The twentieth anniversary edition of Henry Jenkins’s *Textual Poachers* brings this now-canonical text to a new generation of students interested in the intersections of fandom, participatory culture, popular consumption and media theory. This reissue of what’s become a classic work includes an interview between Jenkins and Suzanne Scott and a supplemental teaching and study guide by Louisa Stein, which encourages students to consider fan cultures in relation to consumer capitalism, genre, gender, sexuality, interpretation and more.

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Most fans can recount with perfect clarity the first time they watched *Star Wars*, or picked up their first comic book, or wrote their first piece of fan fiction. Likewise, you would be hard pressed to find a contemporary scholar of fan culture who couldn’t tell you with fannish precision when they first encountered Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. I was introduced to *Textual Poachers* in a television studies class at NYU in 1998, and immediately recognized myself in its pages. In the few short years since *Textual Poachers* had been published it seemed that, somewhat paradoxically, everything and nothing had changed. I was sharing my *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fanfic via email listserv and teaching myself HTML to construct fansites rather than fanzines, but the culture described by Henry, fandom’s textual motivators and analytical and creative pleasures, remained the same despite their new virtual context. As a budding media scholar, *Textual Poachers* provided me with a rich critical language to deploy, and a nascent field of study to help shape. It supplied my generation of fan scholars with a methodology that embraced our hybrid scholarly identities, and our ties to the texts and communities we study. *Textual Poachers* is a textual touchstone that we continue to coalesce around, and Henry has embodied the collaborative ethos of fan culture to help cultivate a robust and diverse community of fan scholars over the past two decades.

Along with the 1992 publications of Camille Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, the anthology *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* edited by Lisa Lewis, and Constance Penley’s *Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture*, *Textual Poachers* is widely recognized as a seminal work on media fans. In retrospect, it seems far more appropriate to identify *Textual Poachers* as a transformative work, much like the transformative fan texts at the center of Jenkins’ study. Challenging dominant
understandings of media fans, *Textual Poachers* was a transformative text for the field of audience studies, but for scholars like myself, reading Jenkins’ work also constituted a transformative professional moment. Media fans are attracted to properties that reward re-reading and offer an abundance of textual resources to inspire their own production, and likewise scholars return again and again to *Textual Poachers* because it is such a rich canonical text to poach, and has afforded us generous margins to scribble in.

It has been an honor and a pleasure to reflect on *Textual Poachers* for its twentieth anniversary. Though much of the discussion below focuses on the technological, cultural, and industrial changes since the book’s initial publication, the ideas presented in *Textual Poachers* will undoubtedly continue to inspire and inform fan studies, and popular understandings of fan culture, for generations to come.

Suzanne Scott, February 2012

SS: You spend a portion of *Textual Poachers’* introduction detailing (and, to some extent, defending) your self-identification as a fan, and the role that played in developing a more participatory ethnographic study of fan culture. Now, it’s common practice for fan scholars to disclose their investment in the texts and interpretive communities they study, and in many cases those communal ties are considered essential to their research. Though the term “aca-fan” never appears in *Textual Poachers*, it has since been adopted as a portmanteau to describe the hybrid scholarly identity and methodological approach that you were adapting from Cultural Studies.

HJ: Despite my efforts to articulate what it means to be both a fan and an academic, “aca-fan” does not appear in *Textual Poachers*. I have been “credited“ (or “blamed,” depending on your perspective) with coining the term. Unfortunately, I don’t remember when or how this occurred. Like many rich concepts, the term took shape over time, refined through conversations with students, colleagues, and fans.

Bacon-Smith (1992) may have been the most immersed of all of the pioneers of fan studies within the fan community, yet for methodological and temperamental reasons, she presented herself as “The Ethnographer“ who observes but participates only through
formal experiments to see how the community practices work. Like a character in a Conrad novel, her Ethnographer seeks to find the “heart” of the fandom as the village elders slowly open up their secrets to her. Many fans balked at such exoticizing language as off-putting and embraced those of us who were more willing to signal the kinds of affiliation expressed by the aca-fan concept.

Academics were studying fans and fandom before fan studies. There was a small but significant body of pre-existing scholarship that pathologized fannish enthusiasms and participations. Often, fans were depicted as inarticulate, incapable of explaining their motives or actions. This claim of inarticulateness was typically coupled with the scholar’s refusal to engage with the community (and thus a rejection of the value of ethnographic methods). Instead, there was a focus on textual or ideological analysis of cult television, often framed around episodes not significant and often despised within fan canons (so Star Trek was explained through “Spock’s Brain” and “Who Mourns for Adonis?” I kid you not!) For the most part, the researchers were not implicated in their own analysis and were not accountable to a fan community. And so, the book’s introduction was reactive to that tradition of distanced observation.

The autobiographical turn had long been part of the cultural studies tradition. Take a look, for example, at how Raymond Williams (1989) mobilizes his personal experiences as a scholarship student at elite British schools and his working class childhood in Culture is Ordinary. Think about what he says about his youthful embrace of libraries and museums as opposed to the way he got treated at tea shops. Think about how his anger towards everyday experiences of class bias shaped his theories and how it forced him to question the assumptions made by his instructors and to develop new theories of working class experience in England. Or think about how Angela McRobbie (1990) confronted the Birmingham boys club working on subcultures, for not owning up to their own stakes in the groups they studied. McRobbie asserted the importance of her own knowledge as a woman about what took place in adolescent girls’ bedrooms rather than in the streets.

And of course, the Birmingham tradition was only one place we could find examples of the subjective turn in cultural analysis. “Writing from a standpoint“ was a feminist issue, as the
philosopher Linda Alcoff (1992) suggested, and Jane Tompkins (1987) was asserting the right to tap the language of affect and fantasy, to write in first person, arguing that what she knew about literary texts was being excluded from male-dominated critical practices and institutions. Within anthropology, Renato Rosaldo’s book, *Culture and Truth* (1993), was asserting a potential link between academic distance and the colonialist project of earlier anthropologists. The only way forward, he argued, was for ethnographers to describe their own subjective experiences and to be more accountable to the communities they studied.

For me, perhaps the most important influence, though, was the emergence of queer studies as a theoretical paradigm, especially scholars making decisions about whether or not to come out of the closet in their professional lives. My office at MIT was across the hall from David Halperin, who acted as my mentor on the emerging literature in Gay and Lesbian Studies, and who, in turn, incorporated some of my insights about slash into his own presentations. He modeled for me how scholars could acknowledge their desires and fantasies through their work, while maintaining academic rigor and theoretical sophistication. In media studies, I was also inspired by the work of Alex Doty (1993), Erica Rand (1995), Robin Woods (2006), Richard Dyer (2003), and others, who were insisting on the value of “making things perfectly queer” (as Doty’s book title suggests). Queer scholars felt that there was an ethical obligation to be honest about how you knew what you knew and what motivated your work. And for me, this commitment spilled over into how I wrote about fandom.

*I think the links to feminist and queer theory you draw above are essential, because fan studies remains deeply indebted to both fields. Louisa Stein, Julie Levin Russo, and others have argued that aca-fandom is a fundamentally feminist project, regardless of the scholar’s gender (Stein, 2011). You recently hosted a series on your blog to debate the continued use of the term “aca-fan” after some (notably, mostly male) scholars argued that the term doesn’t reflect the growing interdisciplinarity of contemporary fan studies. Revisiting the introduction to Textual Poachers, I wonder if issues with the term also stem from its lingering feminine/affective, rather than feminist, connotations. One thing that hasn’t changed dramatically since Textual Poachers’ release is the devaluation of “feminized” mass culture. The cultural hierarchies and
dominant tastes you documented in Textual Poachers now to some extent structure contemporary fan studies, often along gendered textual lines (e.g. “quality” cult television series like Battlestar Galactica or Lost are suitable properties to express a personal fannish investment in, whereas a scholar writing on the pleasures of Twilight might experience resistance or outright dismissal).

Yes, aca-fandom has from the start been a feminist project. McRobbie’s (1990) emphasis on the “active” and “creative” culture of “teenybopers” helped to establish a project which would result in efforts by mostly female scholars to validate other distinctively feminine forms of cultural consumption, such as those around “reading the romance” or “watching soap operas,” which, in turn, paved the way for a shift from generalized audiences (represented under Stuart Hall’s “encoding/decoding” model) to gendered audiences to fan communities (which were, as in Textual Poachers, defined initially around female experiences and pleasures). Even before fan studies existed as an academic field, a feminist writer like Joanna Russ (1985) would proudly proclaim slash as “pornography by and for women.” And, as I suggested above, I think the desire to proclaim our subjectivity as aca-fans went right along with that feminist project. These feminist commitments are very much visible in more recent work by female scholars working in fan studies, such as Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse’s influential anthology on fan fiction online (2006).

As a male writer, I felt it all the more important to state my own affective investments in my object of study, as well as to signal, as I do in the introduction, the ways that I did not fit easily or comfortably into the community I was investigating. On this point, I find myself much more solidly aligned with the tradition of female aca-fan than with many male scholars working in this space. I certainly welcomed the expansion of fan studies to include a focus on activities more closely associated with male fans, but in many ways, I wish they were studied with a more specific investigation of “masculine pleasures” in popular culture and to explore how fan subjectivities may construct particular kinds of masculinities around mastery and expertise or struggle with the “taint” of “effeminacy” that still surrounds some aspects of geek culture. There are certainly male scholars who have written in very open terms about their own fantasies and desires—among them, Will Brooker (2001), Scott Bukatman (2003), and Alex Doty (2002)—but several of them
(Brooker especially) have also taken some major steps back from this kind of work, expressing increased discomfort over the autobiographical dimensions of aca-fan writing. Others, such as Cornel Sandvoss (2005), Matt Hills (2002), and Larry Grossberg (1992), have been very eager to construct abstract theories of “affect” to explain the “psychology” of fandom, but often adopt more objective, analytic voices through their own writing.

I personally do not think we can study popular culture in any form, let alone something like fan culture, from the outside looking in. There are questions we can only answer by examining our own emotional experiences with forms of culture that matter to us. This was a central theme of *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture* (Jenkins, McPherson, and Shattuc, 2003) and *The Wow Climax* (Jenkins, 2006a), two of my other book projects.

I like your point that certain genres lend themselves more fully to aca-fan appreciation because they fit within the habitus of the academic world better than others: it took real courage for the early feminist scholars to proclaim their investments in soap operas, for example, when those texts were still disreputable. The masculine equivalent may be the work of aca-fan scholars on pornography or wrestling, both of which link them to forms of patriarchal pleasures that are hard to own in progressive academic circles, and, in the case of wrestling, also come with lower class taste associations, which do not fit easily into the wine-and-cheese circuit. I wonder if this is why so much of the writing on reality television, say, has been harshly critical, even though I know so many academics who take great pleasure in watching such series.

*I think that part of the value of the term “aca-fan” (or perhaps the value of continued debates around its use) is that it provokes self-reflexive scholarship that confronts these questions of taste and scholarly identity. Keeping the tensions between these two halves in mind, you suggest above that studying fandom or popular culture from the outside looking in is problematic. Contemporary online fan communities are markedly more visible and accessible than the fans featured in *Textual Poachers*, but they’re also diverse and decentralized, and the power dynamics between researcher and community are increasingly complex. In your view, how important is it for contemporary fan scholars to maintain a high degree of*
accountability to the communities they study, and is active participation in those (virtual) communities still essential?

There are at least three things at stake in the use of the aca-fan concept: the acknowledgement of our own personal stakes in the forms of popular culture we study, the accountability of the ethnographer to the communities we study, and the sense of membership or affiliation with the populations at the heart of our research. To me, all of these remain important.

The first issue, subjectivity, surfaces as often now in works of criticism as in works of ethnography, and we might want to broaden it to include acknowledging one’s own stakes in the texts under review. When Jason Mittell (2010) published on his blog an essay on why he hated *Mad Men*, I would still have seen it as falling in the aca-fan tradition, because he was openly drawing on his own emotional investments as a source of knowledge and insight. I’ve often told the story about my early grad school instructor who said “we should always write about texts we hate because that’s the only way to get sufficient intellectual distance.” Well, hate is not “intellectual distance,” and Mittell is explicit about examining where his dislike and distaste comes from.

It is certainly true, as you note, that many contemporary fan scholars have complex and long-term relations with the fandoms they study, but ideally, they still test their ideas with the larger community before publishing them. For me, this goes beyond the legalistic obligations imposed by Human Subjects Committees, which still operate on the assumption that we are studying a form of stigmatized activity rather than one where participants are often proud to be identified as writers, critics, artists, and media-makers. Aca-fans recognize that what we put into print matters, that academic claims carry cultural weight and can have consequences for those depicted in our accounts; we need to assess the impact of those claims before putting them out into the world. Certainly, through digital networks, fans have a greater capacity to respond publicly to academic and journalistic representations, fans may publish their own theories of their practices (so-called “meta”), but that does not remove our ethical obligations to write in conversation with the communities we are studying.

I also think we also should write with a recognition that fandom has its own traditions, values, and norms which have emerged
through collective decisions and actions. When my mentor, John Fiske (1992), said he was a “fan”, he meant simply that he liked a particular program, but when I said I was a fan, I was claiming membership in a particular subculture. Meaning-making in Fiske was often individualized, whereas in my work, meaning-making is often deeply social. There continues to be a core distinction (and sometimes a heated debate) between those of us who write within and about fandom (as a larger network of affiliations and practices) and those who write about individual fans and their personal meaning-making.

The word “fan,” in popular usage, is slippery and expansive enough to include a broad range of different kinds of relationships to media, from the highly individualistic to the highly social. I started out to write a book about fans (as a general category). But, the more I engaged with fandom, the more I realized that I was writing a book about a particular kind of fandom (as I state in the book’s first paragraph). My description of my own background as a fan floats between highly personalized experiences and discussions of group affiliations, suggesting my own uncertainty about what kind of fan my book was describing.

But, the book was grasping towards an account of the social dimensions of fandom (which I describe in terms of the “weekend-only world” concept in the conclusion). I lacked some of the language around social networks and collective intelligence that would emerge as these kinds of informal, geographically dispersed communities of interest have gained greater visibility over the past twenty years.

These tensions within fan studies between individualized and social accounts are reflections of our individual experiences as well as of our theoretical preferences (psychology as opposed to cultural studies, sociology as opposed to anthropology); they reflect how each scholar is situated in relation to the object of their study. I certainly do not want people to “join” fandom simply to study it; there’s a much more fluid notion of affiliation involved here in any case. But, I do think that being transparent about one’s positionality, and choosing a granularity of analysis appropriate to your actual knowledge and experience, are key choices someone must make as they enter fan studies.

*Like many first wave fan studies, Textual Poachers spoke back to dominant representations of fans as “brainless consumers”*
Fans have moved from the margins to the mainstream within convergence culture and, echoing this shift, we’ve seen a proliferation of fan and geek characters within popular culture. Many of these representations still trade in stereotypes, suggesting that fans “get a life” (e.g. The 40 Year Old Virgin, The Big Bang Theory), and the etymological ties between “fandom” and “fanaticism” continue to be reinforced by the popular press (e.g. coverage of Twilight fangirls), but there are notable exceptions. Do you think the trend towards recasting fanboys as superheroes (Heroes, Kick-Ass) or action heroes (Chuck, Ready Player One) has dulled the dominant representation of fans as feminized through their ties to mass culture? Has hegemonic masculinity shifted to tentatively incorporate the fanboy, as a character archetype as well as a consumer identity?

Suzanne, you’ve spent more time looking at this question than I have, but I was struck rereading Chapter 1 by how much these contemporary representations continue to play around with the same themes as earlier fan stereotypes rather than offering us an alternative conception of what it might mean to be a fan. So, in The 40 Year Old Virgin, a key step into heterosexual normality comes when the protagonist sells his action figure collection; we can see Virgin as a prototype for a whole cycle of comedies which celebrate “arrested development” as a masculine virtue/privilege, but the more manly the characters are, the more likely their interests are in sports or rock, rather than in science fiction and comics. Fan boys have been, by and large, better served by literary representations by authors such as Nick Hornby (1996), Michael Chabon (2000), Jonathem Letham (2004), or Junot Diaz (2008), than in media depictions.

The Big Bang Theory is a much more complex text than the “get a life” sketch for a number of reasons, but it starts with the same core clichés: Leonard has been given a love life, but despite a sort of romantic entanglement with Amy Farrah Fowler, Sheldon is still depicted as asexual; Howard still lives in his mother’s basement, even as he is engaged to be married; there are running jokes which queer the relations between Howard and Rajesh (not that there’s anything wrong with it); we have had episodes which hinged on the value of Leonard Nimoy’s autograph and the boy’s collecting impulses are sometimes depicted as bordering on the irrational.
At the same time, though, we are encouraged to see the world from
the fan characters’ perspectives, we value their friendship and intel-
lectual mastery, and over multiple seasons, they have become more
complex than the stereotypes upon which they were based. Most
significantly, the show insures that it gets its geek references right,
anticipating that the show is being watched by people who will
know what “frak” and “grok” mean, who have opinions about the
comics or video games the characters are buying, who might actu-
ally play “rock, paper, scissors, lizard, Spock,” and who will appre-
ciate cameo appearances by Wil Wheaton, Brent Spiner, Katee
Sackoff, and Summer Glau.

What’s striking, though, is that even though Big Bang has added
female characters in recent seasons, the women remain largely
outside the fannish circle: it’s almost a crisis anytime women ven-
ture into the comic shop; Bernadette and Amy are both female
scientists, but they do not show much interest in science fiction.
Big Bang shows some sympathy to fan boys, but doesn’t share the
love with fan girls.

I have spent less time looking at Chuck, so I can’t really com-
ment there, but it seems to me that Kick-Ass and Super, among
the new action films, still pathologize their fan characters (seeing
them as acting out unfulfilled fantasies or turning personal frustra-
tions into violent rage), even if they have become the protagonists
rather than the antagonists (as in, say, King of Comedy or
Unbreakable). I tend to like these newer representations better
because they often address us as “fans” but we still lack alterna-
tive forms of fan identities in popular culture that might reflect
several decades of academic research on fans and fandom.

The exception may be in nonfiction. More and more journalists
are themselves fans and thus openly display fan expertise and
engagement. Commercial blogs, such as io9, Blastr, and the Los
Angeles Times’ Hero Complex, take fans seriously as a demo-
graphic, and San Diego Comic-Con gets cover stories in
Entertainment Weekly, which often assume a fan rather than
“mundane” reader. Documentaries like The People vs. George
Lucas have taken the side of the fan over the producer (though
here, again, with a strong gender bias; the history of female fan
complaints about Star Wars gets little to no attention). And, as
you’ve suggested, more and more show runners and filmmakers
have used their blogs, podcasts, and director’s commentary to
construct a “fan boy auteur” identity, to help authenticate their
relationship with a more participatory audience (an option which has so far not been open to female showrunners) (Scott, 2012). This is where the mainstreaming of fan culture has taken place (and in turn, this process may make some of the more sympathetic elements in Big Bang, say, more accessible to a general audience).

The Big Bang Theory’s dual address seems to perfectly encapsulate the industry’s conflicted desire to acknowledge fans’ growing cultural influence, while still containing them through sitcom conventions. I agree that the recent influx of fanboy characters reinforce old stereotypes more frequently than they challenge or complicate them, but as you note above the comparative scarcity of fangirl representations—Liz Lemon on 30 Rock aside—suggests that while the industry is beginning to take fanboys seriously as a demographic, fangirls (or women, generally) are still considered a surplus audience. While I’m an avid reader of the Los Angeles Times’ Hero Complex, it’s difficult not to notice the gendered language of their tagline, “for your inner fanboy.”

Some of this, I think, has to do with the particular role of San Diego Comic-Con as the primary point of intersection between Hollywood and the fan community (Jenkins, 2012a). Coming out of comics and science fiction fandom, rather than out of media fandom, Comic-Con has very much been shaped by male-centric fan traditions, norms, and assumptions, and until very recently the attendees were overwhelmingly male. So, when Hollywood went to talk to the fans, or when the news media did its annual fandom story, they mostly encountered men, and this served a particular push right now within the media industry to try to hold onto the young male demographic, which is the “lost audience segment,” because they have been abandoning television for games and other digital media. So, even as fan studies has suggested the centrality of women to fan culture, the media industry clings to somewhat outmoded understandings of what kind of people are fans. Over the past few years, we’ve seen an increase of women coming to Comic-Con (partially in response to Twilight and True Blood, but really, across the board), so there may be some hope that the industry might develop a more diverse understanding of the fan audience. Witness a largely sympathetic account of female “shippers” in Entertainment Weekly (Jensen, 2012), which included
acknowledgement by industry insiders of their increasing significance in shaping the reception of especially procedural programs like *Castle* and *Bones*. Because of its location in San Diego, Comic-Con is more racially and ethnically diverse than most other fan gatherings. As a consequence, it is becoming a key site for minority fans to organize and call out the industry for its often stereotyped representations of people of color.

Another factor that may change this pattern has to do with the growing number of cult television shows produced by women—in many cases, they are produced by husband and wife teams, but there are also a number of female show runners who inherit series from male mentors (such as the relationship between Joss Whedon/Ron Moore and Jane Espensen). It says something positive about the so-called “fan boy auteurs” that so many of them have invested in helping women break into the industry. You can argue that the industry’s address to male fans reflect the male producer’s intuitive understanding of what fans want to see and thus diversifying who produces media can help diversify the kinds of media produced. Of course, it remains to be seen if these women will have the same freedom to proclaim the fan investments their male counterparts now take for granted or whether they are still under a lot of pressure to demonstrate their professionalism and are not “simply fan girls.”

The growing number of “fangirl auteurs” is heartening, and while we can partially credit male mentors within the industry, this shift is also being demanded (and in some cases directly funded) by fans, such as the recent Womanthology kickstarter campaign to support female comic book creators. The frustrations that underpin your discussion of female fans in *Textual Poachers* have most actively lingered within comic book fandom, evidenced by recent critiques of DC Comics’ rebooted “New 52” lineup, which featured a paltry number of female creators and some deeply problematic representations of female superheroes. While these moments of resistance by female fans deserve our continued attention, is there some danger of these examples obscuring other, perhaps more affirmational or ambivalent, modes of fan engagement and critique?

The comics industry’s refusal to deal in a meaningful way with its female fans is putting it on a fast track to extinction. There is a real
gap between the sales of graphic novels and manga (through bookstores), where women constitute a significant core of their readership, and of comics through speciality shops, which still are, to a large degree, hostile to the presence of female customers. Even if the relaunch and rebranding efforts at DC and Marvel have led to modest boosts in sales figures in 2011, the long-term pattern is a steady decline in the sales of “mainstream” superhero titles. In this context, it is hard to justify decisions that seem calculated to further alienate female consumers, even if they appeal to the most conservative and patriarchal elements of your hard-core readership. After all, if you are going to rock the boat by reinventing so many of the characters anyway and face a major fan boy pushback, why not go all the way, embrace diversity, expand your appeal, and bring in new artists and writers with radically different sensibilities. If you are going to go for broke, why not go down fighting for something beside the right to dress your female superheroes in the skimpiest costume possible. As it is, DC managed to have backlash from both male and female fans around the same decisions. The female fans were ready for such a fight because groups like The Sequential Tarts have long been making the case for comic book publishers to court female consumers as a way of broadening their base of support. Certainly, the success of Vertigo has stemmed in large part from these efforts to include women’s tastes and interests in the development of their properties. Contrary to what you suggest above, I would argue that the study of direct or explicit forms of fan activism, conducted as consumers and citizens, has historically taken a back seat to the study of cultural forms, such as resistant reading or fan writing, which may have made it easier for other academics to dismiss the politics of fandom.

Even as we continue to explore female-centered fandom as a site of resistance to the mainstream media, I am also happy to see more and more attention paid to masculine forms of fan culture. On the one hand, the initial focus on women as fans resulted in some hasty and easy generalizations about the ways that fan reading practices were tied exclusively to marginalized perspectives, whereas there is much we still need to understand about ways that fandom may operate in relations to patriarchy and heteronormativity. On the other hand, we need to avoid easy readings of male-centered fandoms which see them as simply celebratory rather than recognizing the kinds of transgression and transformation
that occur within alternative forms of cultural production—say, the material culture Bob Rehak (forthcoming) has documented in some recent works—or the social dimensions of collective knowledge building efforts, such as Jason Mittell’s work on Lostpedia (2009). A more robust account of masculine fan cultures may also help us to place what we have learned about female-centered fan culture in a more meaningful context—moving beyond gender essentialism and understanding our gender norms as mutually re-enforcing in ways that make it difficult to escape their influence even for groups, such as fandom, which see themselves as on the fringes of mainstream culture.

Keeping this diversity of fannish reading practices in mind, “textual poaching,” a term you adapted from Michel de Certeau (1984), still aptly describes the way that many fans approach media texts, mining them for elements that are personally pleasurable or useful and then reconstructing new texts from those poached materials. Your description of fans as poachers rested, in part, on fans’ lack of access to the means of commercial cultural production and their limited resources with which to influence the media industry (page 26). Do you think fans’ increased access to technologies that allow them to produce and disseminate their own texts requires us to rethink the term? Or, does “textual poaching” continue to capture the relationship between industrial strategies and fannish tactics?

Many readers seem to want to approach Textual Poachers as if it were an account of contemporary media fandom, as true today as it was twenty years ago. But, of course, that’s not possible. Fandom is a highly dynamic and innovative space; the media environment has changed radically over that time; and my own thinking (as well as the theoretical models available to me) has shifted significantly. It is much better to read the book as a time capsule which captures a particular moment of transition within fandom—the beginnings of the end of the era of print zines, the beginnings of the era of digital networks (suggested only in the margins here). That there is anything which still rings true about fandom today suggests the strong continuity of traditions and norms within a community that has otherwise enjoy rapid turnover of participants and creative and technological churn.
The poaching metaphor has been mined heavily by many different scholars since the book appeared. I certainly have not repudiated the concept but it is a term I use less and less often. Textual Poaching emerged from the debates in cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s around “resistance.” As such, it provided a mechanism for explaining fandom which made sense within then current debates, but resistance has always been a somewhat odd point of entry into studying fans. After all, fans also act out of a strong attraction to the content, even if they read it in terms which are not fully authorized by the media producers. I talk about a tension between fascination and frustration, suggesting that fans are involved in a process of negotiation with the rights holders, seeking to influence the text where they may (a concept I explored more fully in my discussion of the Gaylaxians in Science Fiction Audiences, Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995), but also claiming the right to retell the stories in their own terms. Poaching, to me, captured that process of negotiating over the meaning of the text, and the terms of their relations with producers. Appropriation involves both adopting elements from the existing text and adapting them to alternative pleasures and meanings. But because of the rhetoric of resistance, some of poaching’s nuances got lost.

I find the term “participatory culture” useful for describing a far more complex set of relations between producers and consumers. The term came late in the process of writing Textual Poachers and is probably underdeveloped there compared to the significance it has assumed in my subsequent work. I used it initially to set off fans as participants from more traditional ideas about spectatorship. But, as we’ve entered deeply into an era of networked computing, it has become clearer that fans are only one example of the broader phenomenon of participatory culture—one can argue, as I do in Convergence Culture (Jenkins, 2006b), that the key debates of our times will be over who gets to define the terms of our participation and we are seeing a rapid proliferation of diverse forms of cultural participation, as more groups assert control over the processes of cultural production and circulation (Jenkins et al., 2012). In some ways, Textual Poachers, Convergence Culture, and my most recent project, Spreadable Media, form an informal “trilogy” centered around the concept of participatory culture, with the most recent book representing a shift from my initial focus on reception and production towards a consideration of grassroots circulation within a networked culture. Each captures a
snapshot of a decades-long transition towards a more participatory model of how culture operates.

As historians have turned their attention to fandom, we are starting to have a much fuller account of how a particular concept of cultural participation emerged as folk culture traditions met the institutions of mass culture, going back at least to the amateur press movement in the mid-nineteenth century (Petrik, 1992) (or earlier, if we read Robert Darnton’s account (2009) of the intense affective ties between Rousseau and his readers or Vera Keller’s account (2011) of “lovers” and “amateurs” in early modern Europe), moving through the amateur radio movement (Douglas, 1989), the early science fiction fan world (Ross, 1991), various postwar forms of DIY culture more generally, underground newspapers and comics, the Indie Media Movement, and more recently, various forms of online communities. This long history of struggles to insure popular access to the means of cultural production and circulation can be described as the push towards participatory culture.

We would want to distinguish between participatory culture (a broad movement which takes many different forms across history), fandom (a specific kind of participatory culture with its own history and traditions), and Web 2.0 (a business model which seeks to capitalize and commodify participatory culture). Maintaining these distinctions allows us to use fandom as a base for critiquing many of the policies of Web 2.0 companies that seek to capitalize on free labor or commodify the gifts fans share. Fans have been among the most articulate critics of web 2.0 because they have such a long-standing and well-defined understanding of participatory culture.

Focusing on participatory culture as a concept allows us to acknowledge the complex interactions between fans and producers, especially as media industries have had to embrace more participatory strategies in order to court and maintain relations with their fans at a time when a logic of “engagement” shapes many of their policies and promotions. A focus on participation shifts what questions we ask. We are resistant towards something and we participate in something. So, the first asks us what we are fighting against. The second asks us what we are fighting for and thus asks us to develop a more nuanced description of the social, legal, and economic relationships within which media consumption now occurs. It also asks us who is participating (and who is excluded
from participation) and what factors limit or enable participation (whether legal constraints around intellectual property, economic constraints over media ownership, technological constraints around media access, educational constraints in terms of access to the skills and competencies required to participate, even constraints over who has disposable time to put towards their hobbies and interests).

The parameters of participation you address above are a point of concern for many contemporary fan scholars. Convergence Culture (Jenkins, 2006b) and Spreadable Media (Jenkins et al., 2012) actively build on Textual Poachers’ engagement with the tensions between cultural producers and consumers, addressing how these shifting parameters of participation are negotiated and navigated by media industries and audiences alike. Though fans are no longer operating wholly “from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness“ (Textual Poachers, page 26) within convergence culture and, as your participatory culture “trilogy” suggests, we are moving towards a more reciprocal relationship, do we still need to be mindful of top-down attempts to contain or co-opt fan practices?

We have to move this away from the all-or-nothing logic that says, either digital media changed everything about the relations between media producers and consumers, or it changed nothing. The reality is that the “digital revolution” has resulted in real, demonstrable, shifts in media power, expanding the capacity of various subcultures and communities to access the means of media production and circulation. Every day, we see new evidence that the public is learning to use that power in support of democratic politics and cultural diversity. Fans were an early part of that process, tackling perhaps some of the most complex challenges—how do we create a popular culture that accepts, even embraces, broader forms of participation, and how do we use its resources and practices to insure greater diversity in what ideas get expressed and exchanged.

That said, we have certainly not dethroned the power of major media conglomerates, who have increased their dominance over mainstream media channels, during this same period of time. The creative industries have become more nuanced in the ways they
seek to incorporate us into their various business plans and to exploit the creative energies of a more participatory culture. I kept hearing people say that the control over mass media production was narrowing to a handful of companies (right) and others would say that the digital world was lowering the role of gatekeepers in preventing ordinary people from producing and sharing media with each other (also right). Convergence Culture (2006b) explores the relationship between these two seemingly contradictory trends.

Textual Poachers assumes a world where there are relatively clear lines between media producers and consumers and where poaching from mass media content is the only way that the public can interject itself into the culture. Michel De Certeau (1984) believed that readers left few if any visible and tangible traces of their acts of “poaching,” whereas I was arguing that fan culture generated texts that could be shared and exchanged and created a social infrastructure that supported such exchanges. The web’s robust system of circulation increased the speed and scale at which fan production operated, and thus, expanded the influence of fan “poaching” on the larger culture.

Your work on transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006b), or narratives that unfold across multiple media platforms, poses an interesting framework to consider how the industry has adapted to (or adopted) fan poaching. Transmedia stories encourage fans’ “nomadic” tendencies, relying on audiences to be “hunters and gatherers” of narrative information, but they also frequently poach a primary text as a fan might, playing in the gaps and margins, exploring ambiguities and minor character backstories through narrative extensions. Occasionally, transmedia extensions are even used to queer characters (though these “slash” representations frequently remain unacknowledged by the primary text). Do you think transmedia storytelling, and the modes of fannish textual engagement it endorses, functions as a form of industrially sanctioned poaching?

First, to really talk meaningfully about transmedia entertainment, we need to introduce a concept that does not appear in Textual Poachers—collective intelligence. You get some sense of the collective interpretation and evaluation of texts in my chapter on
Beauty and the Beast but we have a much more robust conceptual framework now for thinking about fandom as a site of collective knowledge production. Fan communities were among the first to experiment with ways they could pool knowledge, build on each other’s expertise, and trade insights within networked communities.

As fans view media socially, they demand much greater complexity, they want more difficult problems to work through and more pieces of information to explore. You catch a glimpse of this tendency in Poacher’s passing reference to the problem-solving activities of online Twin Peaks fans. Transmedia entertainment feeds this demand. These new kinds of stories factor in modes of reception characteristic of fandom (and seek to inflect them in ways that are profitable to media industries); they also reflect the perspectives of people who have entered the media industries from fan backgrounds and seek to design forms of entertainment they would like to consume. It would be interesting to take the different ways of rewriting television through fan fiction in Poachers and map it onto today’s strategies for transmedia extension: there will be considerable overlap, but also some notable gaps in what kinds of stories the commercial media is willing to offer. Catherine Tosenberger (2007) has suggested that what is powerful about fan fiction is that it is “unpublishable.” That is, it is not bound by the constraints that shape commercial media production. But, the bounds between what is and is not publishable are constantly shifting.

One consequence of this reappraisal of fan engagement has been much greater tolerance for the forms of fan production this book describes—we are seeing far fewer cease and desist letters as media companies have come to value networked audiences. Companies may not like the fact that some fans write homoerotica about their characters, but they are far less likely now to try to shut these communities down. Another consequence is that they have sought to anticipate and build in the kinds of back story they know will motivate fan participation. What might once have seemed to be radical appropriations are now fed by playful subtexts and winking references within the programs themselves.

As you and others have noted, transmedia practices and other corporate attempts to court fan interest mean that some kinds of fan reading are more supported and others are more marginalized, either by design or in practice. Arguably, feminine fan pleasures
are more mainstream than when I wrote the book, but they are less mainstream than the kinds of information hunting and gathering that has generated male interest around transmedia.

Some of the points above echo Mark Andrejevic’s (2008) claim that fan “poachers” increasingly work the media industry’s fields rather than “despoiling” them.

I’ve learned a lot from Mark Andrejevic’s critique of my work. Here’s what he says: “the consumption of crops is exclusive (or, as economists put it, ‘rivalrous’), the productive consumption of texts is not (because information is a ‘nonrivalrous’). Far from ‘despoiling’ the television texts through their practices, TWoP-ers [fans on Television Without Pity] enrich them—not just for themselves but also for those who benefit economically from the added value produced by the labor of viewers. The ‘poachers’ are helping to work the field for its owners.” This is especially true as Hollywood has adopted a logic of engagement that places a high premium on some of the activities that fans perform in support of their own culture.

But, the owners of those fields do not always welcome and value such contributions, and may see them as a threat to their own creative and economic control (a theme Mark Deuze, 2007, explores in Media Work). The fact that the companies embrace some forms of fan productivity doesn’t mean all fans are equally welcome. The company still seeks to set the terms of our participation and fans are by and large still refusing to play by those rules. The company may exploit fan labor but the fan may also benefit on other levels from both the product and the process of that labor. Andrejevic suggests as much when he indicates that the “workplace” where fans labor may at the same time “be a site of community and personal satisfaction and one of economic exploitation.” Indeed, fan labor may be “exploited” for the profit of the “owners,” at the same time as fans benefit—often in nonmaterial ways—from what they create.

Academics tend to conflate all labor with alienated labor (as described by Marx), but as Richard Sennett (2008) suggests in The Craftsman, there have always been competing regimes of value around labor, including those that stress professionalism or the satisfaction of “a job well done”—that is, affective and social
rather than economic rewards. For fans, there can be enormous satisfaction in creating something and sharing it with a larger community; they may be willing to accept restrictive terms set by a video sharing or social networking site in order to access a platform that allows them to circulate what they created; they may embrace web 2.0 with an awareness of the tradeoffs they are making and may remain critical of the logics of commodification or the loss of privacy which goes along with this choice. Poaching may over-stress the oppositional nature of these relations and ignore forms of fan complicity, but most of the critiques of fan labor make the opposite mistake—assuming the company’s economic interests trump any other benefit from participation.

Comparatively little critical attention has been paid to your discussion of filk (Chapter 8), which is surprising considering it’s one of the more prescient chapters in terms of identifying these tensions surrounding fan labor. Because filk is socially performed at fan conventions and meet-ups, it is difficult for some scholars to access, but another reason might be that chapter’s emphasis on fan culture as folk culture. Why do you think this conception of fan culture hasn’t been as thoroughly explored?

To be honest, I am not sure why more recent fan studies has avoided the concept of “folk culture,” which was very much in the debates around cultural studies when Textual Poachers was written. It continues to inform some of my recent thinking. I am often asked whether all cultures are participatory. Folk cultures, as they historically operated, were highly participatory, with skills and norms passed down informally across generations and with no sharp division between expert and novice. There was always something oppositional about folk cultures. Throughout much of the early modern period, folk culture was defined in opposition to elite culture. The rise of modern mass media created a crisis for folk cultures, especially in the American context. Folk culture practices continued to exist alongside mass media practices, but they increasingly became a niche interest, not central to the way the culture operates. Modern participatory culture has some relationship to traditional folk culture in terms of the principles of informal learning and social reciprocation. Yet, it exists in relation to mass culture in ways that are somewhat different from the relations
of folk culture to elite culture. Perhaps, participatory culture only really makes sense as a description where there is a strong pull towards spectatorship and consumption rather than a general assumption of widespread participation.

Some of my early writing about participatory culture was informed by the writing of Seymour Papert (1975) about the Samba schools, which he described as a site where newcomers and experts could learn side by side and collaborate in producing a collective experience through carnival. The practices around carnival kept folk culture experiences central to many within Brazil even as they were no longer such powerful and public forces in the Global North. So, what is happening as digital media is entering Brazil? Might people take away from their Samba school experiences new ways of participating online? Might this lead to certain kinds of innovative collective practices? Ana Domb (2009), for example, has studied the production and circulation of Technobrega, a form of “cheesy” techno popular in rural Northern Brazil.

You and a few others have written about Wizard Rock (Scott, 2011) as a form that in some way pulls away from the folk logics I described around filk, creating its own star system, and allowing fewer opportunities for collective singing. Things were already moving in that direction as the publishing of tapes by top filk singers was pulling them away from a community of equals and making them into niche stars. They started to customize songs for their own voices. They started selling their product. When Napster was at its peak, it was a major means of circulating filk to a larger body of listeners. Today, they would be making music videos on Youtube or distributing Mp3s through Facebook. Some filk can even be purchased at the iTunes store. We can see all of this as the commodification of what was once primarily a folk culture practice, but we might also see it as symptomatic of the efforts of fans to increase the impact of their expressive activities on the culture as a whole.

That chapter is also the most openly optimistic about fandom’s potential to realize folk ideals, with the egalitarian structure of the filk circle quite literally bringing together a diverse group of participants and giving each voice equal weight. Many fan scholars continue to celebrate these qualities, but there is a growing body of scholarship that has called for more engagement with anti-fans
(Gray, 2003 and 2005, Sheffield and Merlo, 2010) and conflicts within fan communities (Johnson, 2007).

I used analogies to folk culture here to convey the affective and social bonds that shaped the production and circulation of fan culture. This was perhaps the most intangible and abstract concept in the book and perhaps the most idealistic. Today, I might talk about fandom as an “affinity space,” “community of interest,” a “connectivity and collectivity,” all of which capture some aspects of what I was trying to express in that chapter (and in the conclusion where I come back to these issues). I did not have access to these concepts at the time. I was trying to convey my lived experiences of seeing people come together in physical spaces to sing songs that expressed shared identities and common perspectives.

I was less eager to focus attention on conflicts within fandom—around gender, race, class, religion, politics, generation—not wanting to air the community’s dirty laundry in public. As we’ve created a much larger body of work on fans, these internal disagreements have loomed larger in the representation of fandom, and I would never make light of these very real divisions, but there’s still something about fandom’s understanding of itself as a utopian community that can get lost in such discussions. Perhaps these utopian ideals are recognized most powerfully when they break down and need to be reasserted, but they form part of fandom’s distinctive “structure of feeling.” Maybe all I am saying is that fandom is an imagined community, but if so, it is a community that is constructed through the collective imagination. Its utopian imagination often fuels fandom’s resistances to corporate efforts to commodify its cultural productions and exchanges. If we downplay the utopian aspects of fandom, we may also lose some of its critical edge.

At several points in Textual Poachers, you gesture towards the commodification of fan texts as potentially threatening to dismantle fandom’s “imagined community.” At the time, these concerns circulated around “bootlegging” fan zines (page 160) and the growth of “artisinal level publishing” that professionalized certain filk singers and sold fan texts back to the community they originated from as commodities (page 276). This debate has only intensified as online fannish gift economies are confronted with
corporate efforts to monetize fan labor, with Fanlib being the most notorious, albeit failed, example. Likewise, fan communities have begun performing their own social cost/benefit analysis of these issues. Abigail De Kosnik has suggested that, for fans, the rewards of profiting from their own labor “might be just as attractive as the rewards of participating in a community’s gift culture” (De Kosnik, 2009, 123). Do you agree with De Kosnik, or do you feel that exchanging fan texts through a gift economy remains central to cementing fandom’s connectivity and collectivity?

Within just a few years of Poachers’ publication, I began to hear some counter views within the fan world embodying a kind of “entrepreneurial feminism.” That is, female fanzine editors were asserting their rights to create and manage their own small-scale business—including those around publishing and distributing fan culture—within the support structure fandom provided. These women anticipated the case De Kosnik has so capably made about the ways male fans have often profited from fandom (seeing it as a stepping stone into a professional career) while female fans have refused to “exploit” their friends.

I really admire how De Kosnik challenges the gender politics shaping who can profit from fandom and in which ways. I also respect the work of fan activists, such as those who created the Organization for Transformative Works, who argue that they are not going to be able to remain outside of the commercial economy and so they should create and sustain their own institutions and infrastructures to insure that they, and not outside interests, profit from what they create.

Yet, I still think that there is much we understand about fandom if we see it as a modern day form of a gift economy existing within commercial culture and building on the resources it provides. Fan cultural production is often motivated by social reciprocity, friendship, and good feelings, rather than economic self-interest. So many in the media industries are arguing that acts of “piracy,” of “stealing content,” are undermining their motives to create, and it seems important to hold onto the idea that people create for many different motives, only some of which are pecuniary, many of which are social, and some of which are enhanced through sharing rather than selling content. As legal scholars such as Lawrence Lessig (2008) and Yochai Benkler (2006) have suggested, fandom offers us a powerful model for understanding how widespread
grassroots creativity may persist despite (or perhaps even because of) limited opportunities to directly profit from one’s own labor. Not all kinds of cultural exchange should be commodified. It isn’t just a question of who gets to profit from their labor—some relationships are damaged when they are reconstructed through commercial logics.

Part of the issue here, as you note above, is the perception that those fans who embrace their positioning as “amateurs” and those that have historically sought “professional” status neatly skews along gender lines. While we need to complicate this essentialist logic, I share Kristina Busse’s concern that, though the industry has tentatively begun to embrace some forms of fan production, “groups of fans can become legit if and only if they follow certain ideas, don’t become too rebellious, too pornographic, don’t read the text too much against the grain” (2006).

I would generally agree with Busse here, and, indeed, I made a similar argument in my critique of Lucasfilm’s policies towards fan filmmakers in Convergence Culture (2006b). Yes, in general, Hollywood has been more willing to accommodate the interests of male fans than those of female fans.

But, I think there are also some pitfalls to this framing of the issues. If we look at the way storytelling practice in American television has evolved over the past few decades, it has often been in directions that are prefigured by the fan fiction practices Poachers describes. The television industry today is far more likely to reward fan interests in character relationships that evolve over time, in backstory and story arcs, than the prevailing norms of television in the late 1980s, the period Poachers describes. Women’s interests are being more and more factored into the design and structure of the programs. Critical theory needs to be attentive to whose fantasies are being excluded, what mechanisms are excluding them, and which groups have the power to include or exclude from the cultural mainstream. But it also should be interested in those cases where new ideas enter the culture from the margins and have an impact on what counts as mainstream.

I couldn’t have asked for a better segue into a discussion of slash. Given slash’s presence within Bacon-Smith’s and Penley’s work
on fans in the early 1990s, and its continued prominence within both fandom and fan studies, it seems a useful chapter to revisit in terms of which fannish fantasies are now tentatively included within (or continue to be excluded from) the cultural mainstream. Slash has routinely been held up as the ur-example of fans’ “resistant reading” practices, but in Chapter 6 you reiterate that slash exposes the male homosocial desire lying just under the surface of many popular texts, presenting a negotiation with the ideological constraints of mass media texts rather than an explicit break. Likewise, many slashers argue that they’re simply exposing and realizing latent homoerotic subtext rather than queering the text (Jones, 2002 and Tosenberger, 2008).

My thinking on this issue was profoundly impacted by the work of Alex Doty. Tara McPherson, Jane Shattuc, and I included his essay on lesbian desire in The Wizard of Oz (Doty, 2002) in our anthology, Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture, and we had pushed him to say more about the implications of asserting queer desire through the appropriation of a text targeting children, especially in a culture where queer teachers are often falsely accused of pedophilia. His response was to insist that queer readings were not something that was imposed on texts from the outside, not appropriations in the sense that they involved the hijacking of texts. In the case of The Wizard of Oz, there’s no reason to think a straight reading is any more “natural” or “logical” than a queer reading, given the absence of any explicit heterosexual subplot and the involvement of a significant number of queer-identified performers and creators in its production.

Similarly, there has been a strong queer presence in science fiction fandom from the early part of the twentieth century, with some prominent science fiction fans helping to establish some of the first publications in America to specifically address a gay or lesbian community (Garber and Paleo, 1990). In so far as most science fiction writers have come through fandom, it is not a stretch to think queer meanings and identities were always present within genre entertainment.

Fans have had to resist pressures that would shut down their readings of texts—pressures towards heteronormativity in their own everyday lives and in the public response to their interpretive and creative practices. In that sense, one might argue that the slash
interpretation is responsive to a subtext that runs through western culture and at the same time that it is resistant to some of the most powerful forces in modern life. My analysis of slash, built on Eve Sedgwick (1985), suggests that genre conventions create highly romantic representations of male–male friendship even as they seek to wall off those feelings from erotic contact between men: this is the homosocial–homosexual divide. Slash involves removing the walls that separate the homosocial from the homoerotic.

My essay “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten” (1988) captured the initial resistance within fandom to Kirk/Spock but by the time I was writing Poachers, the intensity of this debate had waned; K/S had evolved into slash, a genre that included a far broader range of different programs and different ways of representing same sex desire. Some forms of slash were fandom’s “dirty little secret.” I was asked not to write about real person slash in the book; I captured a few early examples of femslash in my analysis. Most recent work on slash, for example, would no longer be framed around the issue of why straight women might want to read and write stories about gay men, because of the growing recognition that fan fiction is erotica that circulates between women of multiple sexualities (many of them queer as defined by a heteronormative culture) (Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins, 1998). The Web brought slash more and more out of hiding, as did the academic attention being paid to the genre. When I speak to audiences today, more and more people have encountered slash directly on the internet; they’ve read it, written it, or know people who do. It no longer seems shocking or laughable. It may still be a subcultural practice or a minority taste, but that does not mean that it has the same radical charge now that it had twenty years ago.

One interesting contemporary case study is the CW series Supernatural (2005–present). Supernatural fandom features some of the more controversial iterations of slash, predominantly Wincest (the incestuous coupling of the show’s protagonists, the Winchester brothers), but also Real Person Slash (RPS) featuring the show’s actors and Male Pregnancy (Mpreg) fiction, and the show has openly acknowledged the fan practice of slashing on multiple occasions within the text. Reaction to this textual “outing” of slash has been mixed (Felschow, 2010). Some fans view it as an acknowledgement (however dismissive) of the latent homoeroticism
of the brothers’ relationship, and an explicit example of how fans’ reading practices impact popular texts. Others argue that these meta acknowledgements attempt to contain or contradict slash readings. While this is a specific case, it suggests a number of broader questions to pose about slash’s “radical charge.” Though creators have, for the most part, abandoned their prohibitionist stance in favor of cultivating a more collaborationist relationship with the fan communities surrounding their texts, do the textual and ideological walls that separate the homosocial from the homoerotic remain firmly intact? Or, does the fact that slash is now “out of hiding” (both textually and culturally) suggest a readiness to grapple with the issues slash addresses (e.g. a lack of compelling female characters in popular media, the limitations of traditional masculinity, and a desire to break down rigid gender boundaries), and a partial realization of slash’s potentially progressive politics?

Would it be a cop-out to say all of the above? It is really dangerous to deal with this issue in a static manner, to imagine that what was radical or taboo in 1992 remains so today. Let’s face it: our culture’s understanding of gender and sexuality has undergone some dramatic shifts over the past several decades, as we’ve moved from debates about whether gays can serve openly in the military to a reality where states are starting to legislatively ratify same sex marriage. There have been generational shifts in acceptance of queer people and even many conservatives who are not ready to accept same sex marriage are ready to change the law to tolerate same sex civil unions. This is not to say that sexual minorities do not still face enormous struggles for dignity and equality, but the terrain does not look the same today as it did a few decades ago.

Some, though not all, of these debates have played themselves out in popular culture, which has sometimes remained a conservative force (refusing to represent queer lives, even if it is less often overtly homophobic) and in some cases, it has been mildly progressive, expanding the range of who gets to be protagonists or part of the core team. So, if slash seemed radically outside the mainstream in the 1990s, its premises are more and more imagina-ble within popular media texts, at least those aimed at niche or cult audiences.
Writers like Danae Clark (1993) and Sean Griffin (2000) have written about the ways mainstream texts—ranging from advertising to Disney movies—winkingly acknowledge queer spectators without alienating more conservative consumers, and we can read the kinds of nods to slash in genre programs as doing something similar—the shows are not ready to fully depict same sex characters as romantically and erotically involved with each other. They present slash as a “misreading,” they use it as an inside joke. Sometimes they give fans the images through which to construct their own fantasies, they even depict slash fans within the text, but they do not cross over to embracing slash on the level of explicit denotation rather than as connotation or subtext. Such moments tell us a lot about how our culture is negotiating a complex transition in how it thinks about sexuality.

On the fringes, we are seeing the emergence of a genre of popular romance which sells male–male couplings to female readers, and we are seeing Japanese “boy love” Manga getting translated into English and sold through chain bookstores. Rather than assuming that slash can’t be incorporated into commercial culture, we would do better to be more precise about where and how the dominant still draws lines concerning acceptable forms of sexual representation.

More than any other form of fan production that you address in Textual Poachers, vidding has flourished over the past twenty years. At the time, you made a point of distinguishing fan videos from commercially produced music videos, noting that while commercial music video “isolates images from their original context(s) [...] fan video is an art of quotation that anchors its images to a referent” (page 234). As fan vids begin to circulate within broader conventions and discourses of online video, mashup, and remix culture, I couldn’t help but think back to your discussion of Bakhtin’s work on heteroglossia, and the “conditions against which any creator must struggle in specifying a term’s meaning within a particular context” (page 234). Julie Levin Russo (2009) has discussed the issues that arise when fan vids are decontextualized (for example, when vids are posted to YouTube by someone other than the original fan artists, or slash vids are conflated with parodies in the Brokeback Mountain fake trailer tradition). Fan videos are designed to circulate within specific interpretive
communities, so what might be gained or lost from distinguishing fan vids from other forms of online video?

Well, the last part of your question made it remarkably easy to answer. I do not think it is a good idea for voices within fandom or fan studies to abstain from participating in broader conversations about our cultural futures in the name of preserving some illusionary notion of “purity.” Fans have something vital to contribute to these discussions. For a long time, I felt that I had said what I wanted to say about fans in Textual Poachers and I wanted to move on to other topics. But, again and again, as I pursue those other questions, I find myself drawn back to fandom as a source of inspiration. It is such a vital, generative culture, one of constant experimentation and innovation. Fandom is not something fragile that needs our protection, but rather something that has been transformative and expansive in its influence on culture. Fans have been working through central concerns around creativity, collaboration, community, and copyright.

As I wrote in my essay “What Happened Before YouTube?” (Jenkins, 2009), the fan vidding world has productively explored what is at stake in the decision to go public via video sharing platforms. The sheer number of different videos in circulation today gives YouTube such a sense of plenitude—as if everything that humans create sooner or later finds its way onto this platform. Fans have justly struggled with the risks of going public, which certainly include the concerns you raise above about what happens when materials produced within a subculture get decontextualized, when slash videos circulate to people who do not have access to slash reading practices. At the same time, vidders have struggled with the problems of being left out of the historical record—of women’s innovative contributions to the culture once again being suppressed. They have debated whether or not videos produced as gifts within the community should be transformed into commodities circulated for someone else’s profit. As people who have been living within these contradictions far longer than most, their insights are ones that should be heard by policy makers, industry leaders, academics, activists, educators, and journalists, who are also debating the terms of our participation in the web 2.0 era.

That said, I think it is clear that most fan vids perform different kinds of cultural work than the types of remix or mashup videos that have received much greater mainstream attention, whether
overtly political kinds of remix (such as *Right Wing Radio Duck*) or those produced for the purposes of spoofing the original (such as the many *Brokeback Mountain* parodies). Fan vids are more apt to be melodramatic or romantic than comic: vidders want to get close to the characters rather than to hold the text at a distance. There are, of course, many exceptions: some strands of fanvidding have become increasingly political, especially around issues of gender (*Women’s Work*) or race (*How Much for the Geisha in the Window?*) and some fan vids are playful in their relationship to the original materials (although often in the name of expressing the collective fantasies and desires of the fan community, rather than simply being snarky at the expense of a media property). When slash vids become decontextualized, texts that are heartfelt expressions of longing and frustration get read as broadly parodic, as happened with the notorious *Closer* video. Within fandom, *Closer* addressed issues of sexual violence. Beyond fandom, many in the general public who watched the video were encountering the slash premise for the first time, and so they giggled with titillation.

Certainly, there is every reason to create fanvids that speak in ways that are meaningful within the subculture, yet there may also be reasons to produce vids which carry fan perspectives on core issues around intellectual property, sexual politics, and racial equality to a larger public. Some of my recent work (2012b) centers around the notion of fan activism, which has a somewhat different shape when popular culture references are deployed within and between fandoms, and when they are mobilized as a way of getting the attention of media or the general public.

Constance Penley was struck in 1992 that fans were strongly identified as a female-dominant community that was actively rewriting the scripts of masculinity through their stories but often refused to self-identify as feminists and were not necessarily interested in participating in larger campaigns around gender and sexual equality. They created their stories for their own entertainment. Later, I wrote about the Gaylaxians (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995), a group of queer fans who wanted to change the core text of *Star Trek* so that it represented the inclusion of gay, lesbian, bi and tran characters within its multicultural utopian community, concerns motivated in part by their worries about the suicide rate of queer youth, who would not be reached through strategies of subcultural appropriation, whether in the form of slash fan fiction or camp.
There has always been a tension between the desire of fans to create culture that is meaningful within their own community (a worthy goal) and the desire to engage in larger conversations that impact the culture (also valuable). We can see this as play vs. politics, except that the forms of play which drive fan culture are often deeply political at the most personal levels (for example, teens asserting their own sexual identities, wives claiming some control over their social and cultural lives), and even when fan’s play is “innocent” of politics, it is often forced to defend itself because it operates outside of dominant conceptions of intellectual property or outside heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions.

Until relatively recently, fan studies has been insularly focused on Western media properties and fan communities. Transnational franchising, and how global flows of digital content impact fans outside the United States, is an especially rich direction for fan studies to move. Tama Leaver’s (2008) turn of phrase, the “tyranny of digital distance,” describes fans’ frustration when the “expectation of near synchronous global distribution of media is not fulfilled due to arbitrary boundaries which began as geographic but are now entirely in the economic and political domain,” leaving them at a disadvantage when participating in global fan communities. Building on this idea, global fandom could be seen as a productive space to reflect on these broader industrial, economic and political domains, particularly as they relate to piracy debates.

You see hints around the edges in Textual Poachers of the emergence of what I’ve called “pop cosmopolitanism” (Jenkins, 2004). Classic forms of cosmopolitanism were ways that people sought to escape the parochialism of their own local cultures by embracing cultural materials from elsewhere, most often high culture—music, art, poetry, food, wine, international cinema. Increasingly, we are seeing young people seek to create distinction through their engagement with popular media from around the world. In Poachers, it surfaces in passing references to Anglophile media fans or to Japanese manga and anime.

The digital age has opened up a much broader set of transnational cultural exchanges, as people are tapping into informal and
extralegal networks to gain (or accelerate) access to media from other parts of the world. As they do so, there is a subtle intertwining of interests between diasporic communities seeking a nostalgic return to their homelands and pop cosmopolitans seeking an escape from their own mother country. Where conversations do emerge across these differences, there has been increased pressure to close the gaps in the speed by which mass media is distributed. Why should we wait six months for *Sherlock* or *Doctor Who* to cross the Atlantic? Why shouldn’t Americans enjoy tele-novelas, which are popular everywhere else in the world? And why should Swedish television be remade for American audiences when it is possible to consume the originals directly online?

Fans have thus become increasingly linked to the networks of pirate capitalism in their search for content that is not legally available for purchase in their home country. Xiaochang Li (2009), for example, has mapped the set of cultural exchanges and negotiations that have supported the growth of transnational fan interest in East Asian dramas, while Mimi Ito (Ito, Okabi, and Tsuji, 2012) has helped to document the process of fansubbing, which enables the growth of Otaku-style cultures in the west. Writers discussing anime and manga (Leonard, 2005) have argued that fans played key roles in opening up markets for exported culture, identifying genres which might play well in specific national contexts, educating the public about how to appreciate works that might otherwise have seemed outside the scope of their interests. And there are certainly some good examples where fans have removed pirated media from circulation when it became legally available for purchase.

Of course, cultural materials flow more easily across national borders than people do. For all of the transnational flow of content, the reception remains surprisingly local. Sangita Shreshtova (2011), for example, has described the very different meanings associated with Bollywood dance as it spreads from one local context to another, and this process of informal localization may make it harder, rather than easier, for “global” fan cultures to thrive. Differences in language, culture, and ideology, not to mention access to technologies and skills, make cross-cultural understandings difficult. Texts that are seen as popular in their original context become elite when they move across national borders, texts that are read dramatically are consumed as kitsch, and texts that are sacred can be read as exotic.
Speaking to these localized reception practices, there has also been a marked increase in attempts to “de-Westernize” fan studies in recent years, culturally contextualizing a variety of national fan communities and practices. This reflects broader efforts to diversify fan studies as a field (moving away from gender as the dominant critical axis to address race, for example), but it also has given us important access to histories and studies of previously underrepresented fan communities. As your examples above suggest, thus far most of these studies have focused on Asian fan cultures.

I am teaching a course right now, Fandom, Participatory Culture, and Web 2.0, that has a strong contingent of international students, and it has brought home to me just how Anglo-American-centric fan studies research remains. Fan studies work tends to assume a high degree of familiarity with the source text and the specific history of American fan culture. And there is an urgent need to “dewesternize” some of the assumptions governing this field.

Fan studies in the west has been mirrored by the growth of Otaku Studies in Japan, though so far relatively little of this material has been translated into English and thus we have been unable to fully assimilate its insights. Some of this is changing with the recent translations of Hiroki Azuma’s *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals* (2009) and of Ito et al.’s *Fandom Unbound* anthology (2012), as well as writers like Anne Allison (2006) and Ian Condry (2012), whose work on anime and manga draw heavily on Japanese language theory and scholarship. Writers like Aswin Punathambeker (2007), among others, have connected American fan studies to the fan cultures that have grown up around Bollywood, and we are just starting to get some accounts of Korean fan practices (Jung, 2012). Some are writing about the ways participatory culture has become more widespread in China (Lin, 2012) thanks to the introduction of the internet and how it has been bound up with debates about westernization, modernization, and democratization. We still know far less about fan cultures in Latin America or Africa, despite some growth of research around Nigeria (Larkin, 2008) as important sites of cult media production.

Fan studies offers us some important glimpses into the ways that everyday people are adjusting to changes in the media landscape, the erotic and romantic fantasies that shape their responses to mass media texts, the struggles over censorship and intellectual
property enforcement, and the educational systems that determine who has the capacity to access and engage in grassroots cultural production. As such, fan studies could be a key for understanding current debates about globalization, offering a somewhat more optimistic picture than generalized accounts of cultural imperialism.

*Are there elements in Textual Poachers that you think still warrant closer consideration than they have received over the past two decades?*

When I finished *Textual Poachers*, I was painfully aware that I was scratching the surface of a much more complex phenomenon. Many sentences and paragraphs could act as thesis statements for future researchers. I hoped others would help build on what I had written. In my wildest dreams, I would never have imagined that the book would be reprinted twenty years later or that the field of fan studies would have grown as broad and diverse as it has. That said, the one chapter in the book that has been the least mined by subsequent scholars is my chapter on *Beauty and the Beast*, which had the misfortune of being focused on a series which fell out of cultural currency (as compared to, say, *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* or *Twin Peaks*). As a consequence, readers often skip the chapter and thus its core insights are overlooked. There are efforts afoot to remake *Beauty and the Beast* as a network program, so I will be curious to see whether more people pay attention to this chapter in the future.

A central concern of this chapter is what happens when fans, collectively and individually, fall out of love with a series, what happens when the producer takes their fantasies places they do not want to see it go. Underlying this analysis is a push towards a much more dynamic account of audience response as evolving, week by week, episode by episode. The net made it much easier to study the fluctuations in fan response than before. But, there are still relatively few accounts that deal with the process of fan reception.

The *Beauty and the Beast* chapter builds upon my notion of the fan meta-text (the mental construct shared within the fan community) and the idea that genre might productively be understood as a “reading hypothesis” rather than as a textual property. Alan McKee (2001) has done some very good work on evaluation in fan communities, especially those around *Doctor Who*, which helps
us to understand how collective norms about what constitutes a
good story emerge through fandom’s ongoing conversations.

We might see this “genre as reading hypothesis” approach as
also giving us some ways of thinking about why fans see genres
such as slash or hurt/comfort as emerging organically from the
popular texts. They represent ways of configuring texts so that
certain scenes become more central to the community’s experi-
ence and certain looks, gestures, and statements become more sig-
nificant than they might appear to a more casual viewer. There has
been such a strong pull in recent years away from the study of fan
reception towards the literary analysis of fan texts. I would have
said that the two approaches were not altogether incompatible:
my chapter on slash is very much a genre analysis which looks
closely at specific texts and maps specific conventions through
which the community constructs its stories. But, as we have turned
towards the study of fan fiction as literary production, there is a
tendency to treat genre as a textual feature rather than as part of
the process by which we collectively negotiate the text’s meaning.
All of this is to say we’ve got more work to do.

*Textual Poachers* presents a rich snapshot of pre-internet
media fandom and, at various points in this exchange, you’ve cau-
tioned against considering the book’s contents to be broadly appli-
cable to contemporary fan cultures. However, this conversation
also suggests that there are facets of *Textual Poachers* that deserve
further consideration. If the book is a “time capsule,” it is a living
time capsule, one that refuses to be sealed, informing scholars and
students about the significance of fan culture, and taking in new
materials. Over the past twenty years, fan studies has grown
incredibly diverse, but the fact that so many of *Textual Poachers*’
core concepts and concerns still resonate is a real testament to the
work, and its enduring ability to inspire new applications and lines
of inquiry.

**SOURCES**