THE VALUE OF FANFICTION: FEMALE EMPOWERMENT, IDENTITY
BUILDING, AND RESISTANCE

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Abstract

This study takes an autoethnographic approach that uses a piece of fanfiction and the author’s experience as both a fanfiction writer and a professional writer for television, to demonstrate how writing fanfiction and participating in the fanfiction community empowers women to express identity on their own terms and to resist the patriarchal impositions of mainstream media culture. Martin Buber’s dialogic ethics serve as an ethical foundation for comparing and contrasting the fanfiction and mainstream media systems for female writers. Fisher’s (1987) narrative paradigm and Hecht, Warren, Jung, and Krieger’s (2005) communication theory of identity provide a theoretical framework for investigating the benefits of fanfiction as a way for female storytellers to explore themes and issues that are important to them through their creative work and through communicating within the female-driven fanfiction community. This study finds that writing fanfiction is a more effective means of creative freedom and empowerment for women than working within the parameters of the mainstream media’s profit-based economy. Furthermore, though it has traditionally been derided by the mainstream and fanfiction communities alike, writing Mary Sue fanfiction, in which the main character is an idealized version of the author, is an especially effective way for women to use fanfiction to empower themselves creatively, build identity, and resist the stereotypes and patriarchal limitations of the mainstream media.

Keywords: fanfiction, fandom, writing, autoethnography, identity, feminism, gender, media, Doctor Who
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## CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY
Chapter 1: Introduction

In today’s media-saturated culture, stories are everywhere. However, the stories available reflect only certain points of view both in their content and characters as well as because of the limited group of people who create and produce these stories. For example, fictional media is often created by and most often represents men, making it challenging for women storytellers to have their voices heard (Silverstein, 2014). Jenkins (2012) explains the mainstream media’s limitations in terms of being a space where women can express who they really are and where women are depicted in ways that accurately represent their interests and values:

In practice, both the teller and tale are often “radically other” for women within a world where publishing, broadcasting, and the film industry are all dominated by men; where most narratives center upon the actions of men and reflect their values; where most existing generic traditions are heavily encoded with misogynistic assumptions; and where educational institutions reward masculine interpretive strategies and devalue more feminine approaches. (pp. 112-113)

Writing fanfiction is a unique way for women to express identity and to resist the patriarchal impositions of mainstream media culture. Fanfiction provides a creative outlet and community space for women to explore and resist the limitations and lack of representation in mainstream media, both in media content and the creation of that content. It allows them to relate to media content on their own terms and also provides a context in which they are free to explore and co-create identity through narrative.

1.1 Importance of the Study
This type of creative outlet is significant because, given that writing fanfiction is a predominantly female activity and the value of fanfiction is most frequently of a non-monetary nature, it has traditionally been viewed as being worth less than “officially sanctioned” stories produced and controlled by media corporations. These stories are also aimed predominantly at the more “valuable” male consumer. Demonstrating the value of writing fanfiction stories as an empowering, resistive, and identity building practice for women also demonstrates the value of women as consumers, creators, and social contributors to the broader media culture without having to conform to that culture’s traditional views of women and/or their creative work.

The intent of this study is to demonstrate how writing fanfiction (also known as “fic”), especially “Mary Sue” fic, can empower women to communicate and build identity and resist stereotypes and limitations imposed by mainstream media content and its producers on women who create and consume that media.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Female fanfiction writers use the act of writing stories to tell their own and resist those imposed upon them especially and most explicitly in “Mary Sue” fics, in which an idealized version of the writer herself serves as a main character (Bonstetter & Ott, 2011). This type of story is consistently derided by academics and fans alike. Academics (and some fans as well) dismiss it as self-indulgent and childish, while fans often do not approve of its lack of consistency with the primary text’s canon (Bonstetter & Ott, 2011). Bonstetter and Ott (2011) explain, “Ironically, it is precisely in violating this directive that authors of Mary Sue fan fiction exercise rhetorical agency and challenge the patriarchal economy of writing” (p. 350). Embracing and exploring the Mary Sue fic in
this project serves to underscore fic’s importance as a vehicle for women to tell their own stories on their own terms. Furthermore, writing a Mary Sue fic as a part of this project is itself an act of resistance against this stereotypical thinking and the constraints it places on female fic writers.

1.3 Definitions of Terms Used

The community and culture of fanfiction has its own language and style. The following terms will be used throughout this project and reflect just a small part of the unique lexicon of fanfiction.

**Fanfiction (fic, fanfic):** “writing that continues, interrupts, reimagines, or just riffs on stories and characters other people have already written about” (Jamison, 2013, p. 17).

**Mary Sue:** The main character of a fic who is more or less an idealized version of the author herself (Pflieger n.d., para. 1). The term can also mean a hero who is “too perfect” and “too good,” which often ties into the character representing the author as she wishes to see herself. This second definition is often the reason why Mary Sues and Mary Sue fics are consistently reviled both inside and outside the fanfiction community, but this study uses the term “Mary Sue” in the first sense, as merely a character inspired by the author herself, and not as a character who seems to do no wrong (Bonstetter & Ott, 2011).

**The Powers That Be (TPTB):** Fandom term for the people and corporations that create and distribute popular media. In this study, the term refers more to the corporate “powers” that finance and actually release this media, rather than the individual creative teams that write scripts, direct films, etc.
The definitions of these terms will be reiterated throughout the project where appropriate for ease of reading.

1.4 Organization of Remaining Chapters

Chapter Two presents as a review of literature pertaining to fanfiction and female fanfiction writers. First, the ethical and theoretical foundations of this project are explained. Using Martin Buber’s dialogic ethics as an ethical framework, fanfiction as an empowering, identity-building, and resistive practice for women is discussed in the context of two particular communication theories, Walter Fisher’s (1987) narrative paradigm and Hecht, Warren, Jung, and Krieger’s Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) (2005). A brief overview of fanfiction studies as well as the economies of media and media fandom are then presented, followed by the rationale and research question that this project will answer.

Chapter Three explains the scope and methodology of the project. The methodological framework of this project is autoethnography, which is elaborated on in Chapter Three as a method itself, how it has been used previously in fandom studies, and how it is used in this project. Ethical considerations of the project are also covered in this chapter.

Chapter Four is the project itself, which has two main elements: first, a personal narrative that serves as a prologue to provide context to the fanfiction story, followed by an actual fic. The story features a “Mary Sue” main character and is a Doctor Who story entitled “Making It a Good One.” The fic has seven chapters and an epilogue, and after each fic chapter is an analysis section to elaborate on how the fic connects to theory and helps to answer the research question put forth for this project.
Finally, Chapter Five summarizes the findings of the study, explores its limitations, and makes recommendations for areas of further study based on what was and was not discovered through this project.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Fanfiction writing is an activity in which individuals create narratives, which is an apt illustration of Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm, the theoretical perspective from which this literature review will consider fanfiction and fanfiction writing. Martin Buber’s dialogic ethics will serve as the basis of philosophical and ethical considerations of the literature. Following the discussion of the philosophical and theoretical foundations of this project, a brief history of fanfiction studies and an explanation of the economies of fanfiction and media fandom will provide context for fanfiction in general and Mary Sue fanfiction in particular as empowering, resistive, and identity-building practices for women. The final section of this literature review provides rationale for the project as (1) a way to provide insight into the study of fanfiction from the unique perspective of a fic writer who has worked as a television writer and (2) a demonstration of how writing Mary Sue fanfiction can be an effective tool for women to feel empowered to express themselves and their identities and resist the patriarchal stereotypes and control of the mainstream media economy.

2.1 Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions

Scholars have historically viewed writing fanfiction as a way for fans to subvert and resist the dominant cultural hierarchies that view them as outsiders (Jenkins, 2012). When considered from the philosophical standpoint of Martin Buber’s dialogic ethics, the ostracizing of fans, especially by media corporations who produce the “canon” works on which fanfiction is based, is in direct contrast with the spirit of the fanfiction community and the practice of writing fanfiction (Buber, 1965/2002). It is a prime example of the difference between the two types of communication Buber identifies: I-It and I-Thou.
Media producers (often called “The Powers That Be” in fandom culture) engage in an *I-It* relationship with fans. That is, they treat fans as a means to an end (Buber, 1965/2002). This is somewhat understandable, as ultimately the goal of the corporations that distribute the stories fans engage with is to make a profit, but Buber would still find this perspective unethical because it does not honor fans as communication partners or equals (Buber, 1965/2002). The *I-It* relationship between The Powers That Be and fans also means that the mainstream media has significant limitations in terms of being a space where women can not only express themselves creatively, but can use narrative as a means to participate in “genuine dialogue” that honors who they really are (Buber, 1965/2002). Mainstream storytelling rarely engages in this type of narrative in general, but even less so with stories by, for, or about women (Jenkins, 2012).

The fanfiction community is a space that is much more conducive to genuine dialogue in which the participants have what Buber terms an *I-Thou* relationship. This means that when two people are communicating each considers the other as an authentic being and “does not regard and use him as his object, but as his partner in a living event” (Buber, 1965/2002, p. 670).

*I-Thou* relationships in the fanfiction community are certainly present through interactive activities like authors reviewing each other’s stories, providing writing prompts, beta-reading, and co-authoring fics. While the culture of the community promotes reciprocation with reads and reviews, it is not required; community members actively choose to participate. Therefore, communication in the fanfiction community has the potential to be truly authentic *I-Thou* exchanges because the community is working together to contribute to each author, each story, and the broader narrative of their
fandom that fic writing helps create. Its contrast with mainstream media’s I-It approach to fandom also means that writing fanfiction can be intentionally used as a means of resisting the I-It model on philosophical grounds.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Narrative paradigm.

In his book *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*, Fisher (1987) explains that Buber’s philosophy and Fisher’s own theory, the narrative paradigm, share some basic assumptions about what makes communication “good” communication: “The narrative paradigm advances the idea that good communication is good by virtue of its satisfying the requirements of narrative rationality, namely, that it offers a reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to belief and action” (p. 95). This idea of good communication, or narrative rationality as Fisher calls it, means that every story must have narrative coherence, meaning it makes sense and characters act reliably; and narrative fidelity, meaning it is believable based on the experiences of those listening to the story (Griffin, 2012).

According to the narrative paradigm, *all* communication is story. From Fisher’s perspective, the classic structure of fictional stories like those used as inspiration for fanfiction and of the fanfiction stories themselves, is not only something with which we are familiar, it is the basis for how we construct and understand all human communication and experience (Fisher, 1987). Human beings, at our very core, are storytellers, which is why we relate so often to and through narrative media such as television.
Writing fanfiction, which Jamison (2013) defines as “writing that continues, interrupts, reimagines, or just riffs on stories and characters other people have already written about” (p. 17), is used by female fanfiction writers as a way to tell stories their way, via established characters and worlds they care deeply about. A fic writer extends the connection she feels with narrative by writing her own stories as a means of personal growth and self-expression and as a means of relating to others by sharing it with the fandom community (Fisher, 1987). Fisher (1987) states, “The world as we know it is a set of stories that must be chosen among in order for us to live life in a process of continual re-creation” (p. 65).

The power of fanfiction as a way for women to communicate with the world is underscored by the makeup of the narrative paradigm. Griffin (2012) writes that a story with proper narrative fidelity (which is one of the key narrative paradigm criteria for a “good” story) “squares with the stories they [the audience] might tell about themselves” (p. 314). Furthermore, the essential component of the narrative paradigm is narration – “symbolic actions – words and/or deeds – that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create or interpret them” (Fisher, 1987, p. 58). Fisher states that “narration has relevance to real as well as fictive creations, to stories of living and to stories of the imagination” (p. 58). Those “stories of the imagination” often form the basis of media and, by extension, fandom.

The individual and community narratives that emerge through fanfiction are also means of resistance to the dominant patriarchal narrative about women, therefore empowering women to “rewrite” this narrative. According to Allen (2010), “A historical overview of ideas about femininity and masculinity reflects the persistence of an ideology
of patriarchy…the ‘structural dominance of men that is built into the institutions of society’” (p. 44). These institutions include the mainstream media and the canon narratives produced through them.

Fanfiction as an empowering and resistive narrative gives voice to female writers’ unique perspectives and commentaries on society that the original canon works may ignore and/or devalue: “fan publishing constitutes an alternative source of status, unacknowledged by the dominant social and economic systems but personally rewarding nonetheless” (Jenkins, 2012, p. 159). This is emphasized by Tushnet (2014b) when discussing fan comments solicited by the nonprofit fandom advocacy group the Organization for Transformative Works: “fans explained how fandom had enabled them to challenge gender, racial, sexual and disability hierarchies, and how they used skills learned in fandom to succeed in other areas, including in their careers” (Tushnet, 2014b, p. 27). Participating in fandom therefore provides female fic writers with both individual and group/social advancement and interaction. It helps form who they are as fans, as women, and as people in society.

**Communication theory of identity.**

The duality of individual and social identity creation is evident when fanfiction as a communication activity is considered from the perspective of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI). The theory, as explained by Jung and Hecht (2004), posits that social relations and roles are internalized by individuals as identities through communication. Individuals’ identities, in turn, are acted out as social behavior through communication. Identity not only defines an individual but also
reflects social roles and relations through communication. Moreover, social behavior is a function of identity through communication. (p. 266)

This suggests that self-identified fanfiction writers and the community that confirms and/or builds this identity are constantly affecting one another and are interdependent.

2.3 A Brief Overview of Fanfiction Studies

While narrative is the basis for and the essence of fanfiction itself, it is also a theoretical framework that is prevalent in fanfiction studies. For example, Paul Booth (2009) analyzed fandom wikis as “interactive fan fiction” to explore their narrative potential (p. 372).

Identity creation and exploration is also a significantly explored area in fanfiction studies, such as with another study by Booth (2008) that examines MySpace pages created by fans as the fictional characters they enjoy. These fans deliberately play with identity by assuming the personae of the characters via these pages while also maintaining elements of their own identities. Booth notes that “to enact this method of forming identity on MySpace, a fan must write on a MySpace persona a form of exactly how they want to be identified” (Booth, 2008, p. 525). He points to an example of a fan’s “About Me” section of her MySpace page in which she “establishes elements of both the character and the fan” (Booth, 2008, p. 526).

In addition to narrative and identity, numerous fandom scholars also explore fic for its role in empowerment and resistance for women. This section gives a broad overview of the fanfiction studies field encompassing all of these angles and how the thinking has evolved as the field matures and grows.

The first wave: In defense of fandom and fanfiction.
Jamison (2013) writes that “mass media representations of fanfiction and fan culture present it at best as a ‘wacky world,’ or more typically as a bastion of the physically, socially, and literally inept” (p. 90). In the introduction to the 20th anniversary edition of his seminal work on fanfiction and other fanworks, *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins (2012) reflects that the book “documents a group insistent on making meaning from materials others have characterized as trivial and worthless” (p. 3). He goes on to say, “the stereotypical conception of the fan, while not without a limited factual basis, amounts to a projection of anxiety about the violation of dominant cultural hierarchies” (p. 17). Historically, fans and fanfiction have been viewed as outside the mainstream at best and deviant at worst. Either way, their interests and creative contributions are seen as having little value to anyone but themselves.

In the “first wave” early days of the field, a primary goal of fan studies scholars was to create a more well-rounded picture of fandom and fanfiction as well as the fan studies field (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington 2007). They also sought to correct the general perception of fans as culturally deviant by studying fan culture more deeply. The first wave also established fanfiction studies as a feminist practice. Hellekson and Busse (2014) point out that “from its very beginning, media fan fiction has been a female, if not feminist undertaking” (p. 75), and so it is no surprise that studying fanfiction was (and remains) a feminist undertaking as well. Jenkins (2014) explains:

Feminist fans in particular, had been engaged in critical dialogues that, as Helen Merrick’s *The Secret Feminist Cabal* (2009) reminds us, addressed the growing visibility of women in fandom, the centrality of science fiction to debates within
second-wave feminism and an appreciation of fan fiction as a form of women’s writing (Russ 1985; Lamb and Veith 1986) (p. 90).

**The second and third waves: Shifting and expanding fandom studies.**

As the wider culture became more aware of fandom, scholars began to shift their thinking, seeing fandom and its activities such as fanfiction differently. Gray et al. (2007) explain the “second wave” of fandom studies thusly:

> Scholars are still concerned with questions of power, inequality, and discrimination, but rather than seeing fandom as a tool of empowerment they suggest that the interpretive communities of fandom (a well as individual acts of fan consumption) are embedded in the existing economic, social, and cultural status quo. (“Fan Cultures and Social Hierarchy,” para 1.)

Gray et al. (2007) go on to explain that the second wave then evolved into the “third wave,” which “departed from but also built on the conceptual heritage of its first two generations” to “broaden our analytic scope to a wide range of different audiences reflecting fandom’s growing cultural currency” (“Fandom and Modernity,” para. 2).

Expanding the issues, approaches, and fandoms themselves that are incorporated into fandom and fanfiction studies is something that remains a critical task as the field continues to grow (Jenkins, 2014).

**First wave 2.0.**

Still keeping the need for expanded perspectives in mind, some scholars have urged us to once again consider fanfiction from the first wave perspective that it is a resistive practice because we now are in a “Web 2.0” environment in which media companies are attempting to monetize fanfiction (Coppa, 2014). They do this through
platforms and services like Kindle Worlds and the failed FanLib, a for-profit fanfiction archive that, as Coppa (2013) points out, had The Powers That Be as their primary customers, not fans: “Fanlib wasn’t trying to help fans create and share fanworks. It was packaging fans for corporations” (p. 305). I am tentatively designating this call to reexamine fic as a resistive practice the “First Wave 2.0,” as I explore my own experience of fic and resistance in this context through the project in Chapter 4.

2.4 Economies of Media Fandom

To understand fanfiction’s value as a tool for women to empower themselves, create identity, and resist the stereotypes and limitations imposed upon them by mainstream media, it is necessary to understand the economies in which fanfiction operates. This includes the non-monetary “gift economy” of the community itself as well as its place within the traditional money-based economy of media corporations. The value of fanfiction is vastly different when viewed from these distinct perspectives. To elucidate this contrast, this section contains some of my own experiences as a television writer who left the industry and subsequently became a fanfiction writer, in order to provide a real-world context that complements the literature.

Fanfiction’s gift economy.

The fanfiction economy operates on a system of “gifts” and reciprocation: fanfiction or other fanworks in exchange for reads, reviews, and recommendations. Fans might also write fics for one another to commemorate events like birthdays or simply as a gesture of friendship. However, as Turk (2014) explains, the system is not a cut-and-dry reciprocal exchange:
Fandom's gift economy is not just an accumulation of contiguous reciprocal relationships between individuals but a complex system in which the reciprocation of gifts, and by extension the reward for labor, is distributed across the community rather than concentrated in a single transaction. (para. 3.5)

The value, therefore, is not so much that a fic writer gets a review in exchange for a reader, but rather that she has contributed something new to the community as a whole, just as the reviewer has, and just as someone who translates fics or maintains servers does as well (Turk, 2014). According to Turk (2014),

Generally speaking, media fandom operates on a labor theory of value—not necessarily in the Marxist sense of the phrase, but in the sense that value derives from work. Fandom's gift economy assigns special worth to ‘gifts of time and skill’ (Hellekson 2009, 115), gifts made by fans for fans. The worth of these gifts lies not simply in the content of the gift, nor in the social gesture of giving, but in the labor that went into their creation. (para. 2.1)

A weird world of potential profits.

A system that values labor and gifts over profit is the antithesis of what mass media producers aim to create. This, coupled with their typical understanding of fandom as a community of overly-obsessive, socially inept individuals who needed to “get a life,” has meant that the mainstream media has ignored fanfiction, at least historically speaking (Jenkins, 2012). In recent years, however, they have appeared to show interest in embracing the fanfiction community while continuing to deride it. A quick Google search of the word “fanfiction” garners news articles describing it as a “weird world” of
“amateurs” (Alter, 2012) that also speak about taking fanfiction “mainstream” and “making money” from it (Alter, 2012; Contrera, 2014).

Media corporations’ interest in the fanfiction culture is its potential to generate revenue. This is especially true since the 2011 publication of E.L. James’ blockbuster book series *50 Shades of Grey*, which initially began as a fic of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series (Jamison, 2013). James’ books have sold over 100 million copies, and the first of a series of Hollywood films based on them grossed more than $500 million. (Child, 2015; Lewis, 2012). There is also a myriad of licensed products including everything from pajamas to board games (“Top Ten Licensed Brands,” 2012).

When it comes to monetizing fanfiction, Amazon’s Kindle Worlds is probably the most high-profile current attempt. It allows fan writers to write and publish stories for licensed TV and other media properties, including *The Vampire Diaries* and *G.I. Joe*, and sell them as ebooks (“How It Works,” n.d.). The author, who must conform to set rules and publication agreements, gets a 35% royalty on his or her work (“How it Works,” n.d.). This might seem like an “everybody wins” situation until one considers the constraints placed upon writers using the platform. Tushnet (2014a) says:

> Even if Kindle Worlds could license every popular media property, it would remain highly constrained, and no substitute for transformative fair uses. The language of control and exploitation predominates even in favorable descriptions of Kindle Worlds. Fans are raw material, resources to be exploited, data to be mined. (p. 1469)

In addition to the economic and social issues at play with this view of fic writers and their creations, it is also significant in terms of both CTI and the narrative paradigm.
First of all, these ascribed identities influence who we are as much as our self-identity narratives do. Hecht, Warren, Jung, and Krieger (2005) write that “the ascriptions and categorizations that are communicated to a person also shape her or his identity. Hence, identity is internalized from, as well as externalized to, social interaction through expectations attached to identities and other social categories” (p. 262). If the identity of “resources to be exploited, data to be mined” is ascribed to a fic writer, it inevitably influences what she thinks of herself, even if it is on an unconscious level. She is an object to be used, an identity that is commonly ascribed to women as part of the dominant patriarchal narrative the writer is trying to transcend through her fic writing. This ascribed identity is often (if not always) in conflict with the identities the writer chooses for herself, which is known as an avowed identity (Stewart, Zediker, & Witteborn, 2012). Fisher (1987) also addresses this conflict:

> From the perspective of the narrative paradigm, the dynamic of this situation is that rival stories are being told. Any story, any form of rhetorical communication, not only says something about the world, it also implies an audience, persons who conceive of themselves in very specific ways. If a story denies a person’s self-conception, it does not matter what it says about the world. (p. 75)

> By compromising one’s story in order to adhere to the strict guidelines of entities like Kindle Worlds, a writer might make a small monetary profit, but when considered from the point of view of CTI and the narrative paradigm, this kind of sacrificing of one’s own creative and personal identity does more harm than good.

**Fans and media creators: Blurred lines, false gains.**
Still, the attraction of Kindle Worlds and similar concepts remains for some. In addition to the obvious pull of personal gain, they hold a fairytale-like promise, though it is certainly not stated explicitly. The promise is this: The Powers That Be sanction your work on these platforms, so maybe, just maybe, they’ll notice you and you’ll get to live the real dream: creating official, authorized “canon” works (Scott, 2009). There are many self-proclaimed fans getting to do just that on a massive scale nowadays (JJ Abrams with *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* and Steven Moffat with *Doctor Who*, for example). And these fan-creators reiterate the idea of “living the dream” often. As an article on 2015 Comic-Con panels explained, “During the film’s panel at San Diego Comic-Con on Friday, director J.J. Abrams and several of the stars repeated over and over again to a room of more than 6,000 fans that working on *Star Wars* was a dream come true” (Dockterman, 2015).

Though they are now working for The Powers That Be, these writers and directors have an understanding of fan culture that their corporate bosses just don’t. Still, they are inevitably influenced by the fact that creating content is their paying job and they were hired to do it. Says Abrams, “Because we love it and care about it so much, our job is to not be blinded by that. Being a fan is not enough. When you are directing a scene on the Millennium Falcon, it doesn’t make the scene good. It’s b-tchin’ that it’s on the Millennium Falcon. But that doesn’t make it automatically good” (Dockterman, 2015). Abrams appears to genuinely be speaking from a place of creative integrity and wanting to make a good movie for the sake of it. During the process of making the movie, however, he is still constrained by a budget set by the studio and production companies,
and must adhere to their requests because they are The Powers That Be who are financing his project.

This is a trade-off many fans would find more than acceptable (even if they weren’t earning the kind of money Abrams does making his films). For many, just like for Abrams, it is a dream come true. Even if a fanfiction writer doesn’t aspire to the admittedly far-fetched goal of being the next JJ Abrams, that Hollywood dream narrative of being a fan who goes on to create canon is understandably alluring. “Getting to” create canon is something that I saw as a special privilege of working in television and if I’d been asked to do so for free, I would not have hesitated for a second.

Creating canon for free is actually happening in today’s digital culture. The Powers That Be offer fans chances to create content such as videos from materials they provide (Scott, 2009). Media producers claim their motivation in facilitating the creation of fanworks is simply to provide a service to fans. They want to cater to fans’ desire to have more content available about the media they love. Media producers claim this is what drives ancillary content such as “webisodes, web comics, blogs, video blogs, episodic podcasts, and so on,” and fulfill fans’ wishes to be a part of canon by allowing them to create fanworks via “official” channels (Scott, 2009, para. 3.1). The Powers That Be are supposedly providing fandom materials simply to expand fans’ exposure to the worlds and stories that fuel their fandom. This is the same general idea behind fanfiction’s money-free gift economy (Scott, 2009). But is this altruistic spirit of fandom really The Powers That Be’s motivation?

When network executives would give their notes to the writers on the television shows I worked on, their explanations and motivations for the requested changes were
frequently a corporate edict of one kind or another. While the notes themselves weren’t about product placement, these executives had directives from higher up in the corporate echelon, an echelon at the top of which sits a powerful chief executive and a board of directors whose primary interest, given that they work for a publicly traded corporation, is profit. That is the bottom line, the one they have to explain to shareholders.

This can also be applied to ancillary content models that include fanworks. Scott (2009) calls TPTB out on this:

The rhetoric of gifting that accompanies ancillary content models, and the accompanying drive to create a community founded on this ‘gifted’ content, is arguably more concerned with creating alternative revenue streams for the failing commercial model of television than it is with fostering a fan community or encouraging fan practices. (para. 3.1)

She calls this tactic the “regifting economy” and explains it like this:

By precariously attempting to balance the communal ideals of fandom’s gift economy with their commercial interests, the regifting economy of ancillary content in particular can be viewed as attempting to regift a narrowly defined and contained version of fandom to a general audience. (para. 1.6)

It is this practice I found so stifling in television. In order to be successful as a writer in the industry, there were certain rules, conventions, and expectations to which one was required to adhere. I am not talking about the conventions of storytelling and good writing, but rather of what executives (often incorrectly) think audiences want to watch, therefore generating revenue through ads, tie-in products, etc. When writing my own scripts on my own time just to gain experience, I was still worrying about whether or
not something was “high concept” enough to sell. I fretted over whether my work was just different enough to stand out while remaining safely in industry-defined parameters of genre or style. The result was that I wrote far less of what I wanted to, and did much less writing in general. Figuring out what to write so that my work would be seen as valuable was frustrating and incredibly dispiriting. And yet, this dilemma itself proved valuable in that it got me to question just what value means when applied to creative work, especially work that relates to media that people love as both consumers and producers, fans and creatives alike. As the following section shows, these dichotomies do not apply to fanfiction writers in an “either-or” way, but rather as “both-and.”

2.5 Finding and Co-Creating Identity in the Fanfiction Community

Fic writers, like all people, have complex identities with multiple elements. According to CTI, identity exists in four layers, all of which influence one another and are in play at the same time: the personal layer, which “refers to the individual as a locus of identity”; the enactment layer, which states that “identity is enacted in communication through messages”; the relational layer, in which “relationship is the locus of identity” and the communal layer, which states that “a group is also a place where identity exists” (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005, p. 263).

Fanfiction writing is a powerful tool in discovering, shaping, and strengthening these multifaceted identities. It provides a creative outlet through which participants are free to explore and co-create identity through narrative. As noted above, for many people who write fanfiction, the hobby represents a convergence of multiple elements of their identity. Most typically, this includes a fic writer’s self-defined identities as fan and writer, but also includes other roles such as friend and even professional (Tushnet,
Furthermore, these self-identities demonstrate that fic writers are more than the stereotype of fans as socially awkward obsessives. By being in control of the entire world and characters of her fics without restriction, writing fic is a way that a writer can resist and transcend this identity and express her avowed identity.

While individual identity development is certainly a key aspect of fic as an identity-builder, writing fanfiction is at its heart a social activity because fandom is a social activity, and the process of disseminating, consuming, and even creating fics is not a solitary one. As noted by Duncombe (2012), “Fandom also necessitates relationships with others: fellow fans with whom to share interests, develop networks and institutions, and create a common culture” (p. 1).

2.6 The Devaluation and Power of the “Mary Sue” Fic

Despite the fact that individual and community aspects of fandom are interwoven and equally valid, more overt expressions of individual identity are often met with scorn, both from outsiders and people within the fanfiction community. This is especially true of “Mary Sue” fics, in which the main character of the fic (the “Mary Sue”) is more or less an idealized version of the author herself (Pflieger n.d., para. 1). Pflieger calls Mary Sues “the most reviled character type in media fan fiction” (Pflieger n.d., para. 1). And yet, despite what may be perceived as near-universal hatred towards them in the fandom community, there are thousands of Mary Sue stories and authors, with more added all the time.

Mary Sue fics are criticized for a number of reasons, chief among them the assumption that they are frivolous, poorly written tales primarily created by self-absorbed teenage girls (Bonstetter & Ott, 2011). While this may be true of some Mary Sue stories,
it could also be true of any writing, and ultimately, judging the quality of any piece of art is entirely subjective. Subjective though they may be, many people have rather vehement negative opinions about Mary Sue fics. As Cyndy Aleo (2013), who wrote her own extremely popular Mary Sue fanfic, notes, “the first general rule of writing fanfiction is to not make your main character a Mary Sue” (Aleo, 2013, p. 208). Bonstetter & Ott (2011) tie this attitude directly to the predominant, patriarchal economy of mainstream media:

Not coincidentally, then, the devaluation of Mary Sue fan fiction reifies the very patriarchal economy of writing that écriture féminine challenges. Critics of Mary Sue fanfic, as well as society in general, tend to privilege art that is produced principally for consumption, celebrating and canonizing its (predominantly) male artists. (p. 364)

Therefore, writing Mary Sue fanfiction is itself an act of resistance against the stereotypes regarding the quality of Mary Sue stories and the motivations, writing abilities, and value of their authors. By writing (and reading) them, the women who do so are deeming Mary Sue fics worthy of their time as well as their creative and emotional energy; they are reaffirming that the stories and their authors do in fact have value. This value, like fanfiction itself, is both personal and communal.

In terms of personal value, Mary Sue fics are particularly strong vehicles for female writers to work through personal issues, find solace, and explore their identities. Bonstetter and Ott (2011) state: “Mary Sues aid women in dealing with various social stigmas by literally (re)writing the social norms of the canon universe and, by extension, the lives of their authors and readers” (p. 355).
But while the power of the Mary Sue fic for the individual is more overt, Mary Sue fics also transcend the stereotype of being simply a narcissistic or frivolous exercise by holding value for a broader community as well. According to Bonstetter and Ott:

While a Mary Sue is usually an intensely personal, if public, performance for/of her individual author, she nevertheless names “types” of situations that may significantly and uniquely benefit other (typically) young women. I say uniquely because Mary Sue fanfic is an artistic mode that permits its authors and audiences to explore interests, questions, and desires that have historically been denied women in a society dominated by masculine voices, literature, and artistic practices. (p. 346)

When considered from this perspective, writing Mary Sue fics is perhaps one of the most effective ways for female writers to resist this historical domination, find their own voices, and feel empowered by expressing them.

2.7 Rationale

Studying fanfiction, like writing fanfiction, can itself be an act of resistance. Just as Mary Sue fics are not taken as seriously within the fanfiction community as more “conventional” fics are, so too has fanfiction studies been viewed in academia, though the field continues to gain respect (Jenkins, 2014). That being said, resistance is still necessary to a degree, not only in broader academia, but also within the fanfiction studies community itself as it relates to traditional culture. Jenkins (2012) explains, “the price of being taken seriously as an academic subject has been the acceptance of certain assumptions common to other forms of scholarship, assumptions that link the interests of
the academy with the interests of producers rather than the interests of consumers” (p. 25).

This is why Mary Sue fics, which due to their very nature are some of the best examples of creative works that represent fans’ interests rather than those of the Powers That Be, need to be studied more and also used more as a means through which fanfiction can be studied. Furthermore, actually writing Mary Sue fic is an ideal way to study it as a tool for female empowerment, identity communication, and resistance.

In addition, while there have been many studies on fanfiction, media producers, and the relationship between the two, the field of fanfiction studies can benefit from more research by individuals who have experience in both the fanfiction world and the media production world. This unique perspective has been explored to a degree, for example by Amber Benson, who discusses the experience of her friend Javier Grillo-Marxuach, a professional television writer who wrote a fic that was a crossover between a series he created, *The Middleman*, and *Doctor Who* (Benson, 2013). Grillo-Marxuach wrote the fic on his blog as a way to help him cope with *The Middleman*’s cancellation and tell more stories he did not get a chance to tell through the show (Benson, 2013).

There are definitely fic writers who are also professional writers of all kinds (including television) and fic writers who are academics (Romano, 2012; Jamison, 2013). However, given that this is still a limited number of fic writers, and that there is a stigma associated with fic by canon creators as well as academics, undertaking an academic study not only about but through fanfiction, in which someone (especially a woman) openly admits to being a part of both the fic world and the canon-creating media
production world, is a somewhat unique venture from which new insights can be gained, particularly in terms of narrative, identity, and resistance.

This study examines how the transition from television to fanfiction affects the fic writer’s self-identity narrative, as well as her social identity narrative as a way into looking at the identity issues present in both the fic world and the canon-creating world as cultures. In addition, producing creative stories from within a new framework that is women-driven and not profit-based means the writer is starting from a different viewpoint free of the limitations of the patriarchal system she has left. This can provide an opportunity to tell stories that the mainstream system would never sanction, including stories that empower women to resist that system.

2.8 Design Question

Embracing and exploring the Mary Sue fic in this project serves to demonstrate fic’s importance as a vehicle for women to tell their own stories on their own terms. Furthermore, writing a Mary Sue fic as a part of this project is itself an act of resistance against the patriarchal framework of the mainstream media and academia alike and the constraints this framework places on female fic writers and scholars. The next chapter details how the design of this project, through the method of autoethnography (consisting of a Mary Sue fic set in the world of Doctor Who prefaced by a personal narrative), explores and aims to answer the following question:

RQ1: How does writing Mary Sue fanfiction empower women, both individually and collectively; help them build identity; and resist patriarchal stereotypes better than writing within the traditional profit-driven media economy?
Chapter 3: Scope & Methodology

This project uses autoethnographic research methods to answer the research question of how writing fanfiction (especially Mary Sue fanfiction) can be used to empower women, both individually and collectively; help them build identity; and resist patriarchal stereotypes better than writing within the traditional profit-driven media economy. After explaining the scope of the project, this chapter will elaborate on autoethnography as a method, both within fanfiction/fandom studies and broader academia. It will then explore the project’s connections to its theoretical foundations: Fisher’s (1987) Narrative Paradigm and Hecht, Warren, Jung, and Krieger’s (2005) Communication Theory of Identity. Next, the intended audience and approach to the research question will be covered, followed by a detailed project design and plan for analyzing the project. Finally, the ethical considerations of the project will be considered.

3.1 Scope of the Project

In the project, my personal experience serves as a lens through which to examine women’s experiences in two cultures, the fanfiction community and the mainstream media industry. The project looks specifically at how female writers are able to express themselves within these cultures, and the benefits of the fanfiction writing as an empowerment, identity building, and resistive tool for women. It compares and contrasts the fanfiction community and the mainstream media system to explore each culture’s ability to serve as a creative, safe space for women writers to experiment creatively, explore identity, and resist stereotypes. Ultimately, it shows how writing fanfiction allows women more of this freedom than writing within a mainstream media economy, a
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system that is reflective of and historically controlled by the broader patriarchy within our society.

Autoethnographic projects can take a myriad of forms, from the “more traditional research report or monograph” to “creative forms such as narrative, poetry, performance, spoken word, song, film, photography, or dance” (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 83). Creative fanworks can similarly take many, sometimes even multiple forms, but this project focuses on prose fanfiction stories. It includes two kinds of narrative writing, the first being a personal narrative account of my time working in television, and how I came to write fic. This non-fiction story serves as a preface to provide the real-world context and a look at the personal experience that inspired the main component of the project: a fanfiction story.

Both the personal narrative and the fic contain characters and themes that aim to answer the research question by contrasting women’s creative experience in the fanfiction writing community to that provided by the mainstream media system. In the personal narrative, my own experience writing within each of these environments is discussed outright, whereas the fic explores the experience from a metaphorical angle.

The fic I wrote for this project is set in the world of Doctor Who with a Mary Sue main character. Like most Mary Sues, this character possesses a unique backstory and personal qualities, but is a reflection of the author (Bonstetter & Ott, 2011). The scope of this project is focused on Mary Sue fics because of their particular potential as vehicles of empowerment, identity building, and resistance for women (Bonstetter & Ott, 2011).

3.2 Methodological Framework

According to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), “Autoethnography is an
approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (ELLIS, 2004; HOLMAN JONES, 2005)[sic]” (para. 1). From the beginning, the study of fandom as an academic pursuit has been undertaken by scholars who also identify as fans (Bennett, 2014). “Aca-fans,” as they are sometimes known, often use autoethnography to examine fandom through an ethnographic lens while simultaneously incorporating their own perspectives and interactions as part of fandom. Jenkins (2012) explains this:

When I write about fan culture, then, I write both as an academic (who has access to certain theories of popular culture, certain bodies of critical and ethnographic literature) and as a fan (who has access to the particular knowledge and traditions of that community. (p. 5)

And yet, while autoethnography is a commonly used method of inquiry in fandom studies, in the context of broader academia, it is still considered rather avant garde (Wall, 2006). As a form, it “challenges traditional writing conventions that attempt to validate empirical science and uphold power that accompanies scientific knowledge” (Wall, 2006, p. 149). These conventions, though they value impartiality and objectivity, in fact originate from specific points of view (as all writing does): “For the most part, those who advocate and insist on canonical forms of doing and writing research are advocating a White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-classed, Christian, able-bodied perspective” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, para. 4).

Autoethnography, on the other hand, makes no pretense about a supposed objectivity, but rather embraces a person’s unique perspective as a starting point for his
or her research and acknowledges that emotion and personal experience play a key role in inquiry (Ellis, 2004). Like fanfiction, it is often considered a feminist practice and is primarily used by women, though the point of autoethnography is not to use a single voice or style, or represent a single perspective (Ellis, 2004). As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) state,

> Autoethnographers must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience, but also must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders. (para. 9)

### 3.3 Connections to Theory

The bulk of this project is a fanfiction story, which is a concrete example of the idea that writing fanfiction can empower women, help them build identity, and resist stereotypes. In other words, the best way to show the power of fic to do these things is through fic itself. The narrative paradigm is at work on multiple levels in this case. First of all, because all communication is storytelling (Fisher, 1987), the actual act of creating this project was part of my own story as an individual. Fisher notes that “we acquire narrativity in the natural process of socialization” (Fisher, 1987, p. 65). Therefore, my personal story is also connected to the stories of the communities and social groups I am part of such as the fandom community, the women’s community, and the writer community.

The actual creative narrative itself (that is, the text of the fic) contains symbolic examples of how we use story to understand our world and the institutions in which we
can and cannot do this. It shows how environments like the fanfiction community can serve as better vehicles for empowerment, identity building, and resistance for women than more traditional media economies. The familiar framework of fictional narrative provides readers with an easy gateway into understanding these issues because humans inherently use a narrative structure to make sense of the world around us (Fisher, 1987). Furthermore, Fisher states that dramatic and literary works can cause us to “come to new beliefs, reaffirmations of old ones, reorient our values, and may even be led to action” because “some dramatic and literary works do, in fact, argue if that term is given its broad meaning: to show, prove, or imply” (Fisher, 1987, p. 158).

The design of this project also has connections to the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI). The process of writing fanfiction is an example of the “interpenetration” of the four layers of identity that exist according to CTI: the personal layer, the enactment layer, the relational layer, and the communal layer (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005). A fic is a narrative created by the self, but is also an act of communication. CTI posits that identity is “enacted in communication through messages. The self is seen as a performance, as expressed” (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005, p. 263). Fic writers also create identity when interacting with one another on an individual relational level and on a communal level. Publicly sharing the story created for this project contributes to my own identity creation on these levels (please see section 3.4 for more information on how and why the fic has been shared). Furthermore, the main character’s journey in the fic itself includes identity exploration, providing a narrative example of interpenetration of the layers of identity (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005).

3.4 Approach to Research Question and Intended Audience
This project seeks to investigate the research question and contribute to the broader conversation about fanfiction by creating autoethnographic narratives “in which the tastes, values, attachments and investments of the fan and the academic-fan are placed under the microscope of cultural analysis” (Hills, 2002, p. 71). However, while it is intended to spur thoughtful conversation within the academic community about women’s empowerment, identity building, and resistance through fanfiction, the intended audience for this project is not limited to those who are familiar with academic-style cultural analysis and investigation of these issues. Part of the goal of autoethnography is accessibility so that the created works can have a broader “impact and potential to create change in people’s lives” (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 41). Boylorn (2013) explains,

Making our stories public outside of academe expands our reach, our influence, our capacity and our audience. I have learned that closeted auto/ethnography, the kind that is hidden behind academic doors (and locked access journals), limits the potential of the work. (p. 81)

For this reason, the fic is easily available via Archive of Our Own, a free, fan-run website for transformative works such as fanfiction. The philosophy behind the Archive is closely aligned with the considerations of accessibility that are part of autoethnography’s philosophical/ethical framework. It also serves as an example of resistance against the restrictions that come with the increasing commercialization of fan culture and the fan community’s ability to transcend these restrictions. Francesca Coppa (2013), one of the founders of the Archive, writes that the goal was to create something that was about “not just resisting the commercialization of fan culture, but about creating
positive alternative: a large, visible, nonprofit fanfiction archive run by and for fans” (p. 305). The fic can be accessed through the Archive at the following URL:
http://archiveofourown.org/works/6676165/chapters/15268828

3.5 Project Design

**Personal narrative.**

Personal narrative is one of the most popular forms of autoethnography (Ellis, 2004). The personal narrative in this project is a prose piece. It is mostly an account of my transition out of television and finding a new career. That journey also forced me to consider both my assumptions about the media industry and the media economy in new ways, and led me to writing fic despite my previous biases against it. The style and tone emphasize the inner struggle I experienced through these events, how I came to see their broader context, and how my story might benefit others, including by making them aware of fic as a tool for resistance.

**Fanfiction.**

The fic is a multi-chapter look at the main character’s attempt to discover more of who she is after she decides to move on from her lifelong professional dream. In the story, the institutions of the fic community and mainstream media and the experience of writing within them are represented symbolically through conventional storytelling devices including characters, dialogue, setting, and plot. In order to address the research question, many of the characters in the fic, including some original and some already part of the *Doctor Who* canon, represent a diverse group of women who use storytelling as a vehicle for empowerment, identity building, and resistance. However, other than the main character, these characters are not representations of any specific real-life fanfiction
writer, and the characters themselves are not fanfiction writers. Rather, they serve as symbolic, artistic representations of women fic writers.

### 3.6 Connections to Theory and Personal Narrative

At the end of each chapter of the first four chapters of the fic, there is an additional “connections to theory and personal narrative” section. The “connections” section for chapters five and six appears after chapter six and the section for chapter seven and the epilogue appears after the epilogue because these are shorter chapters and the theory connections are better highlighted when considering chapters 5-6 and 7-epilogue as pairs. The post-chapter analyses point out examples in the story that symbolically demonstrate that writing fic provides a more empowering, identity building, and resistive outlet for women than writing within the mainstream media system. They also draw on parallels with the personal narrative to illustrate how fic can be used to tell one’s own story, serving as a more concrete example of the theory at work.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

Though this project is autoethnographic, there are ethical considerations. One is self-care. Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015) write that “Because autoethnography requires us to examine our identities, experiences, relationships, and communities, the personal risks of doing autoethnography can be significant” (p. 63). This includes reliving traumatic or difficult events and the reactions of those we are close to when they read our stories. That being said, autoethnography itself is also a form of self-care because it also allows us to work through these issues (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015).
Also, because autoethnography (like all communication) is relational and my story does not exist independently of the people in my life who were part of the experience I’m writing about, care must be taken (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015). This includes care in the portrayal of individuals, even if no specific names or identifiers are used to describe them, as well as the portrayal of the situation and the larger communities involved in it.
Chapter 4: The Study

4.1 Prologue: Personal Narrative

From Fangirl to “The Powers That Be” and Back Again: A Story of A Dream Redefined

I manage to keep it together until the car refuses to open. It’s a mild December night and I’ve stopped quickly at home after work, but I need to rush out again to get to, of all things, a roller derby tryout. The key goes in the lock of my shabby 2001 Nissan Altima. I turn my wrist and meet resistance. I pull the handle and it remains resolutely shut.  

Come on, I think. After the day I’ve had, this cannot be happening.

After several more attempts and a glance at my phone to know I’m irrevocably late, I go inside and call AAA to get my car open. In the forty-five minutes that I wait for the truck to arrive, my mind inevitably drifts back to earlier this evening and that email. The gist of the note was “you will not be moving on to the final round of the selection process for the Disney/ABC Writing Fellowship.” What it really means to me, however, is that my dream of being a full-time television writer instead of “just an assistant” has begun to drift away again after it was so, so close. As I sit on my second-hand couch that looks like a giant potato, the question “why am I doing this?” comes to mind.

This program was supposed to be my way into getting staffed as a writer. I have friends who were in it, and while they weren’t always happy with the restrictions placed on them as part of the program, they agree it’s a great opportunity. But when I was interviewed as part of the selection process a few weeks ago, I was surprised when the fellowship directors said that they’re seeking to “cast” the program. The phrase disturbs me. Putting together a TV cast does have to do with talent, but it also has to do with the
overall “look” of a show, sometimes more so than the actors’ skills. This fellowship may give individuals who are underrepresented in television writing a voice and a chance at success, but it seems like only those who fit a role in a “cast” created to look unique, diverse, and creative in a press release are actually selected. Whether or not they actually are those things is less significant.

Tonight, for the first time, I’m finally able to realize that the siren song of my Hollywood dream has begun to ring false, and if I’m being really honest, it has been for a while. The tears begin to fall as I let out the thick, shaking sobs of dying hubris. A career in television writing is something I’ve insisted was my destiny from the time I was fourteen. But now, the long hours of the television business, the cynicism, and the competitiveness, are all beginning to wear on me in a way things shouldn’t for a (thankfully) healthy, gainfully employed 28-year-old in a loving and stable relationship. I had been so sure, for so long, that a TV writing career was what I wanted, my vocational calling. And yet, here I am, crying on my potato couch and wanting to quit.

In order to get past what seems like a crippling moment, I have to figure out how I’ve arrived at it in the first place. I need to understand why working in TV isn’t right for me anymore, which involves taking a long, hard look at both myself and the industry. The personal side is pretty easy to figure out. I am getting married soon, and I realize my career isn’t what I value most in my life anymore. Rather, I’ve become more interested in building a well-rounded life. I’ve begun to see my work as a patch rather than the entire quilt of happiness and experience. This attitude is counter to everything expected of me in my career as it stands now. The farther we Hollywood dreamers are willing to go to achieve success in our creative endeavors, the more the industry benefits from our labor.
They know that many of us, myself included, would be willing to do everything from get coffee to work a 19-hour day for low wages and no health insurance in exchange for our chance at a “big break.” By seeking to define myself by more than just my work, I am finally able to see how toxic this is.

I dreamed of working in television because of its ability to connect people, to capture the imagination, to let you escape, make you feel, and make you think. During my time in the industry, I’ve met many people with the same goal, and a few who are making it happen in earnest. But many writers and other creative people who keep this noble goal as they work so hard on their projects are constantly hindered. Agents and networks are confused by outside-the-box innovation and demand changes, fearful that it will never turn a profit. If a project isn’t “Show X meets Show Y, with a younger feel!” it is often seen as too risky and rejected.

What’s more, this is also the case with unique perspectives, i.e. any story not told from a white, heterosexual, male perspective. For anything successful that is about or written by someone who does not fit that description, a fair amount of the discussion isn’t about the quality of the show itself, but rather the fact that it was written by a woman, person of color, etc. because this is a novelty. I don’t want to be seen as a “female writer,” forced to fit Hollywood’s definition of that term; I just want to be a “writer.” Reflecting on the times when I’d pitch a joke, be ignored, and then required to type the joke into the script when a male writer pitched it five minutes later, I start to wonder if that will ever be possible. And even if it were possible, would it be worth it? I realize that the answer is no. I’m terrified by this, but I’ve also never felt so free.
I do a lot of soul searching to try to determine my next career path and eventually I find my way into the nonprofit world doing grant writing and really enjoy it. Now that I don’t work in television, I have the time and energy to rediscover my roots as a television fan. I watch episodes for fun rather than to analyze them, I engage with other fans online, and find myself indulging in the “guilty pleasure” of reading Doctor Who fanfiction. Many of the stories I read confirm my biases about the quality of fic, but more than a few boldly contradict them with amazing, engaging (and well-spelled) narrative.

The stories also have me itching to get back to creative writing myself. I’d been avoiding it, fearing the return of the harsh voice in my head that demands I monetize every word I type. Ideas pour into my head, and I realize they’re all for Doctor Who fanfiction stories of my own—something I wouldn’t be able to monetize. I pull out my laptop and write my first story. It might be less “legitimate” than the creative writing I used to do in television, but at least it’s something.

I open a new document, hesitating for a second at the cruel sight of a page devoid of anything but a blinking cursor, but I power through the anxiety and start to write. The story is only 525 words, but it has creaked open a door to a place I love and given me permission to walk through it and see what’s on the other side. As it turns out, the other side is full of the joy of writing more stories and interacting with those who read them.

That should be all that matters, and yet, many months later, something still feels off. I sit on the potato-like couch once again, staring at another blank screen, and wonder. It seems there are lots of opportunities to make money from my fics, something that hadn’t occurred to me before. Maybe I should try it; isn’t the right way to make writing really matter, to validate my talent and time, to sell it? Besides, why wouldn’t I want to
be paid for my labor? However, the truth is that rather than merely seeking compensation for my services, I feel compelled to make my work profitable as a way to validate that it’s good. This is the kind of thinking I’ve been taught by The Powers That Be. “This thing will make both of us a lot of money, so we want to work with you,” they’d say. “We just need you to make some changes first…”

It occurs to me now that I left television because I was tired of the corporate control over writers, the push to view creativity solely as product. And I know I have a decision to make. I can once again try to win at their game, using a different strategy by trying to make money from fic rather than scripts. Or I can refuse. I can resist. I can turn my back on the media industry in favor of the fanfiction community, where my fellow fic writers and I are the ones calling the shots. We’re writing on our own terms, in our own voices, and The Powers That Be are powerless to stop us.

4.2 The Fic: Chapter One

Making It a Good One
A Doctor Who Story by Kat Heiden

“We’re all stories in the end. Just make it a good one, eh?” – The Doctor, Doctor Who

Chapter 1: Dreams to Doomsday

July 9, 2007

London, England

Planet Earth

An insane, dangerous, 3D glasses-wearing alien and a bunch of his dorky friends just saved the world. What’s left of it, anyway, Sarah Hanson thought as she looked down at a burning London from the Torchwood tower. None of this felt real. And none of it was supposed to happen this way.
Torchwood was supposed to be Sarah’s dream come true. A sort of twisted dream involving covertly protecting the Earth from alien invasion, but her dream nonetheless. She found out about the agency when doing research for a report on its founder, Queen Victoria, when she was eleven, and becoming a Torchwood operative was her goal from that moment on. Fifteen years, three college degrees, four internships, and one transatlantic move later, and the idealistic, bookish girl from New England was working her way up the ranks at Torchwood One, the organization’s main headquarters at Canary Wharf in London. The same headquarters that was now destroyed, countless pieces of alien technology and weaponry ending up who knows where. All of her coworkers, dead and gone along with thousands or maybe even millions around the world.

It wasn’t like Torchwood was perfect and if today (and the behavior of her entire time at Torchwood, if she was honest) proved anything to Sarah, it was that dreams and reality are two very different things. She’d come to London believing she was going to make the world (and beyond) a better place, protecting humanity and trying to find common ground with remarkable beings from other planets. Her job at Torchwood was in the “Processing Division” – a boring way of saying she and her colleagues were charged to find out how and why an alien was or planned to be on Earth once their initial threat level was assessed by the higher-ups. It reminded Sarah of *Men in Black* and on her first day, she mentioned this to Ted, the guy whose work station was next to hers.

“Torchwood, Miss Hanson,” he’d said coolly, “is *not* a flashy Hollywood film. This is serious work we do, and you’d do well to remember that.” He marched away from her desk and never liked Sarah from that day on.
There were plenty of her colleagues, like Ted, who consistently saw these aliens as threats first, visitors second, even if the stats didn’t bear out that way. Sarah could never quite get on board with that thinking, but she followed protocol and didn’t play nice when she wasn’t supposed to. And there had been a few really nasty creatures she’d had a hand in protecting the Earth from. But for the most part, she discovered, the aliens just wanted a safe place to go, a fresh start, or an adventure.

For the most part, they weren’t that different from Sarah.

But Yvonne Hartman, the director of Torchwood One, was very firmly in the camp of “aliens are threats” and almost never approved letting them stay on Earth. Sarah’s worst day at Torchwood was when Yvonne made her refuse a family of octopus-like things called Sagromians because their planet’s weaponry could wipe out communications satellites worldwide if they chose. But these Sagromians had no weapons. And yet, it was Sarah’s job to make them go back on their ship with armed guards making sure they complied. The look on the youngest Sagromian’s squishy face as they left to return to their war-torn planet was anything but alien: it was sadness.

Sarah had thought about standing up to Yvonne when she rejected Sarah’s recommendation to grant the Sagromians sanctuary. But she’d worked too hard to get where she was and at the end of the day, the risk was too big. Yvonne fired people almost on a whim, and Sarah couldn’t get fired. She’d put her mind to working for Torchwood, and now that she was here, she wasn’t going to let her dream slip away over some Sagromians, kind as this family was. Besides, Torchwood was it. She had no plan B for her life. Sarah reasoned that if she kept her head down, played by the rules for a while,
eventually she’d be the one in Yvonne’s position and could change the way Torchwood did things.

But in the two and a half years since she started, not much had changed for Sarah, despite fifteen hour days, work that most everyone (even Yvonne, occasionally) would admit was exceptional. Her voice, when she did speak up, was often ignored. Her rank and pay were never increased despite the additional duties that had fallen to her. Still, though, there were just enough good days to keep Sarah going. The best ones were when she got to tell the aliens they’d be allowed to stay. She got to hear their stories of worlds beyond, of why they were here and who they were, and every now and then, maybe one in two hundred arrivals, Yvonne didn’t make them leave. It was enough for Sarah for a while, but lately she started getting tired of delivering bad news, of her career stagnation, of her bitch of a boss. She wasn’t sure what to do with these feelings, but then the end of the world happened, so she didn’t get a chance to figure it out.

Sarah turned away from the window and her depressing reverie, back towards the ruined Torchwood office, which wasn’t much better to look at than the destruction below. As she moved to her desk, her limbs felt like she’d been outside in the cold for too long, sluggish and chilled from the inside out. She found an only-partially-charred banker’s box and, with nothing else to do, robotically started cleaning out what was left of her possessions.

“Excuse me,” someone said from behind her. Sarah paused. It was a man’s voice with a sort of middle-class London accent, firm but somehow gentle. Knowing who it was, that last fact irritated Sarah to no end. She’d been trained to think of him as violent,
untrustworthy, and threatening. His seemingly kind voice and heroic actions of the day provided yet another dose of confusing reality.

“Yes, Doctor? What is it?” she asked brusquely as she turned to face the Time Lord who she’d been conditioned to regard as Earth’s number one alien threat. The man who was supposed to be deeply dangerous and borderline amoral. The man who had just saved them all.

“Right, hello. I’m the Doctor, as you obviously know because you just called me by my name. Anyway, I was wondering, Miss…”

“Hanson. Sarah Hanson.”

“Miss Hanson. Yes. You’re the one who took out a couple of Cybermen in the north stairwell, right?”

Had she? This entire day was becoming a blur. Sarah had forgotten that she’d actually saved some lives when she’d managed to stun the horrible humans-turned-robots with an electrical prod she’d nicked from the weapons cage, giving the people stuck on the stairs some time to escape. Somehow, even that didn’t seem to matter now. “Uh, yeah, that’s me, I guess,” she replied.

“Thought so. Well, first of all, well done you for stunning the Cybermen. Cattle prod from Mercury, that’s a new one. Always reckoned that lot was vegetarian. Anyway, I’m not sure I would’ve thought to grab that and use it like you did. Well, of course I would’ve, I’m the cleverest being in the universe. But it was quite clever of you to think of it, too, wasn’t it?”

Sarah just stared at him lamely as he rubbed the back of his neck in what seemed like a nervous tic. She was so confused. This rambling, skinny guy was the biggest threat
to Earth? And it was pretty hard to forget that he and his gang just got rid of the Daleks and Cybermen that were hellbent on killing humanity, forcing them into a void between universes to hopefully never be heard from again. The Doctor bounced on his Converse-clad feet a little as Sarah remained mute.

That’s when his way-too-pretty, way-too-blond companion (girlfriend? Wife? Friend with benefits?) came over. Sarah unconsciously tugged at her own mousy hair, working her fingers through the fried blonde tips at the end—remnants of a failed experiment in looking trendy. “Doctor? We better get goin’,” she said in a thick South London drawl as she put her arm around his waist. Her eyes shifted to Sarah. “This the girl who stopped the Cybermen on the stairs?” The Doctor nodded and the girlfriend—Rose, Sarah remembered now—addressed her directly. “Me mum got away because of you. Thanks.” She smiled brightly and hugged Sarah, who remained stiff. Rose backed off. “So, you comin’ with us or not?”

“What?” Coming with them? Why the hell would Sarah do that? *Because you have no place else to go,* a tired voice in her head whispered.

“We thought we’d give you a trip in the TARDIS as a thank you,” the Doctor explained. “Travels in time as well as space, you know,” he said, grinning like a schoolboy.

“I know all about it,” Sarah said with a reflexive sneer. She’d actually taken a whole training session on the Doctor’s bigger-on-the-inside ship so that Torchwood could be prepared should he ever use it to cause trouble. An infinite ship could hold infinite weapons. The Doctor, they’d been told, claimed he didn’t use weapons, but his track record (and body count) suggested otherwise. He’d destroyed entire planets using that
ship in one way or another. “I don’t want any part of it. That thing is dangerous and a threat to planet Earth, and so are you, Doctor!” Okay, so now she was hysterically spewing the company line rather than actually thinking about the situation. Yvonne would be proud. *But Yvonne is dead.*

The Doctor’s expression turned icy, but his eyes flashed fire. Ah, there was the “Oncoming Storm” Sarah had heard so much about. “You don’t know the first thing about my TARDIS, or me, or anyone I associate with, Miss Hanson. Except for the fact that we just saved this planet you think we threaten. Now, UNIT is on its way here and they’re not going to be as kind to any Torchwood personnel left here as I am. So, you can stay here and take your chances with them or come with us and see if you can do some actual good in the universe to undo the years of damage you’ve helped Torchwood inflict. It makes no difference to me.” He walked to his ship, Rose at his heels, but turned back to Sarah before entering the TARDIS. “By the way, you’re welcome for saving your life.”

“I’m supposed to hate you,” Sarah blurted.

“Excuse me?”

“All I’ve ever known of you is what Torchwood told me. That you’re reckless and dangerous and angry. And then you saved us and nothing makes sense anymore!” Sarah didn’t even realize she was crying until a tear fell onto her nose. It made her unravel even more. “This place was my life. I thought we did some good, and I was trying to get us to do more. Obviously, I failed spectacularly. No one listened to me. No one even cared. But I stayed because Torchwood was all I ever wanted. It was all I had. No family. No friends outside of this place. So I’m sorry, Doctor, but you being anything but evil is just
a bit more than I can handle right now!” She slammed the semi-charred box onto her desk. It broke apart. Sarah sank to the floor and leaned up against the desk, holding her head in her hands as she continued to sob.

“I am those things they told you,” the Doctor said softly after a moment. “Everything they said was true, Sarah. But they didn’t tell you the whole truth. And I think you know that, because you aren’t the type to see anyone as purely evil, or purely good for that matter, are you?” Sarah shook her head and felt Rose’s hand on her shoulder.

“Look, you’ve been through hell,” the other woman said. “We all have. And you don’t know us, not really. But I’m tellin’ you, you can trust the Doctor. And maybe gettin’ away from this place will do you some good, yeah?”

“I’m sorry I snapped at you guys,” Sarah said quietly after a long, deep breath. “And saying this isn’t really enough since you two probably saved billions of lives today, but thanks.”

Rose just shrugged. “I bet you would’ve done the same.”

“But that’s just it. I didn’t, did I? I mean, I helped a couple of people, but by then it was too late for so many.” Sarah shook her head in disgust. “Everything I thought Torchwood was, since I was a kid…everything about it turned out to be wrong, eventually. I just wanted to be a part of something bigger than me, something that mattered,” Sarah sniffled. “And now…What in the world am I going to do now?”

“You’re asking the wrong question,” the Doctor responded. “I think what you really want to know is what in the universe you’re going to do now. So, Sarah Hanson, what do you say we find out?”
Sarah looked around at the battered office one last time, the site of her “dream” destroyed. And then, she took the Doctor’s outstretched hand, following him and Rose out of Torchwood and into the TARDIS.

4.3 Analysis: Fic Chapter One

Sarah’s struggle with her perception of Torchwood, the Doctor, and herself demonstrates how important the narratives we create are used to understand the world around us. This is the central premise of the narrative paradigm, of which Fisher (1987) writes:

> It holds that symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them in order to establish ways of living in common, in intellectual and spiritual communities in which there is confirmation for the story that constitutes one’s life. (p. 63)

For Sarah, Torchwood’s culture and practice, that is, its community story, serves to confirm Sarah’s perception of herself. Being a Torchwood operative means something to Sarah; it is a significant symbol in her life and in the story she tells about herself. Therefore, when that collective Torchwood narrative (and the stories of the Doctor and aliens that are part of it) starts to lack what Fisher calls “narrative fidelity,” Sarah’s self-perception starts to unravel. Ultimately, she has to make a choice to shift her story, to find a new way to communicate her identity that is separate from Torchwood.

In my case, this was leaving television and searching for a new career. However, I knew certain parts of my personal narrative were so central to my identity that they would remain a part of this next chapter of my life. As CTI explains, the four layers of identity interpenetrate each other, leading to identity negotiation, the “give and take as
people face the challenge of calibrating” the interplay of the layers (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005, p. 266). When trying to negotiate my “new” identity outside of the television industry, I had to look for ways to remain true to the core narrative of myself, which included being a writer. I turned to fanfiction to support and deepen that narrative, and quickly found that the community surrounding this communication activity provided ways to explore not only the personal, but the enacted, relational, and community aspects of identity as well. With her decision to go with the Doctor and Rose in the TARDIS, Sarah is about to embark on a similar journey of identity and discovery. She’s leaving Torchwood, but taking her interest in the universe and aliens (and indeed, their stories) with her, just like I took my love of writing with me when I left television.

4.4 The Fic: Chapter Two

Chapter 2: What Do I Do Now?

August 20, 2007

The TARDIS

They spent the next several weeks (relative to Earth time) on the TARDIS, floating in the time vortex. As fascinating and entertaining as the infinite, sentient ship was, Sarah was starting to get cabin fever. She wanted to get out and explore the universe like the Doctor and Rose said she could if she went with them, and she couldn’t help but be suspicious when they kept delaying a landing. It still wasn’t the easiest thing in the world for her to trust them, but to their credit, they gave her space when she needed it. Which was often, especially at first. It took a few days for the numbness to wear off and for Sarah to realize she was grieving and that this delay in the trip was to give her time to
do it. Once she figured that out, she was grateful. Her grief itself, however, wasn’t as
easy to understand.

Growing up as a foster kid, Sarah never really formed close ties. She bounced
from home to home until she aged out of the system. She was always a strong student and
never made trouble, but she acted just distant enough with the foster families that no one
ever wanted to keep her. Sarah was polite, for sure, but would rarely show the side of her
that would tie a first-grader’s shoe in an empty hallway at school or scoop up a caterpillar
from the sidewalk and put it on the grass so it would be safer. It was easier to keep that
sort of softness hidden behind the protective shell of the loner tough girl image. She was
the kid who led the softball league in runs but didn’t have friends on the team. She got
third place in the science fair but had no one take a picture of her with her ribbon.

Sarah never dwelt on that, though. Her goal of Torchwood and the books she’d
read on aliens and outer space kept her going even more than sports or school, anyway.
Ask her about that, and she’d be truly enthusiastic. It wasn’t just what she did, it was
practically who she was. Unfortunately, no one ever really asked her. Mostly they just
thought she was weird.

So now, while she mourned on a macro level for her planet and the destruction the
Daleks and Cybermen caused, and for all the people on Earth who died last month, there
was no one she was personally grieving for. Her coworkers, she supposed. Or maybe it
was people she would never get to meet; the would-be friends, lovers, family. Pages in
the story of her life that would never be written now. Yes, it was the what-ifs that stung
the most. She’d had more crying jags than she’d care to admit over that since she’d been
on the TARDIS.
As she processed all of this and reflected on the day everything changed, she begrudgingly admitted just how heroic the Doctor and his friends were then and just how kind he and Rose were being now. She could relate to Rose fairly well; they were both human, around the same age, equally sarcastic, and shared a love of bad romantic comedies and forensic investigation shows. The last one freaked the Doctor out, much to the women’s delight.

Sarah’s relationship with the Time Lord was still a bit strained, though. She got the sense that he didn’t trust her, given her history with Torchwood and what they’d told her about him. She also got the sense that this good, heroic fun-loving Doctor was always just a moment away from being the rage-filled, dangerous man (alien) he also claimed to be. Then again, didn’t everyone have it in them to snap after seeing as much pain and death as he supposedly had? In a way, she felt like she could connect with him over that, now. Over being the one left behind.

All this ran through Sarah’s mind as her body glided through the water of the TARDIS’s Olympic-sized swimming pool. She closed her eyes after a moment and let herself just float. For the first time since “Doomsday,” as the reporters had taken to calling it, she felt a bit of peace. She tried to stay in the moment, to avoid questioning what the hell she was going to do when she finally returned to Earth, but then she opened her eyes to find the Doctor staring down at her from the side of the pool and let out a startled shriek.

“Oh, sorry! Didn’t mean to frighten you,” the Doctor said. “Just thought that, well, you’ve been here for a while now, relatively speaking. There’s no time on the TARDIS—“
“Doctor. You’re rambling again.”

“Right. Anyway, fancy a trip?”

Sarah smiled. She still didn’t have any answers, but here was the distraction she’d wanted since day one on the TARDIS. “I thought you’d never ask.”

April 6, 3472

Municipal Base Orion

Planet Kalabaxia

“It looks like…like…” Sarah stammered.

“I never get tired of this bit,” the Doctor murmured to Rose as they watched Sarah take in the alien landscape around them. “Human beings, can always count on you for enthusiasm. What do you think she’ll say? It’s like a dream? Or maybe a fairy tale?”

“I mean it’s just…”

”Brilliant? Magnificent? Awe-inspiring?” the Doctor supplied.

“Cartoony.”

“Ah yes. Car—wait, what?!”

Rose burst out laughing. “That’s a new one, eh, Doctor?”

“It’s just that the colors are so bright,” Sarah breathed.

They stepped out of the TARDIS doorway toward a domed base made out of an iridescent light blue material. The red sun’s rays made purple spots appear on the structure, giving the whole thing the look of a mushroom right out of one of the Saturday morning animated shows Sarah grew up watching. The base was imposing, the only structure around in the flat grassland. As they made their way across the field, Sarah
delighted in the feel of the tall grass on her legs. It was a comforting, familiar feeling despite the fact that she was hundreds of light years and thousands of chronological years away from anything she’d ever experienced before.

“Doctor, give us the rundown on this place again?” Rose asked, watching him light up instantly. The Doctor loved playing tour guide.

“Well, ladies,” he said, “we are on the planet Kalabaxia. Up ahead, that’s Municipal Base Orion, named for the constellation this planet is in. And the year is 3472.”

“That’s the part that’s really weird to me,” Sarah replied. “I always sort of figured there had to be other planets besides Earth that had life, you know? The universe is just too big for there not to be. But moving through time…” She gasped, suddenly realizing something. “Holy crap, everyone I’ve ever known has been dead for thousands of years.”

Rose laughed again and Sarah glared at her. “I’m sorry, I really am,” Rose said through her giggles. “It’s just that I had the exact same reaction the first time he took me to the future, and he’s got the exact same annoyed look on his face as he did then. Even though he’s got a different face!”

The Doctor, blushing, rolled his eyes. “Sometimes I hate that you know me so well, Rose Tyler.” He looked at Rose with an affectionate gaze that belied his words and Sarah smiled in spite of herself. “Anyway,” the Doctor continued, “that’s beside the point. We’re here to help Sarah have some fun now that she doesn’t have to fill her days with work for a nefarious organization.” He still couldn’t hide his disdain for Torchwood.

It was Sarah’s turn to roll her eyes now, but it was mostly to disguise the hurt she felt at the Doctor’s words. She’d turned a blind eye to how potentially dangerous and
damaging Torchwood could be in favor of trying to advance her career there. She felt like a selfish fool. Just because that kind of single-mindedness was pervasive at Torchwood didn’t mean she should’ve been swept up in it. Ultimately, the culture of the place contributed to a lot of deaths; the fact that she was in some way complicit by association sickened Sarah, and the accuracy of the Doctor’s characterization of Torchwood was almost too much to bear. She should’ve been better than that…shouldn’t she? Sarah liked to think she was a good person, but honestly, after being in the Torchwood vacuum for so long (and failing to act when their operations were less-than-savory), she didn’t know who or what she was now.

As they approached the entrance to the base, she sighed and then inhaled; the air here smelled like cotton candy and she couldn’t resist the smile that spread across her face at that. Maybe Sarah didn’t know who she was, but she knew she liked cotton candy.

The day turned out to be incredibly fun. Sarah bonded with both Rose and the Doctor as they shared in a variety of activities with an otherworldly twist. Municipal Base Orion was like a huge flea market of sorts, selling trinkets from across this solar system: figurines of nine-eyed robot gods, flashy holographic entertainment systems (that the Doctor said were cheap knockoffs), snacks that talked (which horrified Sarah and Rose alike). After shopping, they went to the rentals section of the base for, of all things, jetpacks to go sightseeing across the planet. It really was like something out of a science fiction film, and Sarah liked it that way. At Torchwood, she dealt with aliens all the time, but never so many different species in one place and, of course, never on an alien planet. This feeling was what she’d dreamed of all those years ago; she wanted to be part of something that led to these kinds of experiences.
August 20, 2007

The TARDIS

Back on the TARDIS at the end of the day, the Doctor tinkered under the console while Sarah and Rose, exhausted but happy, decided to retire to the media room to kick back with some wine and bad reality television. That’s when Sarah’s thoughts of her own reality began to creep back in. And unlike the show they were watching, there was nothing fake about her situation. She’s been promised one trip in the TARDIS and that was done now. Once the Doctor and Rose dropped her back “home,” she would have nothing and no one to return to. And she’d grown close to the quirky Time Lord and his girlfriend. (Rose said that was probably the closest word for what they were. Even though they’d basically promised each other forever, she was sure calling the Doctor her “fiancé” just yet would make him crash the TARDIS.) Pride, however, is a strong and funny thing, and Sarah just couldn’t bring herself to ask to stay. If they agreed, it would be out of pity and Sarah refused to be anyone’s charity case.

She looked over at Rose, who was engrossed in the show, and made a decision. She might not be anyone’s charity case, but Sarah had to admit she could really some advice. And while she and Rose had had plenty of perfectly nice chats, they’d never really gone beyond the level of discussing music or teasing the Doctor now and then, because Sarah was careful to avoid anything more. She’d never formed the kind of female friendships she’d seen other girls at school have growing up. She dismissed these sleepover-and-secret-telling kind of bonds as frivolous, but the truth was a big part of her craved them. If ever she had a shot at one, it was now. Just say what you need to say.
Sarah turned her head back to the screen, eyes glued to it as she spoke. “So, today was fun.” *Nice opener, Hanson. Real original.*

Rose smiled. “Yeah, definitely.” She sipped her wine and kept her eyes on the television.

“So…is it all just traveling around then? What do you two do most of the time?” Sarah hadn’t meant for it to come out as judgmental, but she could sense Rose tense a bit.

“It’s not just travelin’,” Rose said with the slightest edge to her voice, her accent suddenly a bit thicker. “We help people. We go where we are needed, sometimes by crash landin’ but that’s besides the point. We go and we do what needs to be done.”

“Like you did at Torchwood,” Sarah said quietly. Shame crept over her, which was at once painful and infuriating. She was a Torchwood operative, for goodness sake. She should be tougher than this. *You’re not a Torchwood operative anymore,* the voice in her head reminded her.

Sarah looked at Rose and was surprised to see that there was no pity in her eyes, just sympathy. Rose nodded gently.

“I thought that’s what I was doing there, too. Helping. But it was all a lie. Like I said, today was fun, but now it’s over and I still have no clue what to do with my life. My life was Torchwood. As pathetic as it is, working there was all I ever wanted to do.”

Rose turned to her with a kind smile. “No, your idea of Torchwood was what you wanted to do. From what you’ve said, you were never that big into the “alien threat elimination” sort of thing. What you wanted to do was bring people together. Let aliens and humans coexist peacefully, yeah? Give the aliens a chance to tell their stories and start a new life. Write their next chapters. Am I right?”

“I’ve been traveling with the Doctor for a while now and I’ve seen all sorts of horrible things, all across time and space. But that still didn’t convince me that there’s more bad than good out there, and while we don’t always succeed, ultimately, what we do, me n’ him, is try to add to the good. And I think that’s what you were trying to do at Torchwood. So maybe start with that and see where it takes you.”

“Thanks,” Sarah said, fighting the tears that threatened to fall. It wasn’t even so much Rose’s advice, but the fact that Sarah felt like she really did connect with the other woman in a way she’d never gotten to before. All this time, they were becoming true friends and she never even realized it. “Now, pour me some of that wine you’d been hoarding.”

“With pleasure,” Rose said.

Sarah handed Rose her empty glass, which promptly fell to the floor as the women were thrown back, a loud and violent crash resounding through the entire room.

The shaking continued as the TARDIS began to pitch wildly. It felt like an out-of-control, horrible amusement park ride. When it was over, they looked at each other with wide, terrified eyes while gasping for breath. After a moment, Rose stood up, dusted herself off, and extended a hand to Sarah. “Well, Sarah, it looks like you might get a chance to see what we do after all.”

**4.5 Analysis: Fic Chapter Two**

This chapter has Sarah considering how she got to where she is by looking back on the identity she’s enacted since childhood. According to CTI as well as
communication theorists such as John Stewart, identity is something we do (Stewart, 2012). That is, “the self is seen as a performance, as expressed” (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005, p. 263). Sarah’s performed identity was as a loner tough-girl, which evolved into her identity as a good and loyal Torchwood employee. Now that she is no longer part of Torchwood, Sarah must consider the deeper implications of the narrative she had been telling herself about the organization. Her version of what Torchwood was was so wrapped up in her identity that Sarah tried to ignore the things that went against that narrative. As Rose points out, Sarah’s idea of Torchwood was what she wanted to do, even if the reality of it did not measure up. Fisher (1987) notes that “the most compelling, persuasive stories are mythic in form, stories reflective of ‘public dreams’ that give meaning and significance to life” (p. 76). This doesn’t necessarily mean they pass the test of narrative fidelity, however.

Making it as a creative professional in Hollywood might be one of the most ubiquitous “public dreams” narratives around, and it was one that was a deep part of my identity from the age of fourteen, when I first considered a career in television writing. In struggling to rewrite that narrative, I found solace in the fic community because it was a group of women with similar interests and talented writers who were more concerned with using their imaginations than making money from their writing. As Sarah reaches out to Rose for friendship, she too is searching a female ally who can help her re-define her present and her future. This demonstrates the relational level of identity explained by CTI (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005). Rose and Sarah’s relationship is also symbolic of the fic community’s potential as a place for women writers to find allies who support them as they find their own creative voice.
4.6 The Fic: Chapter Three

Chapter 3: A Muse Named Walter

August 20, 2007

The TARDIS

The Doctor rushed into the media room just as Rose and Sarah were leaving it, causing him to barrel right into Rose. “Oof!” he cried, then started searching her form for any signs of injury. Satisfied that Rose seemed okay, he gave Sarah a once-over and reached the same conclusion. Still, he couldn’t help but check: “Are you two all right?”


“TARDIS went rogue again. Apparently, this is where she wanted to go and, despite my attempts at regaining control of the navigation system, this is where we shall stay. At least for now. So! Who wants to know where ‘this’ is?” Before Sarah or Rose could answer, the Doctor turned on his heels and bounced down the corridor back towards the console room.

February 27, 2191

Albish City

Planet Scriveria

A gentle breeze hit Sarah’s face as they exited the TARDIS. The Doctor sniffed, taking in the fresh air himself. “Ahh, lovely day here on Scriveria. That’s good! Looks like we’re in the capital, Albish City, if I remember my Scriverian geography.” They were on a cobblestone street in a city that had a sort of old-world charm about it, aside from the flying car-type-things scurrying across the sky above them. “At least the
TARDIS sent us somewhere I’ve heard of,” the Doctor continued. Never been here, myself, though. But from what I understand, there’s something of a creative renaissance happening here in the late 22\textsuperscript{nd} and early 23\textsuperscript{rd} centuries. Which, if the TARDIS data screen was correct—and it always is—we should be right in the middle of!”

Sure enough, the square was bustling with creative activity: painters, street performers, and craft makers. There were several different species, but predominantly tall, humanoids with golden skin and striking jade-colored eyes. Sarah noticed that many of them appeared to be engrossed in their futuristic ultra-thin tablets, swiping their fingers across it with practiced ease.

“Some things don’t change that much,” Rose quipped. “Everyone glued to their…smartphones, or whatever. I wonder what game they’re playing.”

“They’re not playing games,” the Doctor said. “They’re writing.” He gave an explanation about the low-level telepathic censors in the tablets that made swiping one’s finger across the screen as effective as typing on a keyboard, then rambled about a bunch of extra details that Rose and Sarah only half-listened to. Sarah was looking at the paintings the artists around the square were creating, then noticed some banners on poles across the square advertising the arts festival they seemed to be in the middle of. Her gaze went to the booths and shops surrounding the festival. Everything she saw, from children’s toys to ornate sculptures, had the same character on them: a friendly-looking eagle-like creature with glasses and a little blue t-shirt.

“Doctor, Rose, look. That bird thing is everywhere,” she said.

The Doctor took notice. “So it is. Not exactly the creative renaissance I imagined. Figured there’d be a bit more variety.”
“It’s like Mickey Mouse or something. But…creepier, somehow.” Rose made a face.

“That is Walter,” a rich, proud voice said from somewhere behind them. They turned to find a native Scriverian woman smiling at them. Rose quickly pasted a smile over her grimace. “And he is our muse.” The woman held up one of the thin glass tablets, which now looked like the cover of a novel, to show the travelers. She pointed to the byline. “Vega Omicron. Pleased to meet you.”

“Hello!” the Doctor said brightly. “I’m the Doctor, and that’s Rose and Sarah. We’re just here for the arts festival!” Vega bowed her head in greeting to each of them and they returned the gesture.

“So, you created Walter?” Sarah asked.

“Not exactly,” Vega responded. “Walter belongs to all of us. In fact, no one is really sure who came up with him first. We like it that way; there’s enough Walter to go around!” she gushed. “In the four years since I wrote my first Walter novel, my life has changed completely. Back then, my career as a writer had stalled and I would often drink too much out of despair. I became a laughing stock and I was ready to try to find some off-planet meaningless job just to afford food. But one day, the idea for the first book just sort of popped into my head. It was a miracle! Six novels, thirteen children’s books, and three films later, Walter has truly made me rich in more ways than one. And not just me; he’s helped the career of every single creative artist I know,” Vega said, waving her hand around the square full of people hard at work making and selling their Walter-themed creations. “They started working on their Walter stories and paintings and things right when I did. We’ve all got a different take on him. It’s like he’s everyone’s muse.”
“How inspiring,” the Doctor responded, voice steady and void of the suspicion he was feeling. “So is he based on a real creature, then?”

“He’s part of real art, Doctor. That’s all that matters to us,” Vega replied with a tight smile. “Walter gives us the chance to express ourselves. To tell our stories. Speaking of, if you’ll excuse me, I must be going. I’m doing a reading from my latest book and I don’t want to be late. But I would be delighted if you three would come.”

“We’d love to,” Rose said, “But we’re famished. Haven’t eaten since yesterday. Cheers!” She gave Vega a big smile, grabbing the Doctor’s hand and nodding to Sarah to follow them as she and the Doctor shuffled away. “A pleasure meeting you,” Sarah said as she went to follow. As she turned away, Sarah thought she caught a glimpse of Vega sneering coldly, but thought maybe it was just her overactive imagination. It wasn’t just Rose; this place, especially Walter and Vega, gave her the creeps.

Vega waited until the three odd visitors rounded a corner before tapping behind her ear to activate her comm link. “I’m in the square. We have a breach.”

4.7 Analysis: Fic Chapter Three

This chapter is the first in the story to overtly explore writing and creativity as agents of identity while also being resources that can potentially be exploited. Walter represents the control over (and commodification of) creativity that many female writers, including myself, have experienced working within the mainstream media system. As Vega and her success demonstrate, writers and artists can benefit by “playing the game” and complying with the constraints and conventions of the system. But the homogeneity of the creative work being produced on Scrivertia is unsettling to the Doctor, Sarah, and
Rose not only for its lack of diverse perspectives, but because no one seems to question this lack of diversity.

By making the writers and artists think they are coming up with their own stories, whoever is controlling the Walter character is attempting to placate and keep them engaged while subtly controlling them. This is representative of the media’s attempts at not only controlling those within their system, but also their attempts to bring fanfiction and fanfiction writers “mainstream” through monetization and other, more subtle means such as ancillary content models (Scott, 2009). Scott (2009) explains why this is a problem:

My concern, as fans and acafans continue to vigorously debate the importance or continued viability of fandom's gift economy and focus on flagrant instances of the industry's attempt to co-opt fandom, is that the subtler attempts to replicate fannish gift economies aren't being met with an equivalent volume of discussion or scrutiny. (para. 1.1)

4.8 The Fic: Chapter Four

Chapter 4: Walter, Walter Everywhere

February 27, 2191

Albish City

Planet Scriveria

As the Sarah caught up to the Doctor and Rose, she tried not to let on how nervous she was. After Doomsday and all the other things she’d seen at Torchwood, Sarah couldn’t understand why this weird but seemingly benign little place with a mascot everywhere was giving her the creeps so badly. Clearly, the Doctor and Rose felt the
same way, which unsettled her even more. They supposedly dealt with these kinds of things all the time, didn’t they? “So…Vega and this Walter stuff is really weird, right?” Sarah asked lamely.

The Doctor nodded, already working on solving the mystery. “It’s like some kind of mind control, but not. These people are coming up with the ideas themselves, or at least they think they are.”

“I think we’re going to have to talk to more of the artists,” Rose said. “But there’s still something about Vega in particular I didn’t like.”

“Me neither,” replied Sarah. “I could practically feel her shooting daggers at us as soon as we turned our backs.”

“Seems to me we have two tasks at hand, then,” the Doctor said. “And three of us. Well, two humans and a Time Lord, so it’s really like four of us or something, I’ve got to be as clever as at least two humans, although the maths are all off because I really can’t be compared to other species in a quantifiable—”

Rose cleared her throat. “Rude,” she said sternly. It shut the Doctor up and he smiled at her sheepishly. She rolled her eyes and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

“My point is,” the Doctor continued, “you two go see what you can find out from the others and I’ll try to get some more information on Vega. Sound good?”

“Let’s do it,” Sarah said, swallowing her unease and letting herself be energized by the Doctor’s determination. It reminded her of when she first walked into Torchwood, when she was so excited to learn about everything she even didn’t know she didn’t know. For the first time in as long as she could remember, Sarah felt that mix of fear, curiosity, and the desire to do something good that she’d had when she started there; the feeling
she’d hoped would define her days at Torchwood, but never really did. Feeling that exhilaration now made Sarah feel more like herself than she had in years. A small smile spread across her lips at the realization.

“What?” Rose asked, noticing Sarah’s expression.

“Nothing. It’s just that I’m starting to understand what you meant before about what you do. You go where you’re needed and you try to make things better. And it’s weird and scary and…brilliant.”

“Now you’re getting it,” Rose said with a chuckle.

Heading south away from the square, the women soon came to a small park where even more people were drawing, painting, and writing about Walter. There even appeared to be a film shoot going on, complete with someone in a giant, fluffy Walter costume. In the scene, he was fighting a purse snatcher before somersaulting over to a little boy and catching his ice cream just before it hit the ground. It was incredibly cheesy, but as soon as the director yelled “cut,” everyone in the park applauded wildly. One visibly moved man wiped tears out of his eyes.

“ Weird, weird, weird,” Sarah murmured. She looked away from the set to see Rose approaching a painter and joined her next to the Scrivarian’s easel. This woman, though less of a daunting presence than Vega, had a similar story of inspiration and her body of work was exclusively Walter-centric. The theme continued with two more writers, a performance artist, and the director of the film. After each interview, however, they began to feel like the people in the park were getting more and more suspicious of their presence. Sarah and Rose decided to retreat to a local restaurant to debrief.
They ordered a pizza in the shape of a bird—the “Walter Special”—and as they ate, Sarah and Rose talked through what they’d discovered so far.

“So it seems to have started around the same time for all of them,” Sarah noted. “three or four years ago. And it was a random spark of inspiration. One day they just started creating Walter stuff and never stopped.”

“The big question, then, is why Walter?” Rose asked. “These people are all making money from their work. They’re happy. No one seems to be getting hurt, but still, they talk about this cartoony bird character like he’s a god or something. So who’s benefitting from everyone thinking that way? Do you think it’s, like, a shadowy corporation or something?”

No answer. Rose looked up from her pizza to discover Sarah staring out the window, wide-eyed. “I don’t know,” she whispered shakily. “But somebody is, and they don’t like us asking about them.”

Rose followed Sarah’s gaze just in time to see the Doctor escorted around a corner by armed guards. Their uniforms had Walter insignia. Panicked, Rose made to get up, but Sarah grabbed her arm, wordlessly indicating the waitress, who was changing the coffee pot. “She’s done that twice in ten minutes,” Sarah whispered to Rose. “She’s trying to be subtle, but she’s been watching us. We panic now, it’ll probably just get us taken away, too.” Rose took a shaky breath, but nodded, sipping her water.

After a couple of minutes, they got up and exited the diner, giving the waitress a perfunctory nod on the way out. Once they were outside and clear of the window, Rose sprinted around the corner. Unfortunately, the Doctor was long gone, but Sarah noticed a thin billfold on the ground. She scooped it up. “I found something.”
“Yes!” Rose exclaimed. “It’s the Doctor’s psychic paper. You see what the person who has it wants you to see. The Doctor left us a message. Look.”

*I’ll be okay. Just taking me to a cell. Scriverians not typically violent.* Rose sighed in relief, but the message quickly disappeared and a new one took its place: *There’s a cave in Vega’s book. Go ASAP! Key to the mystery?*

“As much as I want to kill ‘im for gettin’ ‘imself captured like a bloody idiot,” Rose said, her accent thick again, “Sounds like ‘e ‘ad a good lead he was followin’ and gettin’ to the bottom of this is probably the best way to protect ‘im.”

Sarah grabbed her friend’s hand and squeezed. She took a deep breath and made a decision. “You go to the Doctor. I’ve got this.” Sarah said it with more conviction than she felt, but Rose took her at her word and gave her a quick hug before going off in the opposite direction.

Sarah was striking out on her own, actually doing something important without anyone backing her up. She wasn’t sure if it was brave or stupid or both, but it felt like a chance to prove to herself that she was up to the task. A moment later, though, Sarah stopped dead in her tracks when she was waylaid by a strange vision. A woman around her age, with dark skin and a doctor’s coat, running through a hospital with the Doctor, away from giant rhinos. Outside, it looked like the surface of the moon. And then the young woman was performing CPR on an unresponsive Doctor. Sarah saw it all so clearly that for a moment she thought she’d actually been transported into the surreal scene, but as quick as it came, the vision was gone again.

**4.9 Analysis: Fic Chapter Four**
In this chapter, Sarah is still working on creating her new self-narrative and trying to build confidence as she does so. Engaging in the broader mystery and working with the Doctor and Rose help Sarah make progress. Once again, this is an example of the community aspect of identity creation through communication (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005). By working on the details of the case with her friends, Sarah is co-creating the narrative of the mystery-solving experience with them. At the same time, however this helps Sarah “feel more like herself.” This underscores the interdependence of the relational, community, and personal aspects of identity because Sarah’s own journey is not separate from her experiences with her friends or with the artists and writers with whom they interact.

That being said, the community narrative of the Scriverians might seem to contradict other aspects of identity for all involved – Sarah, the Doctor and Rose, the Scriverians themselves. They see their Walter-centric creations as key to their personal and community identities, whereas for Sarah, communicating with these people serves as a catalyst to change her identity narrative, especially as it relates to Torchwood. Jung and Hecht (2005) explain that even when the four frames of identity “contradict each other, they coexist and work together composing an individual’s identity” (p. 267). The communication between each of these parties therefore affects their identities in different but related ways.

For the Scriverians themselves, the stories and art they create about Walter is part of their community identity and narrative. And as Sarah, the Doctor, and Rose are beginning to suspect, there are people who seek to use this in one way or another, and no matter what, the stories being created are not benign. Fisher (1987) argues, “fictive forms
of communication can have rhetorical intentions and consequences” (p. 158). This is true for Scriveria as well as the real world; the mainstream media is part of our own cultural narrative and when it is examined more closely, that narrative is often very limited. When writing for television, my colleagues and I had to be conscious of not just storytelling conventions and intended audience, but also things like brand identity and network executives’ tastes, which could potentially restrict and change the way we told stories.

4.10 The Fic: Chapter Five

Chapter 5: Visions of Stories Yet Untold

February 27, 2191

The Southern Hills

Planet Scriveria

Sarah did her best to keep up her steady pace towards the hills that held the cave (having been pointed in the right direction by a hardcore fan of Vega’s books), but more visions slammed into her mind, as real as if she were there. All of them featured the Doctor and women she’d never seen before. None of them were the friends he had with him at Torchwood.

Each new vision was so very strange.

Another vision of the medical doctor, only now she was dressed all in black, moving from village to village telling stories of the Doctor.

A tall, red-haired woman standing next to the Doctor, keeping up with him word for word, thought for thought, like she herself was a Time Lord.

Another redhead, younger this time, standing with another version of the Doctor overlooking what seemed like a giant brain, convincing him not to kill it.
A short brunette with that same Doctor, diving into a swirling column of electricity and time, impossibly splitting herself to save his life and meeting a dozen other faces that were all the Doctor, too.

Sarah wasn’t sure how she knew these other men were the Doctor or that the visions she saw were real. But she did, she absolutely knew. But why were they happening? And why to her? What the hell was she supposed to do with all of this? Once again, there were too many questions and almost no answers. At this point, she felt almost powerless, frustrated by what she didn’t know instead of excited about it. Still, she found herself genuinely wanting to solve this mystery and free the people from whatever hold was on them, causing them to be obsessed with Walter. Speaking of Walter, the damn thing was inescapable, even out here on the hills. There were digital projections that would show up as soon as Sarah was in a few feet of them, all featuring Walter.

At least the cave was in sight now, albeit still far away. *You’ll never be able to do this,* a voice that sounded suspiciously like Yvonne Hartman sneered in her head. It was tempting to listen to, like she would’ve before, and Sarah almost turned back. But it was that very impulse enraged her and gave Sarah what she needed to push on. She was done going along with what others wanted when it wasn’t right, done with them thinking she was easy to control. It was time to show Yvonne, Torchwood, and the universe what the real Sarah—the curious, determined, compassionate Sarah—could do.

Sarah focused back on the visions she’d had. They all involved the Doctor, and they all involved a strong woman. Someone the Doctor seemed to need. Well, he needed her now, and she wasn’t going to let him, or more importantly herself, down.
Apparently, the women she’d seen in her mind needed her, too. All of them had just appeared on the next hill—and this was no vision.

4.11 The Fic: Chapter Six

Chapter 6: Companions

February 27, 2191

The Southern Hills

Planet Scriveria

Sarah’s mouth dropped open as she watched the women materialize a few feet from the ground and fall like ungraceful human raindrops. They quickly took in their surroundings; each was as bewildered as Sarah.

“Oi! You over there!” The older redhead shouted, motioning to Sarah to come over. “Where are we?”

Sarah made her way to the group and gave a friendly wave. Each of them looked welcoming enough, but she could tell they were ready to run or fight at any second if necessary. The Doctor’s trained them well, she thought. “You’re on a planet called Scriveria, and it’s the year 2191,” Sarah explained.

“Where’s the Doctor?” the small brunette asked. The others looked at her, surprised. “You know the Doctor, too?” the young Black girl wondered.

“I’m going to save you all some time,” Sarah chimed in. “I think we all know the Doctor. And have gone on adventures with him. And maybe were in the middle of one and ended up here all of a sudden. Am I right?” Each of them nodded and Sarah smiled. “Nice to meet you. I’m Sarah Hanson.” She turned to the brunette and pointed down the
hill. “And to answer your question, the Doctor is currently in a jail cell somewhere near that city down there. But Rose—she’s one of us, too—is working on getting him out.”

“And once she does, she’d better bring him here so I can kill him for causing whatever’s going on right now,” the younger redhead said in a snappy Scottish accent. Everyone laughed. “Oh yeah,” the brunette responded, “This mess has him written all over it.”

As important as it was to get to the cave, Sarah figured if she was going to enlist their help, she might as well spend a few minutes with these ladies. If everyone got to know each other a little bit, they’d probably work together better. Each introduced herself: the medical student was Martha, the older redhead Donna, the younger redhead Amy, and finally the short brunette was named Clara. They were all from Britain, and Sarah smirked at the thought that, despite their different appearances, the Doctor had a “type.” British women. After all, even if she didn’t fit the “British” part of the bill, he’d found her in London, too.

They were all from the same time period, their “presents” within just a few years of one another. A moment here or there where something was different, one little quirk of fate where they never met the Doctor, and they could’ve met in a pub in London rather than on a hillside on another planet. “Would’ve been dreadfully boring,” Donna said dryly.

Much like becoming friends with Rose, being with this quirky, fierce group of women made Sarah feel like she belonged in a way she hadn’t before, and it was empowering. Unfortunately, it was time for the girl bonding to be put on hold and get back to the task at hand. She gave the other women the rundown on Vega, the other
artists, and Walter. (They’d noticed the digital projections anyway.) Sarah explained how everyone seemed to be controlled by this character or whoever created it, but none of them seemed to realize it. “The Doctor seems to think there’s some key to all of this in that cave over there,” Sarah finished, “but he didn’t get a chance to tell us why he thinks that or what we’ll find there.”

“Well, at least now you don’t have to find out on your own,” Martha replied with a smile as they trekked to the next hill.

“One thing, though, Sarah,” Clara said. “You never explained how you seemed to know we all travel with the Doctor. You were surprised to see us, but…”

“It was like you recognized us,” Amy finished.

Sarah explained the visions she began having as soon as she left Albish City. All of the women recognized the incidents Sarah had seen, except for Clara, who did her best to shake off the unease she felt at hearing what Sarah saw about her. Fragmented into a million pieces? Strands of time? This part of her story hadn’t been written yet. Clara just hoped when it was, it wasn’t one that could be found in the horror section and said as much.

“It won’t be if you have anything to say about it,” Sarah told her with a smile.

“I’m not sure it’s that simple. I mean, look at what we’re investigating right now,” Clara noted. “Not exactly a Scooby Doo mystery.”

“Well, we may not have the Mystery Machine,” Donna chimed in, “but the cave’s right over there. Let’s figure all this out and go home because frankly, that bird thing everyone’s so obsessed with is just weird. Gives me the creeps.”
“That’s not very nice,” said a voice from the cave. Out came Vega, with Walter by her side. Only this wasn’t a person in a costume or a digital projection, and it was anything but cartoony. It was just a four-foot tall, vicious-looking eagle-like creature with the biggest talons any of them had ever seen. There was no silly blue shirt or glasses, just an imposing barbed collar. The bird squawked – a shrill, horrible sound. “See? You’ve upset him. I think you ladies had better come over here and apologize.”

4.12 Analysis: Fic Chapters Five and Six

These two short chapters largely serve to advance plot by leading Sarah to the Doctor’s future companions and finding out who they are. However, the glimpses of the women’s stories that we get in Sarah’s visions, which are real plot points from Doctor Who episodes, demonstrate the importance of strong women with agency and intelligence in the show, while also symbolizing female fic writers. In each of Sarah’s visions, the Doctor’s companions are the ones in control, the ones helping the Doctor and calling the shots. This is also true of female fic writers! Reading and writing fanfiction helped me see that straying from “canon” works is not only “allowed” but can produce amazing results by looking at things from a new point of view. This, in turn, opened my eyes to just how limited the “canon” perspective can be. Writing fic simply adds voices and ideas to the overall universe of the fandom. It can make the existing stories richer while also providing a community of women who participate in this type of experimentation together as readers and writers.

The added perspective that comes with participating in fandom enhanced the way I looked at the existing canon materials as well as the cultural aspects of popular television, much like it did for Jenkins (2012), who states,
I have found approaching popular culture as a fan gives me new insights into the media by releasing me from the narrowly circumscribed categories and assumptions of my academic criticism and allowing me to play with textual materials. My exposure to fan culture challenged much of what I was being taught about the ‘ideological positioning of viewing subjects’” (p. 5).

In my case, the “narrowly circumscribed categories and assumptions” came from my experiences as part of the canon creators or “the Powers that Be” as fans call media producers. Being involved in fanfiction specifically was what helped broaden my viewpoint and as a women-driven community, it opened my eyes to just how much Hollywood wasn’t one. It also provided a supportive place to re-define and experiment with my creative voice, just as the other companions are supporters for Sarah as she moves towards the unknown of the cave.

4.13 The Fic: Chapter Seven

Chapter 7: Meeting the Villain, Becoming the Hero

February 27, 2191

The Southern Hills

Planet Scrivveria

Vega looked at the group with eyes as beady and hateful as those of the creature next to her. “Now, if you’ll all come with me, I have someone who would like to have a word with you.” Vega forced them into the cave, sandwiching the women between her and Walter so they couldn’t escape.

“Who are you taking us to?” Sarah asked, not even bothering to hide the venom in her voice. “Aren’t you the one behind all this?”
“Oh no, dear,” Vega laughed. “But he and I have quite a nice arrangement. I go wherever I need to and make sure no one loses interest in Walter. Talk about how he’s the greatest thing in the world and how I’d be nowhere without him. Every now and then we have to get rid of someone who’s thinking for themselves a bit too much, but usually it’s a very easy job. Pays quite well. Much better than writing pathetic children’s books, let me tell you.”

As they went deeper into the cave, which was lit by red, glowing stalactites, Sarah noticed a sort of surveillance room filled with screens depicting artists and writers all over the planet. Vega caught her looking. “And that’s our eagle eye, as they say.” She laughed. Martha scrunched her face in disgust at the terrible joke as Vega continued. “Every creative work and every person creating it is monitored through this system.”

“Why? Why do you care so much about the art people make? About the stories they write?”

“Because stories are power,” a booming voice said from the shadows. A fat, hairy man who Sarah thought looked like a cross between Chewbacca and Winston Churchill stood in front of them.

“Walter! How good of you to join us!” Vega gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “I’ll leave them to you, darling,” she said, backing out of the room and pulling a previously-hidden steel door shut behind her.

“I thought Walter was the bird,” Donna growled. “But it makes sense that the real Walter is even more hideous.” The bird squawked a warning from behind them and the hairy, human Walter glared at the women.
“Careful, girls. I might be the real Walter, but the bird’s got real talons,” hairy Walter sneered. “Anyway, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted,” he continued, “stories are power. Think about it. Religion. Politics. All of it is stories we tell about ourselves. What we see. What we do. What we think. What we believe. And how do you get someone to go to your church or vote for you? You get them to think it was their idea, when it was yours all along. I was the only one here smart enough to see how to do it on a bigger scale. They say authors create worlds. I decided to take that a bit more literally. More fun that way.”

“Why not just put them in trances or conquer them like normal crazed dictators?” Amy snarked.

“Trances are just so obvious and boring. A brilliant creative mind like mine needs a challenge,” Walter replied. “Besides, people try to overthrow dictators. They embrace muses. It’s a nice, steady stream of creative energy to feed on this way. And they like it!”

He went over to the screens and took a deep breath. The people on the screens froze. A silver, glowing energy bled from the monitors and into his body, expanding it a tiny bit more. Walter exhaled with bliss and on the screen the pace of the writers and artists happily picked up their work again. “See? Everybody’s happy!” He walked over to the bird, which squawked at him in greeting.

“Unfortunately, though, I’m afraid this story’s going to have to end. You just had to be the busybodies, didn’t you? Don’t you know nobody likes those characters? They usually end up dying.”

Walter grabbed on of the spikes on the bird’s collar. “I take this off my avian friend here and it’s all over. He’s a telepathic conduit and this collar channels his energy
and sends out the signals exactly how I want. Those sparks of ideas that every writer and artist dreams of, that they think they’re so brilliant for coming up with all on their own? It’s just me telling them what to think. Unfortunately, taking off the collar is likely to produce a dangerous burst. Delicious, but it’ll almost surely kill everyone on this planet besides me. Fry their brains like crispy bacon. Oh, it’ll be a bit annoying having to start over with a new planet, but it’ll be fun, too, won’t it? Everybody loves a sequel.”

Sarah watched in horror as Walter moved his hand toward the buckle on the collar. Rage was boiling in her at the hubris and evil of this disgusting man. She might not have stood up to Yvonne or Torchwood, but here was her chance to really do something. *We do what needs to be done*, Rose had said.

So Sarah leapt and tackled Walter.

There was screaming and squawking and pain exploded into her arm. The bird creature’s talon had grazed her. Thankfully, the other women were quickly by her side, working together to hold the bird still and keep Walter subdued.

“You’re forgetting all those stories where the villain tells his evil plan to everyone and it ends up backfiring,” Sarah said, gritting her teeth against the pain as she pinned Walter to the ground. “Your days of controlling these people and what they create are over. We’re stopping you, right here, right now.”

“Um, Sarah?” Donna said in a not-so-subtle stage whisper, “you mind telling the rest of us how we’re going to do that?”

Sarah didn’t actually know, but she tried to think it through. “Walter said the collar is feeding into the bird’s telepathy, controlling what goes in and out of its mind and, through the collar, to everyone else. Take the collar off, everybody’s brains fry.”
“He could be lying,” Martha pointed out.

“We can’t take the chance. The only thing we can do is deactivate the collar. But how? Tell us!” Sarah growled at Walter. He just laughed evilly. Sarah kneed him in the groin. His yelp was quickly drowned out by a far more pained cry, however. Sarah looked over to see that Amy had a huge gash on her head. Donna managed to pull the bird’s head away and dodge before it could hurt her too, but its beak dripped with Amy’s blood.

“Sarah, I don’t know how much longer we can hold this thing,” Clara said, strained. Sarah saw how each of them was desperately trying to keep control of the creature while avoiding its nasty claws and beak. Martha was trying to tend to Amy at the same time, and Amy had clearly weakened from her wound. If they were going to survive this, Sarah was going to have to help them and try her best to fend off Walter the human at the same time. Sarah wanted to cry. Here was yet another unexpected twist, and she wasn’t sure how to deal with it.

*An unexpected twist.* The words resonated in Sarah’s mind like the chime of a bell. That was it.

“The bird’s telepathy isn’t working like it should because of the things Walter is forcing into its mind. So maybe it just needs some new stories. Like the mad, wonderful adventures of people who fly around in a blue box with an alien.” She strode over to the bird and looked it directly in the eye, trying to communicate that she meant no harm.

“What are you doing?” Walter asked as he tried to get to his feet.

“A rewrite.” Sarah turned to her friends. “All right, ladies. Walter might think he’s got a good story here, but I think our own stories are even better. So let’s tell them.
Everyone focus. Make sure you’re touching the bird and just focus on a story in your mind. Maybe giving it a bunch of new narratives will disable the collar.”

“You sure this will work?” Amy asked weakly.

“No,” Sarah replied honestly. “But you heard what Walter said. Stories have power. And this is our only shot. So, tell your story. One about a time when you did something amazing,” she said with a smile, before closing her eyes and picturing herself and her new friends in this very moment. Energy thrummed through her, shaking every molecule in Sarah’s body. For a moment she was sure she had made the ultimate mistake and was dying along with everyone else on the planet. But then she realized that the big, muscular animal body beneath her hand seemed to be… smaller. When the shaking stopped, Sarah dared to open her eyes.

No one was dead.

She and her friends were sitting around an adorable, gentle-looking bird with fluffy feathers, big, friendly eyes, and a small beak.

Donna got up and grabbed Walter the human before he could escape and came face to face with the Doctor and Rose, who held Vega’s arms behind her back. Sarah saw them and beamed. “We did it.”

***

A few hours later, they were back on the TARDIS so Amy could get her wound taken care of and everyone could rest a bit. There was still a lot to do to make sure everyone on this planet was okay, but the Doctor had done a quick check on Albish City and reported that people seemed to be snapping out of it “even if they didn’t know they were in it.”
As for Sarah, there were still a lot of questions about her life to answer. But as she enjoyed some tea with her new friends, talking about their adventures through time and space, she was sure about one thing now: this was her story, and her next chapter was off to one hell of a start.

4.14 The Fic: Epilogue

Epilogue: The Book

November 2, 3960

Municipal Base Orion

Planet Kalabaxia

Rose weaved her way through a crowd of humans and aliens of all shapes and sizes. She’d left the Doctor to his search for new TARDIS parts a couple of hours ago while she went to the bustling market that was a mainstay of the base. It was their first trip since the Doctor had to wipe their memories to avoid some kind of time paradox. That’s why the several weeks previous were fuzzy. She’d always wonder what exactly they did in those weeks and why they weren’t allowed to remember it, but looking back wasn’t something she liked to do too much anyway. Better to live in the moment and find the next adventure.

She passed a stall full of books from across time and space. One in particular caught her eye: *A Universe of Good—Stories of the Great Things Out There*. She picked it up and read the dust jacket to discover that the book was a nonfiction collection by a woman who travels from planet to planet finding interesting tales of people helping each other and the world around them. Rose smiled at the charming concept. She liked to think that she and the Doctor contributed to stories like that now and then, and decided to buy
the book. As the merchant was counting her change, Rose idly turned the book over in her hands. She stopped in surprise when she saw the photo of the author. The young woman with sandy hair looked really familiar, but Rose couldn’t quite place her. Did she know a Sarah Hanson? Shrugging, she took her change and went to find the Doctor. She was looking forward to returning to the TARDIS and curling up with her new book.

### 4.15 Analysis: Fic Chapter Seven and Epilogue

“Why? Why do you care so much about the art people make? About the stories they write?” “Because stories are power,” a booming voice said from the shadows.

These sentences are at the heart of the story—both this fic and my own journey of writing it, as well as my transition from canon-creator to fic writer as told in the personal narrative that prefaces “Making It a Good One.” Stories have power, and can affect our lives in profound ways, even if they are fictional. Fisher (1987) explains how:

> Let us consider how dramatic and literary works argue. The mode of their arguing is the process of suggestion. Through the revelations of characters and situations that represent different value orientations in conflict with each other and/or with the environment, the reader or auditor is induced to a felt-belief, a sense of the message that the work is advancing. (p. 161)

This is the main reason why I chose to write a fanfiction story to demonstrate the idea that fanfiction can be an especially effective way for women to tell their stories, explore who they are, and resist the patriarchal aspects of mainstream media that deem their stories less valuable than those of men. This story in and of itself provides that “argument” while also pointing out that arguments present in dramatic narratives must also be looked at critically.
Sarah and her friends do a “rewrite,” letting their own stories be heard when previously the only stories out there were controlled by a single person (which represents the limited pool of people who produce mainstream media stories). The women’s rewrite of the narrative transforms it to incorporate new perspectives, just as fanfiction is a transformative work that expands, rewrites, or remixes existing stories (Jamison, 2013). By empowering each other to find new ways of telling their own stories through the stories of characters they know and love, fic writers can use their art to develop, build, and express identity, and resist against the narrow scope of mainstream stories that are primarily aimed at white, heterosexual men by expanding them and reimagining them.

Billings (2013) explains the power of fic to expand horizons:

That’s what fic does; you’re obsessed with the characters or world and you’re so willing to go to new places just to read more. In the process, you end up learning about an entire subculture to which you never really paid much attention before.” (p. 196)

As a television fan and then as a television writer, the mainstream media introduced me to many stories that were inspiring, empowering, and fun. However, I was often unaware of its limitations in terms of representing diverse perspectives, including those of women, until I became active in the fic community. This community provided a gateway to identity exploration as I considered what I wanted to do next as a professional and shifted the way I viewed myself. It also provided a safe space to perform identity and meet new people; fic writing has allowed me to explore all four frames of my identity in a creative, unique way (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005). Says Billings (2013), “Fic fandom is a really safe place to fangirl other people and just…share” (p. 197).
Like Sarah, it took a dramatic leap to a new way of storytelling, and a new women-led community of writers, to truly find the value of my creative voice. In the end, I realized I could use it not only to explore who I was, but to help people, and ended up with a writing career in nonprofit, symbolized in the story by Sarah’s choice to write a book about the good things happening in the universe. Without the paradigm shift brought about by my reading, writing, and studying of fic, this might never have happened.

Representing my own story autoethnographically through the “Mary Sue” character of Sarah in this fic was a departure from how I usually write fanfiction because I, like so many in fanfiction and academia, used to consider it a self-absorbed, less competent form of writing than other types of fic (Bonstetter & Ott, 2011). Through this study and writing this fic, I have come to appreciate yet another form of art and the people who create it, which again speaks to Billings’ (2013) point about fic exposing its writers to subcultures and people they never would have encountered otherwise.
Chapter 5: Summaries and Conclusions

This study sought to explore how fanfiction can serve as a tool for female empowerment, identity building, and resistance to patriarchal stereotypes and norms. Including a fanfiction story itself, which was written as a form of autoethnography along with a personal narrative, I was able to not only discover the ways in which fanfiction, especially Mary Sue fanfiction, can and does serve this purpose, but was also able to experience it myself. Writing this story provided the creative freedom to express identity; examine my role as an individual, a writer, and a woman in creative communities including the mainstream media and the fanfiction community; and consider how traditionally “alternative” modes of storytelling such as fanfiction are often just forms of creativity that do not seek monetary profit and do not conform to a norm driven by the interests of white, heterosexual male audiences and creators. Through this project, I was able to confront my own previously-held biases regarding art forms such as fanfiction and discover that the context in which they formed was that of a mainstream media that wasn’t always interested in accurate representation of women or in allowing women like me to express ourselves in the ways we wanted.

The findings of this study on a personal and community level also illustrate the narrative paradigm and CTI at work because they demonstrate that we make sense of the world around us and craft identity through the lens of storytelling and through the communication act of storytelling (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005; Stewart 2012). Considering my own experience through autoethnography and through writing a Mary Sue fic has provided a way for me to better understand the power of fanfiction as a productive, supportive, and empowering communication activity for women in general.
Every narrative is different and exists on several levels in terms of both the narrative itself and the storyteller’s own multi-layered identity communication. Fanfiction allows women writers to embrace the uniqueness of their own narrative through the act of storytelling and empowers them to rewrite existing “mainstream” narratives, therefore giving them a way to resist patriarchal assumptions and strengthen their own voices independently, collectively, and creatively.

5.1 Limitations of the Study

The most obvious limitation of the study is that the perspectives represented are limited based on the characteristics and experiences of the author. However, in addition to this limitation, representing the author’s point of view also has certain benefits from an autoethnographic perspective. On the positive side, individual experience provides context to the research. According to Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015):

Autoethnographers often foreground the ways in which social identities influence the research process, particularly in terms of what, who, and how we study; what and how we interpret what we observe and experience; and how we represent our observations and experiences of cultural life. (p. 19)

As a female researcher and creative writer who has experience in both the mainstream media and fanfiction communities, my own perspective provides a unique lens into these cultures and insight into the inquiry put forth in this study. At the same time it cannot represent some members of the community in the same way as a different form of autoethnography might. This includes different genres of creative expression such as drama, art, and dance as well as different forms of autoethnographic written narrative such as collaborative witnessing, in which a subject and researcher “become
'co-storytellers’ who collaboratively discuss and write their stories in order to understand meaning, challenge and create knowledge, and engage in a compassionate and caring relationship” (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 56).

Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015) also caution about the limits to accessibility when doing autoethnography. While autoethnography is a way to resist the inaccessibility of jargon-laden academic research that is often only accessible through paid journals and databases, the content of autoethnographies still present accessibility challenges in a few ways including the fact that the majority of autoethnographies are text-based, which “ignores the ways texts have been used to diminish, silence, and control marginalized others” (p. 43). They also note that while the stories we tell generally have to have narrative fidelity and cohesion per the narrative paradigm, the structure and storytelling traditions in various cultures are different, and linear narrative is not the only way to tell a story (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis 2015).

5.2 Recommendations for Further Study

There is much potential for further study on fanfiction as a tool for empowerment, identity building, and resistance. Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015) note that certain “selves, identities, experiences and cultures” are represented far more than others in autoethnography (p. 42). Though my own specific story is unique and can contribute to the broader body of knowledge on fanfiction culture, as a white, heterosexual woman, my general perspective is actually represented quite often in both autoethnography and in fanfiction studies (Ellis, 2004; Jenkins 2014). Therefore, first and foremost, the experiences of women fic writers who are also part of other marginalized groups such as women of color, LBGQT women, and women with disabilities are especially rich and
extremely important areas of further study. Studying the experiences of non-white fic writers and fandom participants is an area that has been particularly limited and should be studied more. Jenkins (2014) writes that:

American fandom studies has been ‘colour blind’ [sic] in all of the worst senses of the term, an attitude that would have been much harder to maintain if the field had more directly been dealing with the literature around music and sports fandoms, where participation by fans of colour [sic] has been much more visible. (p. 97)

This also underscores that studies about the experiences of fans and fic writers have often been about those whose fandoms are in specific genres such as romance, science fiction, and soap operas (Jenkins 2014). As the current study primarily focuses on the sci-fi series *Doctor Who*’s fanfiction and fanfiction community, it falls into this commonly-studied group as well. Expanding research on fic as a tool for female empowerment, identity building, and resistance in a variety of genres is another area for further study.

Finally, this study focused on fanfiction as a uniquely female vehicle for empowerment, identity-building, and resistance because fanfiction is overwhelmingly written by women, which is in direct contrast to the mainstream media (Jenkins 2012; Silverman, 2014). However, fic is not *exclusively* written by women. And if fic is used as a way to resist dominant ideologies to express new and different perspectives, studying men who write fic, a minority population within the fic community itself, provides a potentially enlightening complement to the current study. Who are the men who write fic? And if they too are part of a population that is marginalized, misrepresented, or underrepresented by the mainstream (such as men of color, non-heterosexual men, etc.),
how do they use fic as a way to express and empower themselves? What are the implications?

Overall, analyzing the impact of writing fic on a wide variety of people who do it—broadening the scope of fanfiction studies—will provide additional depth to what we have discovered about the power of fanfiction to empower, build identity, and resist stereotypes (Jenkins 2014).
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