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What is This?

Archival anarchies: Online fandom, subcultural conservation, and the transformative work of digital ephemera

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Abstract

This article explores the politics of digital memory and traceability, drawing on Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* and on queer theories of performance and ephemerality. Its primary example is the Organization for Transformative Works, a successful advocacy group for creative media fans whose main project has been an online fan fiction archive. I am concerned both with this public face and with the activities that fans would prefer to keep out of the official record. For scholars of subcultural artistic and cultural production, the mixed blessings of conservation and legitimacy are necessary considerations for the archiving and meaning-making work of cultural theory. Paying attention to the technological and social specificities that contextualize fandom as a digital archive culture, I trace contradictions and contestations around what fannish and scholarly archivable content is and should be: what's trivial, what's significant, what legally belongs to whom, and what deserves to be preserved.

Keywords

archive, digital, ephemera, fandom, memory, queer, subculture

Introduction: Legitimacy

> [W]hat is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way. (Derrida, 1996: 18)

In 2011, Google deleted accounts on Google Plus, its then-new social networking service, that did not appear to index users' real names. In the online controversy that resulted,

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the hashtag #nymwars indexed online disagreements over how individuals' pseudony-mous participation in online networking should be identified and tracked. Google's insis-tence that users' online handles match the names on their credit cards hints at an opposition between identification and anonymity wherein lack of verifiable identity is a threat: an anarchic state in which the boundaries between digital selves cannot be dis-cerned. Anonymity is disruptive because it implies that one can be forgotten, making it possible to search, comment, or cause trouble online without any repercussions. Linking one's Google account to one's offline identity, on the other hand, allows information to be remembered, making online participation part of a searchable, public archive of everyday life, as well as smoothing the functioning of Google's personalized search algorithms, with their promotion of targeted advertising sales. Combatants in #nymwars argued for a third term, pseudonymity, to mediate between anonymity and identifiability such that financial and legal documentation would not be the only reliable way to attain the benefits of verified digital selfhood. Led by those who risked censure if their politi-cal, sexual, or subcultural online practices were carried over to offline worlds, Google's critics argued that self-designated names could serve as reliable alternatives, identifica-tion archives worthy of a Google account. But what do we lose by eliminating the disrup-tive anarchies of the anonymous, the forgettable, the difficult to archive?

Among the #nymwars' most vocal defenders of pseudonymity were participants in creative fan culture, who often establish pseudonyms for the purpose of sharing artistic production that draws on copyrighted stories, characters, and images. At the transient pro-pseudonym site http://my.nameis.me, Francesca Coppa (2011) wrote that such fans 'accrue significant and traceable reputations' under their pseudonyms, 'working in fan-dom as writers, artists, vidders, and software coders, as zine publishers, community mod-erators, archivists, wiki editors, blog commentators, gamers, and convention organizers'. Pseudonymity, as Coppa describes it, becomes an accountable, archivable, and socially positive way of separating online activities from a physical sphere that may not approve of them: a middle ground between unruly anonymity and the vulnerability of connecting all activities to a legal name. To publicize and preserve fandom's professionally compe-tent pseudonym culture is crucial for Coppa's work as founder and chair of communica-tions at the Organization for Transformative Works, a fan advocacy organization that works to preserve and defend the legitimacy of fans' creative works. Yet in many fan-cultural contexts, as elsewhere online, significant and traceable reputations are to be avoided rather than celebrated. Thousands of comments and stories are posted daily by fans in wholly anonymous 'memes' dedicated to erotic fiction, gossip, and random silli-ness; they have access to the legitimating archives Coppa discusses, but choose to avoid them along with the digital surveillance trail of a Google account. Seeking to understand the importance of digital forgetting signaled by such desires for anonymity, this article unpacks some politics, implications, and contradictions of digital traces and subcultural archives by exploring the formation and development of the Organization for Transformative Works and its mission to represent and serve creative fan culture through processes of archiving.

The name of the nonprofit Organization for Transformative Works (hereafter the OTW) comes from the provision in US copyright law that 'transformative' uses of copy-righted material can be 'fair use'. It marks the organization's guiding argument against

the commonly held notion that fans' appropriation of copyrighted material infringes intellectual property laws, and its investment in preserving the specificities of 'fannish economy, values, and creative expression' (OTW, n.d. b). The OTW also sponsors an online open-access academic journal, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, whose output has deepened critical scholarly conversations within fan studies; I was part of the journal's founding editorial team and also discussed some of this article's central ideas there in a brief provocation (Lothian, 2011). I write as a supporter and member of the OTW since its formation, to complicate the discourses of legitimacy that surround an activist project I support and to show the relevance of internal discussions within fandom to a wider audience who may be drawn to these issues by related debates, such as the one surrounding Google Plus. To do so I focus on the OTW's major achievement: the Archive of Our Own,[1] an online depository for fan fiction stories that is still in development but currently makes more than 380,000 works of fan fiction available for fans of any conceivable source to read online, download, comment on, share, and discuss.

The questions of memory, violence, and forgetting that Jacques Derrida raises in *Archive Fever* (1996) open up the OTW's activist archive to its omissions. Derrida's straightforward but compelling insight underlines both the OTW's project and my own: archives and archiving are always political, and to collect content is never only to store information. Rather, the 'archivable content of the past' is given meaning through the structure of the archive, which keeps its memory alive (Derrida, 1996: 17). Struggles over the archive are struggles over which pasts will pass away; changes in archives' contents change histories and futures. Yet it is not enough to say that unarchived materials are lost. For words and actions not to be remembered may be powerful and pleasurable, just as to be archived against one's will (perhaps through compulsory verification of online identity) may have terrifying consequences. Derrida analyses this through the anarchivic force of Freud's death drive, the urge to destroy that 'never leaves any archives of its own' (1996: 10). Yet, as scholarship in queer theory and performance studies has shown, that which is not archived often does not entirely disappear but leaves ephemeral traces. I bring this important idea together with digital media theory in order to think through ways that online fannish practices exceed the OTW's legitimating archival project. Paying attention to the technological and social specificities that contextualize fandom's digital archive cultures, my discussion traces contradictions and contestations around what fannish and scholarly archives are and should be: what's trivial, what's significant, what legally belongs to whom, and what deserves to be preserved.

Digital memories and subcultural archives

Part of the impetus for *Archive Fever*, Derrida writes, was the changing significance of 'the archive' in a time of rapid technological and political change (1996: 16). Although Derrida's idea of the archive is not only physical, its meanings are constituted by materials: ink and paper, indexes and catalogues, fiber optics and network protocols. 'Archivable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives', Derrida writes: '[i]t begins with the printer' (1996: 18). When the primary mode of storage shifts from analogue to digital, from the printer to the pixel, meaning's materiality will no longer be lived in the same way. When Derrida gave the 1994 lecture that would become *Archive Fever*, he described

electronic communication as 'on the way to transforming the entire public and private space of humanity … at an unprecedented rhythm, in quasi-instantaneous fashion' (1996: 17). We can now take something approaching an entire digital transition for granted, but there is still much to learn from the materialities of digital memory and forgetting. Culture traffics online through unruly splatterings of contradictory, intersecting archives; run a search for any popular TV show and you are likely to find fan fiction and fan video, which may or may not be approved by the copyright holder, high in the results. The archival formations of online fandom developed in order to informally share amateur art and writing through generations of rapidly changing technologies of communication and reproduction. Yet through their digital archive cultures, online fan communities have transformed from marginal worlds, of interest only to members and scholarly admirers, into discursive landscapes at the heart of debates about digital media and intellectual property.

As internet users, fannish or not, our informal sense of online archival rhythms is twofold. On one hand, there is what Derrida called the 'quasi-instantaneous' transfer of data, so that information passes to and through us at what Tara McPherson described, in a 2002 analysis that continues to resonate, as a rhythm of the 'present as a perpetually unfolding now' (2002: 469). Fads and memes rush onward; old information is easy to leave behind. On the other hand, inadvertent archives grow up around us: cookies, search histories, and other traces created in the process of everyday digital life. We expect to be able to find anything online, especially things we have forgotten; from old message board posts to embarrassing Facebook photographs, the past seems always recoverable. Google makes much of its interest in archiving human knowledge, making everything available at one quick search in a business decision to sink money into overriding storage media's degenerative tendencies. The power of Google's proprietary search algorithm has created many users' sense of the internet as an accessible universal archive. Early versions of Google Mail replaced the 'delete' button with one marked 'archive' and insisted that users need never delete anything again, while Google Plus has sought to organize users' chaotic digital lives into personal archives that can be capitalized upon. Meanwhile, the nonprofit Wayback Machine (archive.org) attempts to preserve even the most transient online content. For users, it seems that to archive online is to give over to unconscious machine memory, to remember the same action as to forget. Yet, while multiple nonrivalrous copies make deletion profoundly unreliable, even the best organized online archives rarely store data as reliably as their paper-based equivalents (Corbyn, 2011). Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has described digital media's archival contradictions as an 'enduring ephemeral', a temporality of perpetual presentness and unreliable memory in which the trivial lasts for ever and the crucially important may disappear at any moment (2011: 10). One of its features is 'a conflation of memory', which is human and personal, with 'storage', which is technological (2011: 105). Chun's terms also mark temporalities; memory is (among other things) 'commemoration' of the past, while storage is future-oriented – 'we put something in storage … in order to use it again'. The archive is the place where memory and storage, past and future, come together (Chun, 2011: 133). Creative fan culture makes ephemera endure by virtue of its status as digital media, but it is also characterized by specific archival practices and processes. Thinking fan cultures through digital archives and digital archives through fan cultures can help us to unpack media theory's generalized assertions about what 'we' do in and with the digital.

The term 'fandom' is amorphous, as can be seen from the diverse communities (from music to sports to soaps) to which it refers in the influential anthology *Fandom* (Gray et al., 2007) or the set of scholarly debates published on Henry Jenkins's blog in summer 2011.[2] I use 'subcultural fandom' to refer to the established groupings of media fans whose norms and expectations around production and discussion of fan fiction, art, and remix video the OTW has sought to represent. There are many fan collectivities and networks who engage in these participatory archival practices; the one out of which the OTW arose is primarily though not exclusively oriented toward American and British science fiction television and film. While the edges of fandom's interlocking networks are not easy to define, many within these self-described fan communities find origin stories for their practices in Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* (1992) and Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse's *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (2006). Organized around the sharing and storing of texts and interpretations, subcultural fandom has been as much built on the work of the archive as the style-based 1970s subcultures described by Dick Hebdige were built on the work of spectacle (1979: 90). But the ways in which fandom lives its archives are varied and complex.

In a 2003 essay, Abigail Derecho draws on *Archive Fever* to analyze fan fiction writing as an archival practice. She describes it as a genre of 'archontic literature' whose multiple authors build on existing media and literature and add a diversity of perspectives that challenge the notion of the single-authored text so that any given work becomes a potential archive that is, in Derrida's words, 'always expanding and never closed' (in Derecho, 2006: 61). Derecho finds that archontic writing in general and fan fiction in particular are 'often used by minority groups and women as a technique for making social and cultural criticisms'; the archives they build are 'ethical projects' that 'oppose outdated notions of hierarchy and property' (2006: 61). These ethics may appear as content, as in the case of fan fiction that offers explicit feminist critique, but they also operate through form and distribution. In her ethnography of *Star Trek* fandom, *Enterprising Women*, Camille Bacon-Smith describes fans' removal of Hollywood's property from the monetary realm as a rebellious act, in opposition to if not in defiance of capitalism (1992: 4). Similarly, Jenkins famously called fan production 'textual poaching': theft of culture from capital's enclosed property that recreated a cultural commons (Jenkins, 1992).[3] Textual poaching in the digital age is more than a fan practice, as the chaotic archives produced by the transfer and reproduction of digital data contain an implicit challenge to laws and norms by which the original producers of any content are the only ones legitimated to work with it. As Rebecca Tushnet remarks in 'Legal fictions', even 'viewing a document on the World Wide Web requires making a copy of that document on the client computer' (1997: 651). We rarely take the implications of this obvious fact seriously, but the deviant archontic practices of filesharers and fanwork creators exploit its technological and cultural affordances.[4]

Yet, while media corporations remain attached to the notions of hierarchy and property that subcultural fandom and digital reproduction often bypass, fans' archontic production has been looked on by corporations less as dangerous piracy than as a resource to be exploited – 'user-generated content' that enables the selling of advertising space. Fans' intense investment adds profitable paratexts to the corporate archives of popular media, and they are often willing to do free labor that will be 'profitable to producers'

(Milner, 2009: 506), while subcultural fandom's anti-profit world has often been built through web services whose owners profit from every byte of data uploaded and exchanged. Fan production is unruly, creating narratives and images that can radically contradict the connotations by which media creators might prefer their brands to be remembered – but it also increases copyrighted characters' and narratives' presence, reach, and permanence. Jenkins's shift of emphasis from fan culture as a subcultural world organized in opposition to mainstream media (1992) to an industry-focused trans-media model that calls attention to the ways fan practices extend far beyond subcultural groupings into the 'convergence culture' of 21st-century media production (2006) makes this very clear.

Yet subcultural fandom lives on, in excess of its ongoing incorporation into the media industry's logics. As fan cultures migrated online, they used digital media to reproduce what the legacy archival and participatory spaces of zines and conventions had made possible: not only lovingly created responses to objects of fandom, but also interpersonal connections and cultural networks that exceed any given media property. Connections between fans are frequently carried over into offline life, but it is telling that subcultural fans will often describe themselves as *living* online, where fan-created fiction and media preserve relationships and personal histories. Home is where the archive is. And it was the contradictions and interactions between fan cultures' affective subcultural histories and their objects of fandom, the feelings of home and the capitalization of digital spaces, that instigated the OTW.

Owning the servers: an archive of one's own

In 2007, $3 million of venture capital was invested in creating FanLib.com, a website created to host and profit from fan fiction. FanLib's major attraction was its connection to media companies, who paid for promotions on the site in the form of contests and features (FanLib, 2008). If fan production is considered part of media brands' distributed property, this appears to be a useful and desirable way to archive it. But fans who considered themselves to be part of autonomous communities, oriented around informal sub-cultural archives, were not happy.[5] Over the next few months, the first angry posts complaining about exploitation began to mobilize into the development of a communal, nonprofit group to provide fans with 'an archive of our own'. On 17 May 2007, the prominent fan Astolat wrote:

> [T]he people behind fanlib … don't actually care about … anything except making money … [W]e are sitting quietly by the fireside, creating piles and piles of content around us, and other people are going to look at that and see an opportunity … We need a central archive of our own … Something that would … clearly state our case for the legality of our hobby up front, while not trying to make a profit off other people's IP … and create a welcoming space for new fans that has a sense of our history and our community behind it. (Astolat, 2007)

Over the next few weeks, fans threw themselves into organizational work behind the idea of a centralized archive that would codify fans' subcultural ethics and offer a 'front door' to encourage new fans to participate in the subcultural rather than corporate version of fan-nish archive culture (Astolat, 2007). The developing 'fanarchive' collective eventually

solidified into the umbrella nonprofit Organization for Transformative Works (Femmequixotic, 2007). During the OTW's first fund drive in September 2008, Speranza, another prolific fan central to organizing efforts, powerfully expressed the force of the fans who made up the OTW's desire for a more secure relationship to digital space than that of a poacher:

> I want us to own the goddamned servers, ok? Because I want a place where … no one can turn the lights off or try to dictate to us what kind of stories we can tell each other … It comes down to this: I'm not their user-generated content. I'm a fanfiction writer, and I write for free, for you, and I gratefully read what you give me … And so I'm happy to contribute my time, money, and energy to help fans buy servers and write software and keep our 'social network' a real community. And I hope you will, too.

The idea of 'owning the servers' became a rallying cry. Designed from the ground up by teams of volunteer coders and funded by donations, the Archive of Our Own went live in October 2008 and bought its first dedicated servers in September 2009 (Coppa, 2009). FanLib disappeared from the internet in the summer of 2008.

Technically, the Archive of Our Own, known as AOOO or AO3, is a piece of open-source software running on the OTW's member-owned servers. Ideologically, it is a resource whose loving collection of fannish art and knowledge consolidates fandom as what Speranza called a 'real community'. It appears to offer an alternative or supplement to the distributed, chaotic archive culture that characterizes the internet at large, although it is of course as subject to the unreliability of digital memory as any other collection of files. It might more accurately be described as the Server of Our Own, a name that would highlight the technological structures that make a digital storage device different from a library. The name of the archive signals the OTW's political stance for the recognition of digital storage as cultural memory by invoking what Ann Cvetkovich in *An Archive of Feelings* calls a 'grassroots archive': a 'ritual space within which cultural memory and history are preserved' (2003: 241). A fan fiction archive might seem on the surface to have little to do with the New York Lesbian Herstory Archives about which Cvetkovich writes (although both certainly contain many descriptions of queer sex acts). But the OTW seeks to preserve fannish community and culture precisely as a grassroots print archive might, tracing a throughline for fan culture's online archives to subcultures that predate the internet. The OTW hoped to halt their archontic subculture's reliance on the incidental and unreliable archiving of most online information, which could so easily disappear or be appropriated by a for-profit group more successful than FanLib. They insist that their storage will provide cultural memory that 'lasts for a very long time', 'preserving fanworks for the future' by producing an organized and searchable 'deposit library' for the community, solidifying its history and meanings explicitly (OTW, n.d. a). Derrida writes that 'every archive … is at once institutive and conservative. Revolutionary and traditional' (1996: 7). The OTW wears both functions on its sleeve, seeking to institute 'a future in which all fannish works are recognized as legal and transformative and are accepted as a legitimate creative activity' by pursuing aggressively traditional archive strategies. The OTW's archive mobilizes subcultural memory in the service of a transformation of online fannish temporality that would give fandom's archive cultures a traceable history to claim with pride and a future to look forward to.

The OTW's rhetoric of community frames the organization's development 'by fans, for fans' as a signifier of unmitigated good (OTW, n.d. a). But the 'our' in 'Archive of Our Own' is scarcely unproblematic. In *Against the Romance of Community* (2002), Miranda Joseph critiques identity-based valorizations of community like the ones the OTW makes on the basis of members or users' self-identification as subcultural fans. Joseph argues that 'communal subjectivity is constituted not by identity but rather through practices of production and consumption' (2002: ix). Subcultural fandom, through the OTW's self-narration, literalizes Joseph's connection between production, consumption, and identity; we have already seen how Coppa used fans' practices of building pseudonymous identities as fanwork producers to argue for inclusion within Google's accepted range of consumer identities. Joseph describes the dynamic by which '[n]onprofits often stand in for community metonymically' such that '[o]ne gives to one's community or to 'the community' by contributing labor or money to a nonprofit' (2002: 70). The nonprofit structure that the OTW has attained seems to function as its proof that subcultural fandom, despite its lack of geographical or demographic cohesion, can be a legitimate community. Yet both Joseph and Derrida insist that all communities, like all archives, are constituted through violence and erasure. Struggles, conflicts, and exclusions are not merely the unpleasant underside of communities' and archives' productive, desirable, and pleasant modes of organization, but central to their very formation – and key starting points for understanding the cultural work that particular archives and communities do.

Unlike the community organizations explicitly opposed to capital that Joseph describes, the OTW tries to protect fans by insisting that its subcultural groupings are constituted in support of capital, that 'there shouldn't be trouble because fans are loyal customers' (OTW, n.d. b). The preservative politics of the AO3 requires legitimation for 'transformative' uses of corporate intellectual property within US law, solidifying the uncertain legal place of fanworks for the sake of their continued accessibility and their makers' legal safety. To this end, the OTW constructs its own and fandom's nonprofit nature as participating in the reproduction of capital even when they might appear to be in opposition or tangential to it. For all its demonization of the for-profit fan archive sites, the OTW is keen to point out how the fanworks they archive will also aid in others' profit; their drive for legal legitimacy rests on this claim.

The OTW's relationship to law and capital is strategic. But what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way. It is vital to look critically at the project for meaning-making that lies explicitly within OTW's liberal legitimation goals, the temporality of 'preservation for the future', and the desire 'to preserve those fannish projects that might otherwise be lost due to lack of time, interest, or resources on the part of the current maintainer' (OTW, n.d. a). The representation of fandom that the archive wills forward to the future can by necessity only open onto some records. As the OTW matures into a public-facing organization that routinely represents fan cultures' interests to journalists and academics, it becomes ever more important to ask who and what will be left behind. Cvetkovich believes that grassroots archives are able to escape the institutional violences of knowledge-delineation that Derrida describes because they challenge 'principles of legal entitlement and viability for research and the need for funding that govern the acquisition process in many traditional archives' (2003: 250). The OTW

proves her wrong in that it is most assuredly a grassroots structure, without the quality controls or large institutional backing of 'traditional archives', but it produces its own sometimes violent modes of ordering all the same.

Undoing the archive: from scholarship to ephemera

The OTW and AO3 are projects that have been spearheaded by fans who are also professional academics. Several of the scholarly works on fandom I cite in this article are written by people who have a powerful interest in the OTW,[6] and one of the OTW's most successful projects in addition to the archive has been its sponsorship of the peer-reviewed journal *Transformative Works and Cultures*. This institutional power makes my application of the language of subculture to fan communities somewhat questionable. Subcultural scholarship in the British Cultural Studies tradition focuses on the 'subordinate and subordinated' status of subculture members (Clarke et al., 2006: 8). Hebdige's influential account of incorporation sees subculture's participation in mainstream capitalist cultures as the negation of this subordinated lifestyle, and the academic analysis and archiving of subcultural life by 'sociologists and interested straights' like himself as 'threaten[ing] to kill with kindness the forms which [they] seek to elucidate', 'regarded by the members of a subculture with just as much indifference and contempt as the hostile labels imposed by the courts and the press' (1979: 139). '[T]o get the point' for Hebdige was 'to miss the point' because to archive a subculture's expression of subordinated class position within the privileged sphere of scholarship was to take the rights to the production of meaning irrevocably away from the anarchic grassroots archive of those who initially created it – producing a cultural politics that, however intellectually radical, was no longer *sub*.

The 'sub' in subculture carries a less rigid meaning in the more recent subcultural scholarship Judith Halberstam described in 2005 as the 'new queer cultural studies'. Halberstam describes scholarly analysis that:

> feeds off of and back into subcultural production. The academic might be the archivist, a coarchivist, a full-fledged participant in the subcultural scene that the scholar writes about. But only rarely does the queer theorist stand wholly apart from the subculture, examining it with an expert's gaze. (2005: 163)

This position – the scholar as archivist whose work contributes to the subcultural community to which she belongs – is the one that most scholarship on subcultural fandom occupies, although among fandom's often comparatively privileged participants, the shared exclusion from dominant cultural norms Halberstam discusses cannot be assumed.[7] And that commonly held position shapes the archives on which scholars are able and willing to draw. When a group as organized and articulate as the OTW exists to advocate for the group in which one is interested, why look elsewhere? It is easy to ignore objections like that of one anonymous fan who remarked in 2010 that they find 'fan studies pretentious and annoying', that they feel 'watched and observed in [their] fannish activities'. They would prefer not to be legitimated into a scholarly archive, not to be a source for articles like this one, perhaps not to be archived at all. What, other than

the wholesale abandonment of fan studies as an intellectual project or the assurance (commonly sought) that permission to study will always be gained, might it mean to take this perspective seriously?

One way to honor fans' discomfort with scholarly archiving might be to look at the ways fan culture's online practices exceed the OTW's archival model. Although fandom is structured by the storage of interpretive and transformative texts, the ways in which networks form around them is neither static nor stable. At the time of the OTW's formation, LiveJournal[8] was the blogging and social networking service adopted by the overwhelming majority of subcultural fans on which the organization drew. Its style of engagement highlighted users' interactions, discussions, and comments rather than archival features, such as the number of times a given story had been read. LiveJournal's durable links to past postings were frequently used to store and share fan production in the manner of an archive, but it did not differentiate structurally between postings of art, fiction, and pictures of the blogger's cat. As the interface of the LiveJournal 'friends list' encouraged constant refreshing, all of the above were likely to move into and through the span of a reader's attention with great speed. Newer sites like Twitter and Tumblr, also loci of much fan activity, are even more centered on the flow of individual posts and images; neither offers much scope for the maintenance of archives. In 'Writing bodies in space' (2006), Coppa draws on these structures to suggest that fans' writings should be understood as a mode of performance rather than as literary practice, that fan culture is better understood through the *acts* of writing than by way of completed texts. Yet archives remain important for the perpetuation of subcultural norms and tropes, differentiating fandom from other quotidian acts of online writing. For Coppa, the fiction and other writings that fandom's servers store are both memorable in themselves and archives of performances. And as acts in the body, performances always exceed what can be stored and shared after the fact. Diana Taylor names the distinction between textual and performative expression in *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), where she argues that the constitution of historical memory as that which can be archived (written, printed) is a colonizing mode that erases the embodied memory practices, the 'repertoire', particular to many subordinated groups. For Taylor, digitized culture is on the side of the archive and leaves the body's repertoires 'poised to disappear in a virtual space that eludes embodiment' (2003: 16). But if we can assume that bodies do not get left behind when we participate in cultural practices online, we can approach the digital with attention to the sensations communicated in ephemeral moments, the affective elements that exceed even the most diligently recorded archive. To the past and future orientations of digital memory and storage, thinking online participation as performance adds a perpetual, constantly vanishing, incompletely archived present.

Queer studies of performance have best theorized the ephemeral and its pleasures. José Muñoz writes:

> Ephemera … is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. It does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues and specks of things… . Ephemera includes traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential politics and urgencies long after those experiences have been lived. (1996: 10)

Residues of digital performances might include blog comments, IM messages, and the cached versions of postings taken down by their producers or rights holders. It is easy to see why a performer might shudder to see such remnants studied and preserved in an archive where they might be displayed to onlookers who could not recreate the originating context. No matter how rooted in cultural communality, the OTW's archive framed as deposit library cannot account for the traces, glimmers, and residues that give subcultural art its meanings and its feelings. Fictions may be the traces of lived experience, but, when deposited in the archive, they will be framed as art – the 'thing itself' – with the politics and urgencies of the performance it once embodied slipping out of memory. This is not to say that AO3 ought to pursue a structure somehow more akin to LiveJournal; only to highlight the limitations of the model so far chosen.

In recent years, much fan fiction and debate has been posted anonymously, without the connections to personal archives that well-established pseudonyms contain, on 'anon memes' where fans disengage from the persistent pseudonyms whose legitimacy Coppa so eloquently defended to Google. The memes persist, generally on LiveJournal, despite or perhaps because of the difficulty of keeping up if one is not paying attention to the flow of comments. Some will find their way to an archive, even AO3, and others will be truly ephemeral: archived only in feelings, by the impressions they leave behind. Fast-flowing, non-archived spaces of anonymous online performance are far from unique to fandom, of course. The most influential is surely 4chan, where users mark their connection to the site's cultural norms by shared language that is intensely misogynistic, homophobic, and racist. Yet 4chan is also associated with the crowdsourced political activities of Anonymous, from campaigns against Scientology to support for anti-government movements in Egypt and Libya.[9] Fannish ephemera are less obviously political – more gossip than incitement. Yet the ease with which 4chan-like internet anonymity can swarm into political force suggests that no online formation should be written off as irrelevant for its apparent lack of legitimacy.

Within the ephemeral interface styles of LiveJournal and similar sites, fans have unofficial subcultural archives to document traces – if always incompletely – without the non-profit structure or politics of posterity the OTW adopts. The most venerable is Fandom Wank, established in 2002 as a group blog, message board, and wiki for the purpose of mocking '[s]elf-aggrandizing posturing. Fannish absurdities. Circular ego-stroking. Endless flamewars' and '[p]seudointellectual definitions' (Fandom Wank n.d. a). In addition to its denotation as slang for masturbation, wank in fannish context signifies online drama, arguments, and deeply silly conflicts that get out of control and erupt into flamewars. Fandom Wank's archives demonstrate what the OTW's legitimating discourse of 'community' leaves out – though if there is such a thing as a universal feature common to all communities, wank (and its attendant mockery) is probably it. The particular wank that fannish ephemera enables includes sexualized exchange of explicit fiction among women that sometimes not only resembles but also constitutes a kind of sexual contact based in fantasy.[10] Fannish wank also contains conflicts around gender, race, and sexual politics which demand political responsibility be taken in fandom's assortment of discursive pleasure-oriented spheres (TWC Editor, 2009). Participants in online fandom's discussions of social justice often prefer not to trivialize their debate by using the term 'wank', but I suggest that even the silliest interactions, in their traffic through archives and subcultures, might signify the transformative work that digital ephemera can do.

Fandom Wank is a storehouse of unfortunate ephemeral interactions, collected haphazardly with less than good-natured intentions. Yet it too facilitates long-term preservation of fan-cultural practices, aggregating histories through an endless succession of in-jokes and links. Saving hosted screenshots of deleted or password-protected posts, this anarchic archive aims to press back the forces of data decay. It preserves acts and projects that are abandoned and regretted by maintainers, often against their will, refusing the illusion of autonomy that the privatizing and deleting functions of digital hosting software functions provide – and fully acknowledging that to be archived is often the last thing fans want, while archiving them all the same. Fandom Wank has repeatedly been banned from LiveJournal and other for-profit community sites for its illegitimate archival practices, and it now exists on less than reliable fan-owned servers (Fandom Wank, n.d. b). Fandom Wank functions as an irreverent, oral digital history with multiple unreliable narrators: the inverse of OTW's intensive drive to legitimacy. Its members sift through the traces of fandom's conflicts for their own amusement, and as a byproduct produce an index (if never quite a reliable one) to subcultural histories.

Fandom Wank has been active for almost a decade, but posts are less frequent than they used to be. Much of the wank, sexual and dramatic, that takes place in fandom is never archived at all, or saved only on the computers of those who peruse it. Even if it were intensely successful, though, I would not hold up Fandom Wank as an ideal archive any more than I would demonize the OTW for their liberal politics. Both meanings of wank – sexuality and conflict – are in fact welcomed into OTW's archive under its claim to 'value infinite diversity in infinite combinations … while seeking to avoid the homogenization or centralization of fandom' (OTW, n.d. b). The OTW's steadfast refusal to disavow fandom's most embarrassing subcultural activities is admirable – but its status as subcultural fandom's acceptable face mean that it cannot afford to learn too much from the pleasures and politics of what fandom calls wank.

Conclusion: transformative works

> [W]e will always wonder … what every 'careful concealer' may have wanted to keep secret. (Derrida, 1996: 101)

Derrida closes *Archive Fever* with a meditation on what his archival subject, Freud, may have wished to hide from posterity: letters he may have burned. The image of the burned letters offers a concrete form for the image of the *anarchive*, the drive for destruction that twins memory with forgetting throughout *Archive Fever*. '[R]ight on that which permits and conditions archivization, we will never find anything other than that which exposes to destruction', Derrida writes: '[t]he archive always works … against itself' (1996: 12). This doubling of destruction and preservation is also the paradox of digital storage's enduring ephemera. The OTW's positivist visions of permanent storage by necessity overlook the extent to which the 'lack of time and interest of maintainers' they seek to combat may be matters that contain as much meaning for fandom's archives as Freud's burned letters do for Derrida (OTW, n.d. a). The OTW's goal is to preserve what would be lost, but Derrida reminds us that all preservation involves loss, that a complete archive is an impossible concept. Within burned letters,

impossible archives, and unidentifiable, unretrievable web pages exist possibilities that were never realized but might have changed everything. The subcultural past is as malleable as the future, and alternate stories may be hidden by the idea that there can be an archive of 'our' 'own'.

The phrase 'transformative work' evokes such possible alternatives. It suggests infinite prospects of working to transform communities, worlds, or selves: through art or activism or simply through changing ways of living. The OTW's use of the term as a legal noun phrase need not preclude a commitment to the greater forms of transformation it implies as a verb. In embracing nonprofit structures as the best way to enact change and community, and in foregrounding the archive as a site in which transformative works of fan production are preserved, the OTW may overlook some of the ways subcultural fandom is engaged in working transformatively. In a comment on an early OTW discussion post, one fan articulated the material stakes of this distinction, wondering whether the OTW seeks to represent 'the transformation of a few individuals, works, laws, within a general context of conservatism? Or fandom's empowerment of community and diversity expanding to help transform society overall?' (Slashpine, 2007). In the example with which this article began, pseudonymous identities were defended for their generation of legitimate and productive online selves. The Archive of Our Own offers a space from which, perhaps, fans' pseudonyms and creative productions will begin to be recognized beyond the contexts of grassroots marketing or odd internet phenomenon in which they are presently most often framed. But these moves toward conservation and legitimation focus on the comparatively conservative 'transformation of a few'. The easily archivable and comfortably representable are not the only online practices, fannish or nonfannish, that can work transformatively – they are just the easiest ones to fit within prior structures of activism and scholarship.

Slashpine's questions, posed before the real transformations that the OTW brought about in fan and academic culture, remain to be fully answered. They are important not only for this particular subculture but also for anyone concerned with the transformative possibilities in rapidly changing, complex, and conflicted online and offline cultures. Amid digital traces that trouble easy definitions of personal and subcultural individual and collective practices, we can find potential alternative ways to think ownership, identity, power, and community off- as well as online. The appropriate archival software for these transformative ephemeral pleasures is yet to be developed – or imagined. If we want to contemplate the possibility that ephemeral conflict, online sex, and other deviant practices might function to undermine dominant sexual, gendered, racialized, and economic ways of being, both on- and offline, we must pay attention to what subcultural activist archive fevers overlook.

Funding statement

Notes

1   See: http://archiveofourown.org
2   These debates are archived at http://acafanconvo.dreamwidth.org/

3   For more recent discussions of fans' economic practices, see Tushnet (2007: 143); Hellekson (2009), de Kosnik (2009).
4   For a more detailed discussion of intellectual property, law, and common practice in digital culture, see Tushnet (2007), Tehranian (2007), and Lothian (2009).
5   Responses to FanLib are collected and discussed in de Kosnik (2009) and Hellekson (2009).
6   Tushnet and Coppa, for example, were on the first OTW board.
7   I do not have space to discuss this at length, but it is important to note that both in terms of personal identity and of activist commitment, the intersections between fandom and radical queer and trans communities, antiracist activism, and other politicized contexts are significant – but they are certainly not subcultural fandom's dominant modes.
8   See: http://livejournal.com
9   For fascinating discussions of the power of 4chan and online anonymous culture, see Luke Simcoe's (2010) blog entry about his work in progress.
10   For further discussion of this, see Lothian et al. (2007).

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