers no longer have to take a passive role in the writing process; they can collaborate with the writer on the wiki. Of course, these collaborative abilities depend upon the settings of a given wiki—in many cases, the administrator of the wiki must grant permission for users to edit papers. However, Rebecca Wilson Lundin’s point about the value of wikis is still useful; wikis, when used effectively, make writing a more collaborative process. Indeed, as Karen Weingarten and Corey Frost put it, “wikis are . . . like a collaborative chorus” (48). Wikis facilitate and encourage collaborative composition. Moreover, because wikis are collaborative tools, designed for use by multiple writers rather than individuals, they would have little to no value for individual authors, who still have a variety of other old and new technologies to choose from in disseminating their writing.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Cummings and Barton’s edited collection *Wiki Writing* (2008), Lundin’s “Teaching with Wikis” (2008), Weingarten and Frost’s “Authoring Wikis” (2011) and Hunter’s “Erasing ‘Property Lines’” (2011).

Wikis are a ripe space for conversation, one in which students often demonstrate higher levels of engagement than other writing spaces. As Weingarten and Corey explain, “[I]ncorporating wikis into a course encourages students to write independently outside the classroom and also provides a model of the way writers depend on discourse communities” (48). My work with wikis in first-year and third-year composition courses has produced similar results—students regularly comment in course reflections and on course evaluations that the work they were required to do via wikis made them reassess their notions of what constitutes writing and also made them feel invested in their work on a different level than they had previously experienced. But, like Weingarten and Frost, I am not just interested in how the use of wikis makes students feel invested in their writing for the course; I am also interested in how wikis alter our and, more important, students’ conceptions of authorship, as “wikis also serve to circumvent, and subvert, the established concept of authorship that is fundamental to writing in the academy—the idea of individual authorship” (48-49). Throughout this project, I have contested the notion that writing is an individual or independent process because it involves conversation among writers and readers. Furthermore, I have suggested that as composition instructors we need to incorporate more collaborative writing activities or projects into our courses because the very notion of individual authorship is becoming increasingly less common as ways of writing are changing due to the development of new media and new and digital literacies.

In addition to utilizing wikis as means of writing collaboratively, we can use wikis to encourage students to more carefully and critically consider the rhetorical choices writers make. Because wikis alter notions of authorship and audience among

other rhetorical concepts, integrating wiki-based projects into composition courses requires students to rethink or think more carefully about the rhetorical choices they make in their writing. Wikis promote a unique vision of composition not afforded through many other writing technologies by treating writing as a collaborative and interactive process. While the specific technology used to complete this project is less important than the writing students do throughout the project, I carefully considered a variety of technologies that could be utilized before selecting a wiki. For instance, Google docs can be useful in collaborative projects because they allow multiple users to edit pages at the same time. On the other hand, Google docs do not always afford the same kinds of navigation available through other Web 2.0 technologies. Blogs can also be a good tool for this kind of project, but I have found them more useful in individual rather than group authorship. I chose the wiki for this project because I believed it afforded the most useful capabilities for the given project. Wikis allow for easy linking between pages, which can help to avoid the problem of having to scroll and sift through a great deal of material as it accumulates.

“The New Kid” and “Sunny-Heads”: The *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* Group

While most members of the class were new to fandom and participatory culture, the sense of what it means to be a “newbie” within a fan culture was perhaps most acute within the *It’s Always Sunny* group. This group consisted of four members—Spencer, Joshua, Joseph, and Malia—all of whom were between the ages of twenty and twenty-two. All three men were avid viewers of the series prior to the project, while Malia had never seen it before. Initially, Malia worried that this would put her at a disadvantage, as she explains in her essay, “It’s Always Sunny in Wiki World . . . Or Is It?”: “I thought

my ideas would be immature in nature, (from my sheer lack of intellect on all things *Sunny*), and not well received; Quite the opposite was true.” Later in her essay, she describes her concern in composing her first post to the wiki, “In this post I attempted to address and define the show’s dynamic. I know this is a pretty gutsy move, but I just had to throw it out there to see what kind of response it got. After all, how could they blame the new kid? (Plus, they had to be nice because I’m the only girl.)” Though she immediately follows this parenthetical comment with a statement that she is joking, there is a truth to what she is saying.

As the only woman in the group, as well as the only “new kid,” Malia was at an immediate disadvantage to other group members. While many online groups are receptive to “newbies” and encourage their participation as they begin to develop a knowledge of the cultural products they are engaging with, many are not. In a “real” *It’s Always Sunny* group, then, Malia might have been mocked or even flamed for her attempts “to define the show’s dynamic” after having viewed just two episodes, but within this group, her ideas were welcomed and even encouraged. In response to her post, Joshua writes, “Malia, I think you’re right on with the intention of the show. As long as there are taboos in society, there will be comedians to push the envelope, to say what everyone else is thinking but no one else wants to.” This kind of response is common within the group, making each member feel valued. Moreover, within this group, the “experts,” Spencer, Joshua, and Joseph, act as “teachers” or “tutors” for Malia, integrating her into the world of “Sunny Heads” by offering her positive reinforcement as she developed her knowledge of the show in a form of scaffolding.

This group bonded rather quickly through their mutual encouragement of one another's ideas, as well as by pushing one another to develop their analysis of the show within the fan community. Though their group only met as a whole via the wiki, they connected with one another through their mutual interests in the series and in analyzing its moves towards social commentary. The group members regularly related what they saw happening on the show to current social and political events in the United States. As Joshua explains in his paper "Popular Culture in a Teacup," "Our group delved deeply into this show. Our analyses typically connected the episodes to larger issues of the time: the national budget crisis via 'Sweet Dee Gets Audited,' . . . ; parenting styles via 'Frank Reynold's Little Beauties,' . . . ; the perpetuation of racism via 'Frank's brother.'" Indeed, this group's posts stood out among the most deeply analytical in the class. For instance, in response to the second episode the group viewed, Spencer writes,

I like this show because it is very smart and on point, as well as hilarious. Viewing the episode with the intent of completing an assignment, I noticed much more than I do when I watch the show casually—I realized how intelligent this show actually is, and that it plays on very basic themes and time-established ideas. For instance, in the "Pretty Woman" episode, I saw that the show was investigating the nature of love, friendship, and morality.

Having reached the character limit for the comment box on the wiki here, Spencer goes on to post an additional, also lengthy comment detailing his reasons for making these connections. Throughout the project, all four members of this group made similar very detailed and insightful comments about the show, engaging in the kinds of analysis

teachers of English composition and literature hope for. Clearly, these four individuals are well versed in the kinds of reading and writing practices expected of them within academia, and they deliver.

As discussed above, these students draw connections between what they see happening on the show and larger social and cultural issues at work. One of the most difficult episodes the group wrote about was the “Frank Reynold’s Little Beauties” episode Joshua refers to above. According to Joshua, in this episode “a pedophile infiltrates a beauty pageant the Gang hosts in their bar.” Responding to this episode, Joshua writes,

There is no greater taboo in society right now than what they hit on in this episode, and I was horrified the entire time that they would cross the line. However, I don't think they did – they walked right up to it, danced on it, leaned over to the other side, but never crossed it. There is no greater crime than that committed against a child, but I think we've become so scared of it in this country that we can't even talk about it anymore. If people like working with kids, they're suspect. If children are naturally drawn to someone (especially a man), we don't look at them with admiration anymore – we look at them with suspicion. And so, that gives birth to people like Frank, who are so paranoid of being accused of wrongdoing...that they very much look like they're doing wrong. This is an issue that is nearly impossible to talk about, and though the episode was uncomfortable to watch, I still admire it for it's gutsiness.

Once again, these connections Joshua makes between what occurs in the episode and larger cultural concerns about pedophilia, demonstrate his abilities as a successful reader and writer. His ability to make such connections translated into the classroom, as well, as he was able to apply similar analytical skills to his readings of *Convergence Culture* and other students' papers for the course. Like Spencer, Joshua demonstrates an astuteness in his responses to the show, reinforcing my belief that undergraduate students are more careful and conscious readers and writers than they often receive credit for both from instructors and themselves.

In our follow-up interview a couple of months after the conclusion of the course, Spencer admitted that he found the experience "humbling" because "I was expecting that I would be just like typical, how I'm one of few people in the class that actually talk and look at things and do readings, . . . but I think we had a good handful of people who actually are contributing" in his group. He went on to explain that he and perhaps his peers were analyzing the show more carefully than they otherwise might have *because* they were writing in response to an assignment; however, he was clearly impressed by the level of engagement his group demonstrated with the assignment. Ultimately, I think his comments demonstrate a larger attitude held by many instructors and particularly gifted students that the majority of undergraduate students are unengaged or uninterested in academic pursuits. I would argue, though, that this group's participation on the wiki demonstrates that this attitude is highly problematic.

Of course the *It's Always Sunny in Paradise* group consisted of four outstanding students, all of whom clearly understood academic conventions and expectations. Moreover, not every student in the class demonstrated this level of engagement, nor would I have expected

them to. I am not arguing, then, that *every* undergraduate student is as careful of a reader or writer as the four students in this group. Instead, I am arguing that the level of engagement undergraduate students are capable of bringing to any assignment is higher than they often receive credit for. Many instructors and even some more successful students tend to assume that most students lack certain kinds of knowledge, when in fact many of these students may simply not yet know the vocabulary or the ways of expressing their knowledge that are privileged within academic spaces. This group's work suggests that, as I have been arguing, we need to give students more credit for the engagement and the intellectual capabilities they bring with them into the classroom, drawing on both in our assignments. Moreover, rather than assuming that most students "lack" certain knowledge or skills, we should find ways of utilizing what they already know, helping them to translate that knowledge into the kinds of practices they are expected to engage in within academic spaces. Further, we should reassess our own taste-based hierarchies, which privilege certain kinds of knowledge or cultural practices over others.

In addition to their analytical abilities with regard to the show, this group demonstrated strong abilities to discuss their own literacy practices in relationship to the project. For instance, the following quote from Malia's paper encapsulates the awareness these group members had of their literacy practices, as well as their ability to speak eloquently about them:

There were a couple times where I disagreed with an episode's message, or wanted to say something slightly sarcastic and humorous, but was afraid it would come across cold and uninviting. I sat at my computer for a

while, pondering ways to stylistically emote a thought. Many times, I was tempted to simply throw in the towel and settle for a classic “☺.” I learned to write past those initial responses to difficult situations, and develop what I believed to be a clear dialogue, emotionally charged only when needed.

While the students were prompted to analyze their literacy practices within the fan community in their essays, Malia’s response demonstrates a depth of understanding about the writing process that was not necessarily required by the assignment. The quote above is just a brief section of a much longer paragraph, in which Malia contextualizes her stylistic choices on the wiki in relationship to her writing practices in general. She clearly understands the rhetorical moves writers make and is able to analyze them effectively in her own writing.

Joshua offers a similar analysis of his fan practices. He writes, “You might call me an ‘armchair’ fanatic—capable of appreciating a work deeply, but rarely making an active contribution to the culture. . . . [A]fter I sample a work, I am absorbing and digesting an image or a story until I derive an internal meaning . . . , my energies expended on popular culture have rarely reached out to other fans.” However, within his essay, Joshua explains that his participation in this project has altered his perception of fandom, as well as his own fan practices. While he admits that he is unlikely to participate in fandom beyond this project, he also acknowledges that the project forced him to think more deeply about his responses to the series, and he enjoyed engaging in conversation with his peers about the show via the course wiki. Participating in a fan community thus significantly influenced his participation with the show, engaging him in

more active viewing practices. Writing about the show also allowed him to engage with other fans without the added pressure of a face-to-face conversation about the show. Like Malia, Joshua expresses that writing on the wiki allowed him to more carefully articulate his responses to the show, which made him feel more comfortable expressing his opinions.

In many ways, the *It's Always Sunny* group represents the ideal for a project of this nature. All four students involved in this group were deeply invested in the project, and all four were very careful readers and thoughtful writers. They analyzed their show perhaps more deeply than many of the other groups involved did. Moreover, these four students clearly understand academic conventions and expectations. Were the project replicated in a 100-level course, the results might be quite different, as well. Because the course in which this group of students was enrolled is a 300-level course, and, therefore, the students involved are more advanced and have more experience writing at the college level, their responses should have demonstrated a certain level of sophistication. Still, not every group of students demonstrated the same level of engagement with this project that the *It's Always Sunny* group did, suggesting that their advanced level of education may not be the most significant factor in the quality of their responses to the assignment. What is significant about this group's response to the assignment is that it demonstrates that, given the opportunity and the freedom to be creative, engaged students will consistently surprise and inspire through their work. From the very beginning, this group exhibited a strong knowledge of academic discourse communities, and utilized more traditionally academic forms of conversation in developing its responses to the show. When members disagreed with one another's analysis, they did so respectfully, acknowledging that their

opinions were simply opinions, while citing examples from the episode they were debating to support their readings of the show. Again, the fact that these group members were so well versed in academic discourse made them stand out from other groups in the course and makes their responses to the project unique. Still, the fact that they responded to the project in the ways that they did suggests that projects like this, drawing on students' interests from outside the classroom, as well as combining their emotional and critical responses to texts, can be rigorous and can enhance students' reflective and analytical practices.

“He just doesn’t get it”: Anger and Boundary Crossing in *Intervention’s* Community

While this project had mostly positive effects on the class and helped the students to develop stronger relationships with one another within the course, as demonstrated particularly through my discussion of the *It’s Always Sunny* group above, it had some drawbacks, as well. One of the most significant drawbacks to any writing situation, particularly writing within a fan community, is the potential for disagreement. In the guidelines for the assignment, I stressed that students in the course should be courteous and avoid “flaming” each other. Personal attacks were unacceptable just as they would be within the physical space of the classroom. And the participants in this course were highly conscious of how their words might affect others within their communities, as well as within the classroom. As Kimberly, a member of the *Jersey Shore* group explained in her follow-up interview, participating in the project “made me more self-critical . . . I didn’t want to *offend* anyone else that was watching the show . . . I wanted to be careful not to piss anyone off or . . . hurt anyone’s feelings.” This comment is fairly

representative of most of the participants' feelings about the project. Most people worried about how their words might affect other readers, as also demonstrated by Malia's comments in the previous section.

The *Intervention* group's discussions began in a similar way. Carrie explains in her essay that "[o]ur group seemed to be comfortable with each other and discussion flowed nicely. This being because of the candidness of the group." One member admitted early in the project to being an alcoholic, citing experience with the disease as a reason for being drawn to the series. Inspired by this person's admission, another talked about the experience of being in a relationship with a drug addict. Other group members wrote about family members with drug addiction. One member even wrote in the essay that "I had begun to type several times my own story in relation to the person featured on the show weekly. I stopped and erased; I wasn't brave enough. . . . I felt like a hypocrite. Here these people were, spilling secrets and details of their lives and I was the only one holding back." Though this person did not feel comfortable sharing this information with the whole group, it was evident that the group members felt very comfortable with one another. The four active members of the group cited these early discussions of the members' experiences with drug addiction and alcoholism as reasons for their group's connectedness. While the project was not designed with the intent that students would delve into these kinds of discussions of their personal experiences, these participants engaged with the project in powerful ways by openly discussing how their own experiences related to what they saw happening on the show.

This connectedness among the group members made it all the more shocking, then, when one group member, according to the others, crossed the line. After viewing an

episode of the reality series *Intervention* that focused on the story of a young woman who had been raped while under the influence of drugs and had no recollection of the event until she saw surveillance camera footage of the rape, Carrie had a very strong response.

She wrote,

I watched Lana guys, it was the one featured this week! Oh my my my this show had me feeling so emotional for this girl and her family. To see such a beautiful girl, who used to be full of life, shut herself down with her addictions is just devastating. . . . Lana being raped was probably her downfall, but I had a hard time understanding why something that she had no recollection of could affect her in such a detrimental way. But then again maybe thats really insensitive for me to say since I have not walked in those shoes.

Carrie was attempting with this comment to open up a discussion about the episode's portrayal of a woman who had been raped. She admits that her comments might seem insensitive to a rape victim, but Carrie demonstrates sensitivity by saying, "I have not walked in those shoes." She felt a strong connection to this woman, she informed me later, in large part because, though she had no personal experience with rape or sexual assault, she had experience with addiction. Watching Lana's story, she felt she was reliving her own experiences with addiction.

But Carrie's experience did not end there; she was thrust into the position of Lana's defender by Frank, who wrote,

Well Carrie I am a man so I don't think I will be raped anytime soon. With that said I will never have to go through what Lana went through. I feel

bad for her but there is nothing I can do to help her. There are a lot of girls who get raped and don't turn to drugs. Just like you I don't know how she could be affected so badly by something she is just now starting to remember. There must be something else that is bugging her besides the fact that she got raped. I think that drinking at age 7 is very bad and that it is only a matter of time that something like rape would happen to her eventually. I am not sure if I believe her at all about the rape. I hate to say it but does anyone believe that Lana was raped?

During our follow-up interview, having had several weeks to reflect on the experience, Carrie suggested, "if he would have reread it, he probably, yeah, would have thought differently about it." Though Frank did not write about this comment in his paper, and he declined to participate in a follow-up interview, I, too, want to give him the benefit of the doubt and assume he may not have fully thought the comment out.

Gary offers another possible reading of the comment in his essay:

The strangest comment in the entire wiki pertained to a girl who had been raped. The debate was about how the rape affected her addiction if she could not even remember being raped. The person was trying to understand the situation and respond to another post. . . . My first initial thought was that I hope this man never goes to prison. The point of this quote is that it is hard to put yourself in a person's shoes unless you have already worn those shoes.

Gary believes that Frank is trying to express sympathy for Lana by saying, "I will never have to go through what Lana went through" because he is a man. Carrie is not so

convinced. Though Frank neither wrote about nor discussed with me his feelings about having made this comment, a statement in his essay does suggest he may have revised his thinking about it later: “I don’t think I can ever enjoy *Intervention* again. I use to laugh at the people in *Intervention* and make fun of them and their problems. However, now that I had to watch the show more closely in order to interact with the other students . . . I . . . began to feel sorry for what they have gone through because of their addiction.” While he does not directly address his comments about Lana here, then, Frank does suggest that he has thought more carefully about the show and potentially about a situation like Lana’s after reflecting on his experience with the fan community.

As an instructor, I was unsure of how to respond to the situation. As a woman, I am disturbed by Frank’s ignorance in making such a remark. A comment Carrie made during our follow-up interview encapsulates my feelings in reading Frank’s comment

When I read his comment that he didn’t . . . believe that the girl had actually been raped and that, even though there was videotape evidence, it still wasn’t enough to convince him, and I just felt like what an *idiot*, and he said that, “She probably had it comin’ to her.” And I just thought about how all the women that I know of that have been a victim of some kind of abuse like that, and I would never have said at any given point that they had it coming to them because of what they were doing that specific evening, and I thought about him being a *man*, and how they just don’t *get* it, and I thought about him just being who he is, and how *he* just doesn’t get it, and it irritated me . . .

It disturbs me further that he calls his classmate out by name, “Well Carrie,” almost suggesting that Carrie is functioning as a representative within the fan community for Lana. Indeed, the comment seems almost accusatory, as though he is not just suggesting that *Lana* is a liar, but that Carrie, as her stand-in within the group is equally culpable in his mind. As the instructor for the course, I had to make a quick decision on how to respond. I could not broach the topic objectively because I took great offense not just to the comment itself but also to his treatment of his classmate. At the same time, though his comment was directed at Carrie, he was clearly making an argument about Lana and about accusations of rape in general. I felt obliged to address inappropriateness of the comment with him, but I did not want to embarrass him or make other students in the class uncomfortable expressing what they felt about the episodes they were watching in their wiki posts. I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt and assume that perhaps he did not realize how offensive this remark would be and how it would affect readers, particularly women. Though I privately suggested to Frank, then, that this type of comment perpetuates larger cultural assumptions that rape victims’ claims are somehow suspect or that women are “asking to be raped,” I did not make this point on the wiki itself because I did not wish to stifle the students’ discussion, and I also wanted to give his peers the opportunity to engage him in response to it.

While Carrie said during our interview that she believed her classmate might have regretted making the comment, it clearly had a significant impact on her work throughout the rest of the course, as well as her participation in the fan community. On the other hand, she said she was glad that I had not stepped into the discussion because she believed that my doing so would have changed the nature of the group’s discussion,

making participants uncomfortable in truly expressing themselves. Throughout the rest of the project, Carrie and her fellow community members continued to engage in serious discussion of the issues raised within the series. While Frank's comment was very upsetting, then, to the other group members, and it had enough of an impact that they all wrote about it in their essays, it did not significantly alter the tenor of their discussions on the wiki itself. The connectedness the group felt early on carried through the rest of the project, allowing the participants to truly form a community both on the wiki and in the classroom itself.

Ultimately, what happened within this group's online discussion could have just as easily occurred in a face-to-face classroom discussion. Yet the fact that the conflict occurred within a wiki space rather than in the physical classroom space is significant because it altered not just my response as the instructor of the course, but the group members' responses, as well. Had the comment been made in class, I would have been far more likely to immediately respond to it, and my response would not have been as carefully thought out. Carrie also likely would have had a much more forceful reaction; she might even have called Frank an "ass" to his face rather than taking time to reflect on what he was saying, why he might be saying it, and giving him a chance to clarify his comment. Though students do occasionally make similar comments during class discussions, I also believe that most students would be much more reluctant to make a comment like Frank's during a face-to-face discussion. In their reflections on the project, both written and oral, students who participated in the project consistently reiterated a belief that the potential for anonymity and not having to say something directly to a person influenced their responses. While they knew they would be seeing their

classmates twice a week in class, most of them were able to separate their “online” personas via the wiki from their physical personas, and this made them more willing at times to type comments on the wiki that they may not have been willing to express aloud in the classroom.

“Making it real”: Connectedness and Friendship-Building in a *Castle* Fan Community

In stark contrast to the *Intervention* community, the *Castle* community was marked by a strong rapport from the very beginning. Whereas the *Intervention* community consisted of six members (four active), the *Castle* community had only two. Surprisingly, though, the *Castle* group generated more discussion and lengthier and more deeply engaged posts than any other group in the course except the *It's Always Sunny* community. According to both Andrew and Sarah, their participation in the community was heavily influenced by the fact that there were only two of them, and they did not want to let each other down, particularly because they liked each other and had two other classes together. While both of these students were highly engaged with this project and with one another, they did not always demonstrate the same level of engagement with other projects in the course. However, once they became engaged in this project, they both exhibited a stronger engagement in other projects for the course; in particular, Sarah said that participating in this project made her more interested in the course readings than she had been prior to writing about *Castle* via the wiki. They both said that their engagement with this project was heavily influenced by their group dynamic, as well as their interests in talking about a favorite television show they felt unable to discuss with others outside the group. The project thus enabled students who might have otherwise

been less engaged and perhaps less successful to demonstrate and develop their reflective and analytic abilities within a “safe” space. Further, the project allowed students to negotiate their identities within the course through writing rather than just through face-to-face interactions.

Identity, particularly in terms of sexuality played a significant role in this group’s interactions. As an openly gay twenty-one-year-old man, Andrew expressed himself in ways that were initially shocking to Sarah, who is more conservative. Despite the fact that both were uncomfortable early in the project, unsure of how to express their opinions, and wary of offending one another within their discussions, by the end of the project, the two had clearly developed a strong bond and felt deeply connected to one another through the project. Both stated during their follow-up interviews that they were initially skeptical of one another. Early in the project, Andrew explained, he made a number of assumptions about Sarah based on comments she made in class. However, conversing with her on the wiki “sort of helped me—her—because I had those assumptions . . . but then it changed. . . . It was almost like a continuous conversation online and in person.” He told me that participating in the group with Sarah altered his opinion of her, forcing him to look past his initial presumptions. Sarah made a similar comment during her interview: “Andrew is very different than I am, very different, and we see things differently, but it was interesting to see how he saw different things that happened. . . . It made the class more real; it made the people more real.” In particular, Sarah cited a comment Andrew had made on the wiki about a male character having an attractive “butt.” Sarah explained to me that she was taken aback by this comment, though she posted to the wiki that “[t]he butt comment was hilarious!!” Initially, Sarah

was a bit uncomfortable participating in a group with a gay man because she did not have a great deal of experience interacting with gay men, so working with Andrew forced her to reexamine her own beliefs, just as working with Sarah forced Andrew to reexamine his own.

Their face-to-face relationship played a significant role in Sarah and Andrew's interactions on the course wiki. Sarah explained to me during our interview that "if my partner had been someone different, I would have said different things. . . . I think that if I was watching a different show, . . . I would have been more careful at what I say, . . . but knowing him face-to-face I knew that it really didn't matter what I said." In spite of the fact that Sarah was initially unsure of how to interact with Andrew, she very quickly realized that she could express herself honestly within their community, a sense she credits largely to their "real life" relationship. Andrew also felt that his prior knowledge of Sarah from the physical classroom space influenced their relationship within the community. Via the wiki, Andrew explains, the two developed a good rapport with one another: "I think we got into a groove of, like, I *knew* she was gonna follow the love story more, and I was gonna follow the action and things like that, so we just kind of meshed it together well." This "groove" the two developed on the wiki altered their face-to-face relationship, as well. As discussed above, Andrew's feelings about Sarah changed significantly through this project because he saw a different side of her on the wiki than he did in the physical classroom space. The project, thus, helped these two students to develop a stronger relationship both on the wiki and in the classroom.

Like the *It's Always Sunny* group, the *Castle* group, in addition to developing a strong rapport on the wiki, was deeply engaged with analyzing and reflecting on the

television series. Andrew helped push them towards a deeper engagement with the series through research. In a post made in early October, Andrew writes, “This episode really screamed out to me how we are talking [in class] about how technology changes and all that, and this episode with them cryogenically(sp?) freezing themselves for the future is just crazy. OMG I actually googled cryonics during the commercial and there are actually about two hundred people in the united states that have been cryogenically frozen.” First, Andrew relates what he sees happening in the episode to what we have been discussing in class, showing that his participation in the fan community has led to a deeper engagement with the course itself. Then, he goes on to discuss additional research he has done about what is happening on the show in order to satisfy his own interests in the subject matter, engaging more deeply with the show itself.

When I asked Andrew during our follow-up interview what he learned about himself through the project, he said, “Well, I learned that I’m actually a very active TV watcher in a different sense, in the sense that, I guess, I go beyond the actual storyline. Because, before I was in the wiki, I would just sit and watch TV, but now, . . . I’ll look stuff up while I’m watching TV.” According to Andrew, looking things up about what is happening while he is watching TV has led to a deeper engagement with the show. Laughing, he added, “My boyfriend hates it that I always like to talk to him when we’re watching TV now. . . . [but] He’s kind of into it now.” According to Andrew, participating in this project and researching topics discussed in the show has altered his television viewing habits. He is no longer a passive television watcher. Instead, he actively engages with the television shows he watches, even persuading his partner to engage in deeper analysis of the shows they watch together.

When I interviewed Sarah, she told me that Andrew's incorporation of research into his posts pushed her to engage more deeply with the show, as well. Throughout the project, Sarah also related what she saw happening during the episodes of *Castle* to discussions we were having in class: "I thought this episode was interesting, I've never seen a plot with superheroes on a show like this. I thought it was a creative twist to keep the show interesting, especially since we had been talking about comics and cartoons in class." Like Andrew, Sarah found that the connections she made between the series they were watching and our classroom discussions deepened her engagement both within the wiki project and within the classroom. Moreover, she felt that the project itself helped her to understand the concepts raised in our class discussions and course readings: "I mean, we talked about it a lot in class, different online groups or different things people participate in, and I thought it kind of brought to life or gave it a real-life situation 'cause we read about a lot of different things like the *Harry Potter* group, and . . . I thought that it brought the class more to *our* level." Though Sarah ultimately found the project rewarding in these ways, she was initially resistant to it, saying that she thought members of fan communities like the ones Jenkins writes about were "quacks." Completing the project thus broadened her view of fandom, making her more open-minded about participants in online fan communities, whom she now perceives as, like her, just looking for someone else to talk to about the television shows they enjoy.

Again, for both Sarah and Andrew the communal experience was the most important part of this project. Connecting with one another over a mutual passion for the television show *Castle* enhanced their experience in the course, as well as within the project. Though she was initially skeptical about the project, Sarah told me during our

follow-up interview that “*after* it was over, . . . I remember, two weeks later, there was a really interesting episode, and I was like, oh, I wish he—I could tell him this, or I would like to hear what he would say about it, so I kind of missed it.” Having become accustomed to sharing her reactions to the episodes with Andrew, Sarah suddenly found herself looking for a new outlet for discussing her feelings about the show. Sarah found friends less receptive to her interests. As a result, she felt more of an affinity towards members of online fan communities whom she had previously judged. While their conversations about the show ended with the conclusion of the project, Andrew and Sarah both expressed that their participation in the group altered their perceptions of one another and prompted them to connect with one another in ways they had not anticipated. Moreover, they developed a mutual respect for one another that carried over into their face-to-face relationships in three separate courses. This project, they told me, inspired them to collaborate on projects for other courses they were taking together.

Certainly, the fact that they knew one another and the fact that they only had one other person to negotiate with within the group influenced their interactions on the wiki. They likely shared personal details with one another that they might not have in a larger group (for instance, Andrew might not have commented on the character’s attractiveness within a larger group). In a different setting, then, they probably would have participated differently. Still, they were aware that other members of the class could read their wiki page throughout the project, so they did not share anything they would not want the whole class to see, and they were highly conscious of the fact that their online personas would influence the ways in which their peers perceived them within the classroom. Thus, the kinds of interactions which occurred within all three of these groups are clearly

not representative of “real” fan communities’ interactions. The fact that the participants in this project all had face-to-face relationships played a significant role in their participation in the project. Ultimately, though, the goal of this project is not to replicate “real” fan communities; the goal of this project is to develop discourse communities within the classroom which draw upon students existing expertise in popular culture in order to develop their critical, analytical, and reflective skills within the classroom.

“Being a Lady” or “Being a Man”: Gender and Participation in the Fan Community

At the end of each follow-up interview, I asked the participants if they felt their gender influenced their participation in the project. Of the ten people interviewed about this project, nine answered yes. Andrew, the only participant to answer no, explained, “I would argue no. I mean, that’s hard because I’ve grown up socially as a male, so there is obviously some things that have influenced me the way I am, but I think more so my sexuality.” When I asked him why he thought so, he said, “I would say almost because it’s more socially acceptable with me being gay to talk about my *feelings* or my *interest* in a TV show more so than a ‘*straight-male*’ social-wise.” Interestingly, though Andrew suggested that his sexuality might give him a “pass” to talk more about his “*feelings*” about television shows, within the project, he focused on many of the same aspects of the show he was writing about that other men in the class focused on, namely the “action” or plot-driven elements of the show. Women in the class, on the other hand, tended to focus more on character-driven elements of the show, particularly relationships among characters.

All six of the women interviewed believed that their gender influenced their participation in the project, and many of them cited their interest in the characters' relationships or their own feelings about the show as ways in which their gender factored into their participation. According to Carrie, "The first thing that comes to mind is that being female with Frank making his comment about . . . females deserving it when they get assaulted . . . I would think that a man would feel that in their heart that that was the wrong thing to say, but being a woman, . . . it really affected what I said." She goes on to suggest that perhaps she had such a strong reaction because women are "emotional." For instance, she explains that in response to the comedy shows, "if there was crude sexual humor I think that the boys would talk about it more than the girls." Her belief that women are more resistant to discussing "crude sexual humor" in comedy series is reinforced by Malia's response to the "Frank's Little Beauties" episode of *It's Always Sunny in Pennsylvania*: "I can remember a particularly disturbing episode . . . where Danny DeVito's character is falsely accused of 'diddling,' or sexually assaulting little girls in beauty pageants. I was initially horrified by this situation, but decided to wait a minute before I took my aggression out on my keyboard." Of course, as Andrew points out with regard to his own participation, the argument that women are more resistant to "crude sexual humor" is based more in social expectation than necessarily in reality. Malia was offended by the humor in the *It's Always Sunny in Pennsylvania* episode, but a different female group member might not have been.

Like Carrie, Kimberly attributes her reactions to her group's selected series to her gender, as well as to her upbringing: "[B]eing a conservative girl, growing up Catholic and my parents teaching me how a lady is supposed to be, and then coming to college and

becoming a sorority girl and not adhere—and not conforming to what people think that sorority girls are just like a bunch of drunken sluts.” These notions of “how a lady is supposed to be” and the stereotypes Kimberly faces as a member of a sorority heavily influenced her reactions to *Jersey Shore*. She told me she would be “mortified” if someone saw her behaving like the women on that show, commenting on “how little . . . conscience and reflection . . . they have about their behavior and how they show no remorse . . . the morning after they did something embarrassing or mean to one of the other housemates.” Social conditioning has clearly played a significant role in Kimberly’s sense of herself, as well as her reactions to the women who appear on this reality show. Kimberly has a clear sense of “how a lady is supposed to be”: “You don’t sleep around, you’re intelligent, you don’t show your panties in a bar, you don’t wear things too low-cut, you conduct yourself with grace and dignity.” Watching *Jersey Shore* for this assignment with these criteria for how women should behave in mind obviously affected Kimberly’s participation in the project. She told me that she had always watched the show purely for entertainment, not really noticing these women’s problematic behavior; after watching the show for this project, she was “embarrassed” that she had enjoyed it in the past. Moreover, if she had not been required to watch the show over a period of several weeks for the assignment, she would have quit watching it much sooner.

The men who participated in this project also attributed their responses in part to their gender. While Andrew believed his sexuality was more of a factor than his gender in how he responded to the show, both Spencer and Joshua believed their gender played an important role. According to Spencer, “I think that comedy is more gender—is more leaning towards males . . . so maybe I was more comfortable with it.” I do not think that

Spencer means to suggest that *all* comedy is male-oriented here, but that a particular *type* of comedy, like that on *It's Always Sunny in the Park* tends to be gendered male. Like Carrie, Spencer suggests that “crude” humor is geared towards a male audience, and he believes that Malia “was probably uncomfortable with it.” Joshua agrees: “I guess I have pretty open tastes, so I don’t—I wasn’t really offended by anything I saw. I mean, there’s a lot to be offended by on *It's Always Sunny in the Park*, but I never really was. . . . Actually, it is pretty sexist, the show, now that I think about it, so I can see, being a man, I probably found it a lot funnier than a lot of women might.” For Joshua, as for Carrie and Spencer, being a man is synonymous with having “open tastes” and not being easily offended. Just as Kimberly is influenced by stereotypes of what it means to “be a lady,” then, these men are also influenced by stereotypes of what it means to “be a man.” Of course, I do not believe any of these people would argue that *all* women or *all* men behave in the ways they describe. Still, it is interesting to consider how their socially constructed notions of how members of a certain gender are supposed to behave influenced their responses to the shows they wrote about, as well as their participation within these fan communities.

“It Furthered My Reflection”: The Value of the Project to the Composition Course

Ultimately, this project enabled students enrolled in the course to better comprehend the issues raised in our course readings from Jenkins’s *Convergence Culture*. When the course began, students were highly resistant to many of Jenkins’s arguments. They were also, as many of them stated in their follow-up interviews, highly “skeptical” of the project because they felt that fan communities were groups of “weirdos,” obsessed with television shows, books, films, and other media, people who needed to “get a life.” By the end of the project, though, even if some students were still

slightly skeptical about certain online groups, they understood more why people participate in fan communities. The project, thus, forced them to confront their long-held beliefs about fandom, asking themselves why they believed what they did about participants in fan communities, and reassessing their own participatory practices in response to media they find pleasurable. Furthermore, this project required students to think more carefully and critically about their literacy practices and the rhetorical moves they make as writers. As Ashley explained to me in our follow-up interview, the writing she did on the wiki “was more of an analytical type of approach because I had to think about why I like the show. . . . I had to be able to *describe* to others why I liked the show. It furthered my reflection on it.” Ashley was not alone in reflecting on the assignment in this way. Several other participants expressed similar ideas in their papers and interviews, suggesting that they understood the larger goals of the project and felt that the project had significantly altered not just their perceptions of fandom but also their perceptions of their own literacy practices.

As I have explained throughout this chapter, the goal of this project is to engage students in more careful, critical, reflective, and analytical thinking and writing through the use of participatory culture. By having students respond to popular television series through writing within fan communities via a wiki, I encouraged them to think of themselves as experts, pooling their knowledge of these television series in order to develop arguments about the social and political implications of these popular shows. Using a wiki persuaded the participants to think of writing as collaborative rather than individual from the beginning because wikis are collaborative writing tools. Through their conversations on the wiki, students developed a more collaborative notion of

authorship, perceiving their responses to these shows as part of a larger discussion rather than isolated opinions. Furthermore, by being forced to negotiate not only their identities but also their reactions to the shows with others in the class, these students recognized the significance of audience awareness and the importance of analyzing and anticipating their audience's needs and potential reactions to their writing, accounting for both as they composed. Thus, this project has value not just in terms of engaging students, but, more important, in terms of encouraging students to think more carefully and rhetorically about the ways in which they write, as well as how they negotiate their identities through the written word, both of which are significant goals of most composition courses.

CONCLUSION

“Good writing does not lay out all the facts and traits of a person like a bullet-point list; instead, it takes the reader on a journey with discovery, both spoken and implied. . . . Good writing will challenge the audience.” – Alice, 27, email interview, 2/7/12

“Good storytelling, real characters, good dialogue, good literary/story arcs [are what I most like about my favorite shows]” – Victoria, 33, email interview, 8/3/11

“I feel I can relate to [characters reading in a television show] more because I read a lot, too. And . . . it connects them to the real world . . . in a lot of ways. [I]t’s something that’s interacting with a lot of things that you do every day. I mean, not everyone who reads is smart, but it helps. I like smart characters. . . . I think books are less accessible. You have to want it more.” – Annie, 22, face-to-face interview, 8/3/11

These three quotes, taken from interviews conducted with participants in several different online fan communities, illuminate a point I have been developing throughout this dissertation—that people who participate in television show fan communities actively engage with the television series that they watch. Not only do they engage with these series by writing within fan communities, but they engage while watching the shows themselves, focusing on and analyzing the writing of the shows, and relating to the characters as fellow readers and writers. In our interview, Victoria also mentioned the popular device of voice-over “journaling” within contemporary television series in addition to the actual physical writing characters do on paper or on a computer screen. According to Victoria, such uses of literacy within television series is compelling because “I think more highly of the characters, and I think it makes them more ‘real’ because they are being shown taking the time to ‘do’ something that is often absent in these contexts.”

Like Victoria, both Annie and Alice relate to characters who read or write because they share these interests. Thus, relatable characters are important to all three of these individuals, as they are to most viewers of television series. Even more interesting is the fact that all three of these individuals cite “good writing” as an important element of what makes their favorite television series engaging to them. Of course, Annie just recently completed a BA in English, Alice is currently an MA candidate in a humanities discipline with a BA in English, and Victoria has a BA, MA, and PhD in English, so it is ultimately not that surprising that all three share this interest in the writing of their favorite series. However, as I have shown throughout this dissertation, many individuals who have backgrounds in much different areas share this interest in the writing of television series, participating through their own writing in various fan communities online.

While these three participants share values with scholars within the field of Rhetoric and Composition, then, having earned degrees within the field of English, little attention has been paid overall within the field to how individuals like Annie, Alice, and Victoria practice literacy within television show fan communities. Of particular importance to the field are the kinds of literacy practices taking place within online fan communities and the kinds of literacy practices being represented within popular television series. As I demonstrate in chapters two and three, fan communities for television series like *Modern Family* and *Community* have become sites of discourse and community-building, which not only demonstrate a concerted interest in the writing of these series, like that shared by Annie, Alice, and Victoria, but also demonstrate an interest in promoting social change and redefining authorship through digital means. Because digital literacies are becoming increasingly popular and developing into new and

significant forms of communication, as scholars within a field concerned primarily with how people write and read, we need to be paying closer attention to these developments.

Throughout this dissertation, I have been arguing that scholars and instructors within the field of composition should be paying attention to how literacy and identities are represented within popular culture, specifically through the medium of television. Series like *Modern Family* are of particular importance to examine because of their immense popularity—not only has this series won numerous awards, but also it has consistently remained one of the most viewed sitcoms on television throughout its entire run. Now in its fourth season, *Modern Family* has had the opportunity to influence the way significant numbers of viewers perceive typical literacy practices within the family home and workplace, as well as how one's identity influences her or his literacy practices. Many students bring similar beliefs about the intersections between literacy and identity with them into our classrooms. Though significantly lower-rated in terms of total number of viewers, *Community* also deserves closer attention because of its positive reception among fans and critics. Despite the fact that the series is watched by far fewer individuals than *Modern Family*, it is arguably more popular among its cult fan base, and certainly takes more liberty and greater risks with its writing and production than *Modern Family*. Moreover, the series is particularly interesting in terms of its representations of literacy and identities within classroom spaces, as well as its innovative approaches to storytelling and narrativity.

Further, I have been arguing that fan responses to these series deserve attention, as well, particularly within online spaces, including discussion forums and social media like Twitter and Facebook. As I discuss in Chapter Two, through Facebook, a group of

about 13,000 fans protested the sanitized portrayal of *Modern Family*'s gay characters, inducing its writers and producers to at least slightly modify the portrayal of that relationship. Twitter has played a similar role in the narrative about the series *Community*, particularly with regard to the firing of series creator Dan Harmon, as I demonstrate in Chapter Three. Again, I argue that as composition scholars and instructors we need to pay attention to these media not just because they are changing the ways in which writing is produced, but also because they create intriguing sites of discourse, as well as communities of people who engage with one another through the very techniques we study and value within our field. The very ways in which literacies develop and are practiced are changing as a result of these media, so if we do not begin to pay closer attention to them, we risk being left behind.

In Chapter Four, I offer one potential pedagogical application of these concepts. As I discuss in that chapter, I asked the students enrolled in my English 309 course during the fall 2011 semester to form fan communities with their peers via a course wiki. These communities were dedicated to shows' of the groups' own selection. After completing this portion of the project, the students individually composed essays reflecting on and analyzing their own and their peers' work within these communities. Within the wiki itself and in the discussions which followed, both within the students' essays and in face-to-face interviews held after the course was completed, issues of literacy and identity arose. In particular, these students expressed an acute awareness of how their own and their peers' identities influenced their reading and writing practices within the communities. Moreover, I found that these participants saw value in the

assignment in terms of better getting to know their peers. For instance, as Hope, a twenty-two-year-old explains,

Just getting to know other people and finding kind of a common ground, like even just picking out what shows, being like, 'Oh, you like that, too? I do, too. . . . And that in itself is like finding a fan community, you know? Just like, being like, oh, we like the same thing, we like the same kind of show, book, whatever . . . realizing something like that is technically a fan community and kind of putting that together, that fan communities aren't just the kind of people that dress up in costumes and go crazy and have their walls plastered with pictures. . . . It's just really liking a show and talking about it to another person.

The students themselves perceived the efficacy of this project in terms of making connections with fellow fans, as well as learning how to compose in new ways which combine real-world writing situations with academic writing situations. I argue that composition instructors should implement similar projects into their courses. While the topic of discussion could vary greatly, I think it is important that we engage students in writing activities which draw upon new media and Web 2.0 technologies. Not only are such media and technologies increasingly prevalent within U.S. culture, but they change the very nature and notion of what constitutes authorship. By having students engage in such writing projects, then, we encourage them to think more carefully and critically about what they write, how they write it, who they write it for, how their audiences might respond to their work, why they write, and why all of those things matter.

In addition to the face-to-face and email interviews conducted with ten students following the English 309 course, I also conducted electronic interviews with participants on various television forums. Within Chapter Three, I discuss email interviews conducted with four members of the *Community* fan forum Dan Harmon Sucks. I also conducted both face-to-face and email interviews with five members of fan communities dedicated to other television series. Quotations from these interviews are included in Chapters One and Three and this conclusion. Through these interviews, I learned a great deal about how these individuals identify themselves and how they feel that their identities influence their literacy practices, as well as their viewing of television series and participation within fan forums. However, there are some limitations to the material obtained through these interviews. I had a personal relationship with each individual who participated in a face-to-face interview with me, and that relationship may have influenced their responses to my interview questions, as well as their willingness to participate in the project. Alternatively, I had no prior relationship with the participants who responded to my interview questions via email. Thus, they had no reason to participate in the project other than their own personal interest in participating. However, because I could not see their body language as they responded to my questions, I have no way of knowing how the questions affected them other than through their self-reporting. The fact that all of the participants in the English 309 course were my own students is also a concern. Some of them may have felt compelled to participate in the project because they were enrolled in my course. However, I minimized this pressure by making participation entirely voluntary and conducting interviews only after the course was completed and final grades

had been turned in. To avoid such concerns in the future, I would consider replicating the study with a group of students who were not enrolled in my own course.

In each chapter, I treat the television series and/or fan community being discussed as a case study. Because case studies are limited to one individual or small group of individuals, their results are very limiting and not generalizable. Therefore, I make no claim that these series or groups should be considered representative of all series or all groups or individuals. Instead, I argue that these case studies should serve as a starting point for discussion of how identities and literacies intersect, how popular representations of literacies and identities might influence their audiences, and how social media and Web 2.0 technologies can be used as sites of inquiry and discussion of these issues, as well as how those technologies change the ways in which human beings compose. Just as my case studies carry certain limitations, so does my textual analysis. As anyone who reads and analyzes a text does, I bring to each piece of writing (whether it is a television series or a comment on a fan forum or social media site) my own biases and interpretations. I have attempted to limit such biases by asking the writers within these forums to comment on their own ideas through surveys and interviews. In any future studies, I would ask participants to comment on how they have been represented within the study through additional interviews.

I would like to continue developing these ideas through further scholarship, as well as through my pedagogical practices. I plan to examine representations of literacies and identities within other television series, as well as other fan communities. In future courses, I also plan to have students participate in similar projects. However, as I suggest in Chapter Four, I would like the students to utilize a wiki, a blog, or a Google doc in

composing their reflective pieces. I believe that composing through those media will encourage further collaboration among the students, as well as new ways of thinking about authorship. Moreover, I would encourage others to adopt similar pedagogical practices. I firmly believe that social media and Web 2.0 technologies are important innovations that allow for new ways of reading and writing, as well as further collaboration among writers. Additionally, as composition becomes increasingly collaborative, I feel that composition scholars and instructors should be paying attention to the ways in which people utilize new media and Web 2.0 technologies to compose collaboratively.

Though not all students enter our classrooms with knowledge of or the ability to use these technologies, increasing numbers of students begin college with a strong awareness of them, and I believe we should draw upon their existing expertise, helping them to understand how to apply it to the skills we want them to gain through our courses. Ultimately, then, I believe that further studies of the representations of literacy and identity within television series are warranted. Further, I would like to see additional studies of how writers construct and negotiate their identities within fan communities, how digital literacies alter our ways of communicating, and why certain television series inspire such communities and sites of discourse. Our field would benefit from further study of the kinds of literacies people are engaging with outside of our classrooms in order to better inform our pedagogical practices, particularly in terms of understanding the notions of literacies and identities students carry with them into our classrooms. By becoming more knowledgeable about these issues, we are better prepared to help our

students bridge their existing writing practices with the kinds of writing practices privileged within academic spaces.

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APPENDIX A

Survey Questions

Gender: Female Male

Age:

What is your current occupation?

What is your highest degree earned?

Are you currently working on a degree?

If so, what degree are you currently working towards?

What motivates you to participate in online fan communities (fan forums, discussion boards, etc.)?

When you write on discussion boards or fan forums, which of the following concern(s) you most? (Choose all that apply)

correct grammar/spelling/punctuation
saying the right thing
saying things in the right way
being an insider
sounding intelligent
none of the above

If you selected one or more of the choices available in the previous question, please explain what most concerns you about that issue/those issues below.

May I contact you to conduct a follow-up interview? If so, please provide a current email address at which I can contact you below.

Interview Questions

1. What are your favorite TV shows?
2. What in particular do you like about those TV shows?
3. Describe what you like about your favorite characters on these TV shows.
4. When you see a character on a TV show reading or writing, why do you imagine the writers have chosen to include that image (of a character reading or writing)?
5. When you see a character on a TV show reading or writing, how does it affect the way you think about the characters or the plot? Why?
6. In general, when you see a character on a TV show reading or writing, how does it affect you? Why?
7. When you see a character on a TV show reading or writing, does it make you think about your own reading and writing practices? Why? How?
8. Which of the following best describes the way you watch TV?
 - a. When I watch TV, I think carefully about what's happening on the show and how it affects me and those around me.
 - b. When I watch TV, I occasionally pay attention to how what I'm watching affects me and others, but I mostly watch it for entertainment.
 - c. When I watch TV, I'm usually distracted and pay little attention to how what I'm watching affects me and others.
 - d. When I watch TV, I'm watching it purely for entertainment, and I have no interest in how what I'm watching affects me and others.
9. Please briefly explain your response to question 8. Why did you choose the answer you chose?
10. Does your answer to question 8 depend on the TV show you are watching? How or why?
11. How long have you been participating (as a writer or as a reader) in online fan communities?
12. What made you decide to begin participating in online fan communities?
13. What made you want to write in online fan communities?
14. In which online fan communities do you participate?
15. Why do you participate in online fan communities?
16. Do you consider yourself a writer? Why or why not?
17. When you write in online fan communities, what do you worry the most about as a writer?
18. When you write in online fan communities, who do you consider to be your audience?
19. When you write in online fan communities, do you typically proofread, edit, and revise your posts? Do you revise as you write? After you are finished writing? Why or why not?
20. What is your highest degree earned?
21. What are your parents'/guardians' highest degrees earned?

22. What is your current job?

23. To what extent do you think your education and/or gender has influenced the ways in which you read and write?

APPENDIX B

Wiki Guidelines

For your weekly wiki posts, you are being asked to react to the episodes your group watches each week. As is true in online fan communities (like what you observed on the TWoP site), there are a few “rules” to keep in mind:

1. Be polite to others within your fan community (i.e. don't post rude or disrespectful comments to one another).
2. Be clear and specific in your posts (i.e. explain what you say. For instance, if you say you liked a certain aspect of an episode, explain *why* you liked it).
3. Post roughly a 100-200-word response each week.
4. Don't just summarize what happened in the episode; *analyze* it (explain *why* what happened in the episode is significant to you).
5. Have a *conversation* about the episode with your group (i.e. feel free to add a new “thread” to the discussion, but *read* what others in the group have written and *respond* to each others' posts).
6. Post by the due date/time. Posts should be made no later than midnight on Fridays (that is, 12:00 a.m. Saturday).

Reflection/Analysis of a Fan Community

Fan communities have long existed as a part of U.S. culture. From book clubs to fan conventions to online discussion forums about favorite television shows, music, and films, fans have found ways to connect with other fans through these communities. However, the term “fan” carries with it a certain weight—fans (short for “fanatics”) are often treated as weirdos or freaks, as “obsessed” with their favorite films, music, tv shows, etc. in a way that other types of fans (sports fans in particular) are not.

Over the past several weeks, the members of this class have been participating in fan communities dedicated to a variety of popular television shows. You have watched and responded to these shows in writing. You have also engaged in what are called “new literacies”—reading and writing practices made possible through new media (in this case the specific medium of a wiki).

For this assignment, I am asking you to **reflect** on your experiences of participating in these fan communities and **analyze** the activities that have been taking place within them. In order to accomplish this task, consider answering the following questions:

1. What is a fan community? How did this group participate in such a community? In what ways did participating in this group affect your perception of fan communities in general? Why?
2. How did each member of the community shape her or his identity within the community? How did you personally shape your identity within the community?
3. In what ways did participating in this community change your personal reading and writing practices? In what ways did it affect others’ reading and writing practices?
4. What kind of discussions happened within the community? What stands out as interesting/significant about these conversations? Why?
5. In what ways did participating in this community affect your perception of the television show your group selected? Why?

These questions are meant to serve as a starting point for thinking about this project. You do not necessarily need to answer *all* of them, nor should you *just* answer these questions—come up with your own questions, as well. While you have a set of questions to consider here, be careful to craft your essay cohesively so that it doesn’t read like just a list of answers to these and your own questions. **Transitions** between ideas are, thus, particularly important.

APPENDIX C

Description of Participants in Chapter Four

Andrew is a twenty-one-year-old Junior majoring in Psychology. He currently works with children affected by severe social anxiety disorders. After completing his degree and attending graduate or medical school, Andrew hopes to continue to work with these children as a Psychologist or a Psychiatrist.

Ashley is a twenty-one-year-old Junior majoring in English and Philosophy. Initially, she described herself as a techno-phobe, admitting that she had just recently bought her first cellular phone. Through this project, she developed an interest not just in technology, but in participating in online fan communities outside the classroom, as she has struggled to find fellow fans of her favorite television series.

Malia is a twenty-year-old second-year college student majoring in Marketing. She explains that she intentionally joined a group dedicated to a show she was unfamiliar with so that she could increase her cultural knowledge as well as develop her analytic skills.

Joshua is a twenty-two-year-old third-year transfer student majoring in Psychology. At the end of the semester, Joshua picked up a second major in English. He hopes to pursue a graduate degree in either Psychology or English after completing his B.A.

Spencer is a twenty-two-year-old Senior majoring in Political Science. He resists most popular culture, but he explained in our follow-up interview that Jenkins's text and our class discussions complicated his perception of popular culture, making him more aware of its democratic and participatory potential.

Kimberly is a twenty-two-year-old Sophomore majoring in Psychology. She works with children with hearing impairments. Because she hopes to continue working with young children after completing her degree, she is particularly interested in the ways in which popular texts influence these children.

Carrie is a twenty-seven-year-old returning student. Currently a sophomore majoring in Sociology, she is deeply concerned with the sociological aspects of the study of popular culture. She is particularly interested in class and gender disparities in contemporary U.S. culture.

Frank is a thirty-three-year-old Senior majoring in Political Science. Though he currently works for a real estate agency, he hopes to attend law school after completing his undergraduate degree. He also served in the military during the Gulf War.

Gary is a thirty-eight-year-old returning student, who completed his degree in Psychology in December 2011. Earning the degree is a point of pride for him, as he began work on it twenty years ago at another university. A father of two, he is mostly interested in technologies that allow him to communicate with his children, but he worries that social networking sites and new media may ultimately harm many relationships.

Sarah is a twenty-two-year-old Junior majoring in Psychology. She is interested in the psychological affects of social networking sites on individuals who participate in them. Of particular interest to Sarah are sites where individuals divulge secrets they have never even shared with people they know in real life.

CURRICULUM VITAE

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Education:

PhD, Rhetoric and Composition
University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky
Expected Graduation May 2013
Dissertation: "Literacy and Identity in Popular and Participatory Culture" (Committee: Bronwyn Williams (Director), Karen Kopelson, Dennis Hall, Debra Journet, and John Alberti)

MA in English, Literary History
Ohio University, Athens, Ohio
Graduated June 2006
Master's Essay: "'Ruinous Extasy': Reading as Procreation in Eighteenth-Century English Texts" (Advisor: Jeremy Webster)

BA in English Literature and Creative Writing, University Honors Scholar
Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, Kentucky
Graduated *Magna Cum Laude*, December 2003
Honors Thesis: "Like Vines: Poems" (Mentor: P. Andrew Miller)

Publications:

Detmering, Laura. "'Good Breeding' and 'Acute Discernment': The Politics of Literacy and Family in *Gilmore Girls*." *Studies in Popular Culture* 34.2 (2012): 1-21.

Detmering, Laura. "Workshop on Developing Coherent and Cohesive Paragraphs." *Teaching with Hacker Handbooks*. Boston: Bedford, 2010.

Detmering, Laura. "Roberts, Nancy. *Crossing the Great Divide: A Collection of Short Stories*." *Kentucky Philological Review* 21 (2006): 74-75. (Book Review)

Manuscripts in Progress:

Detmering, Laura. "Avoiding 'Idea Dumping': Reinventing the Research Paper in First-Year Writing Courses."

Detmering, Laura. "Inhabiting a Liminal Space: The Role of the Graduate Student Assistant Director in the University Writing Center."

Conference Papers and Presentations:

"Fan Conventions: Negotiating Literacy and Identity on the Web and in the Classroom"
Conference on College Composition and Communication
Las Vegas, NV, March 2013

"Getting It Right": Literacy Practices in Online Fan Communities"
Thomas R. Watson Conference in Rhetoric and Composition
Louisville, KY, October 2012

"'New Kids' and 'Armchair Fanatics': Television Show Fan Communities and the Composition Classroom"
Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association National Conference
Boston, MA, April 2012

"Inhabiting a Nonspace: The Role of the Graduate Student Assistant Director in the University Writing Center"
Southeastern Writing Center Association Conference
Richmond, KY, February 2012

"Nerdy Virgins and Airheaded Sluts: Representations of Female Students in Popular U.S. Television Series"
Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association National Conference
San Antonio, TX, April 2011

"Working Values in Composition"
Thomas R. Watson Conference in Rhetoric and Composition
Louisville, KY, October 2010

"Converging Instructional Space through Research Wikis"
Conference on College Composition and Communication
Louisville, KY, March 2010

"(Re)Designing (Our) Selves and Sequences"
College English Association Conference
Pittsburgh, PA, Spring 2009

"Demystifying Silence: The Struggle to Create Equality in the Classroom"
Conference on College Composition and Communication
Chicago, IL, Spring 2006

Like Vines: Poems
Northern Kentucky University Conference of Honors

Highland Heights, KY, Spring 2003

Excerpts from *Like Vines: Poems* and other poems
Northern Kentucky University Awakenings Faculty/Student Reading Series
Erlanger, KY, Spring 2003

"Sanctuary: Dystopian Themes in Film"
Northern Kentucky University Celebration of Undergraduate Student Research and
Creativity
Highland Heights, KY, Spring 2002

"Don't Fence Me in: Poems"
National Collegiate Honors Council Conference
Chicago, IL, Fall 2001

Teaching Experience:

Graduate Teaching Assistant, August 2008-present
University of Louisville English Department, Louisville, KY

Courses designed and taught:

ENGL 101: Introduction to College Writing (7 sections)

ENGL 102: Intermediate College Writing (4 sections)

ENGL 105: Advanced Composition for Freshmen (2 sections)

ENGL 302: Survey of British Literature II (1 section)

ENGL 309: Inquiries in Writing (1 section)

ENGL 373: Women in Literature: Amateur Sleuths and Female Detectives (1
section)

ENGL 373: Women in Literature: Jane Austen and Fandom (1 section)

Adjunct Instructor, February 2007-June 2008
Cincinnati State Technical and Community College Humanities and Sciences Division,
Cincinnati, OH

Courses designed and taught:

ENG 1001: English Composition I (9 sections)

ENG 1002: English Composition II (1 section)

Adjunct Instructor, August 2006-June 2008
Northern Kentucky University Literature and Language Department, Highland Heights,
KY

Courses designed and taught:

ENG 101: College English (5 sections)

ENG 200: Introduction to Literature (5 sections)

ENG 291: Advanced College Writing (2 sections)

Adjunct Instructor, August 2006-December 2006, August 2007-December 2007
Xavier University English Department, Cincinnati, OH

Course designed and taught:

ENGL 101: Composition (2 sections)

Teaching Associate, September 2004-July 2006
Ohio University English Department, Athens, OH

Courses designed and taught:

ENG 151: Writing and Rhetoric (3 sections)

ENG 306 J: Women and Writing (3 sections)

ENG 308 J: Writing and Rhetoric II (1 section)

Other Professional Experience:

Substitute Teacher and Substitute Teacher's Aide, March 2004-June 2004
Kenton County Board of Education, Independence, KY

Student Mentor/Teaching Assistant, August 2003-December 2003, January 2003-May 2003

Northern Kentucky University Honors Program, Highland Heights, KY

Writing Consultant, July 2003-December 2003, August 2001-December 2002
Northern Kentucky University Learning Assistance Program, Highland Heights, KY

Honors:

Faculty Favorite (an Outstanding Professor Nominated by Students), 2010-2011
Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

Service to the Department/University:

Assistant Director, University Writing Center, August 2010-May 2012
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

Assessor, General Education Assessment Project, September 2011
General Education Curriculum Committee, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

Graduate Student Representative, Transnational Studies Search Committee, Fall 2010-Spring 2011
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

Mentor Coordinator, Department of English Graduate Student Mentors for PhD
Candidate Visitation Day, Spring 2010
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

PhD Student Mentor, Department of English, 2009-2011
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

Executive Board, English Graduate Organization, 2009-2010
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

Technical Committee, Thomas R. Watson Conference in Rhetoric and Composition,
2008, 2010
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

Panel Chair, Thomas R. Watson Conference in Rhetoric and Composition, 2008
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

Prior Service:

Course Developed, ENG 101 Online: College English, Summer 2008
Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, KY

Freshman Composition Placement Exam Scoring, May 2006
Ohio University Center for Writing Excellence and Writing Across the Curriculum,
Athens, OH

Junior Composition Exemption Exam Scoring, April 2006 (Spring Exemption Exam)
Ohio University Center for Writing Excellence and Writing Across the Curriculum,
Athens, OH

Professional Development Advisory Board, September 2005-June 2006
Ohio University Department of English, Athens, OH

President, Honors Student Association, August 2002-May 2003
Publicist, Honors Student Association, August 2001-May 2002
Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, KY

Poetry Co-Editor, *The Licking River Review*, August 2002-2003
Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, KY

Editor, *Placebo* (NKU Honors Student Literary Magazine), August 2002-May 2003
Poetry Editor, *Placebo*, August 2001-May 2002
Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, KY

Service to the Profession:

Reviewer. *Studies in Popular Culture*, 2012-

Reviewer. *Teaching with Hacker Handbooks*, November 2007-February 2008
Bedford/St. Martin's, NY

Professional Development Workshops:

Creating a Collaborative Classroom Space: Using the Workshop Format in the
Composition Classroom, Fall 2012 (presenter)

Innovative Methods for Teaching Peer Review and Commenting on Student Papers,
University of Louisville, Fall 2010 (panel presenter)

Teaching Reflective Assignments, University of Louisville, Fall 2009 (panel presenter)

Teaching *Writing as Reflective Action*, Ohio University, Fall 2005 (panel presenter)

Presenting at Academic Conferences, Ohio University, Fall 2005 (panel presenter)

Professional Memberships:

Popular Culture Association in the South (2012-)

American Culture Association (2011-)

Rhetoric Society of America (2010-)

College English Association (2009-2010)

Alpha Chi Honor Society

Sigma Tau Delta Honor Society