Toward a fannish methodology: Affect as an asset

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[0.1] Abstract—Fan studies is a multifaceted discipline that developed from widely different fields of research, resulting in a great variety of methodological approaches. A recurring issue in discussions on methodology in fan studies is the tension between the researchers' attachment to the phenomenon they are studying and the more detached, critical role of a researcher. The double position as both a participant in and observer of the communities that they are researching has led to valuable discussions about reflexivity and positionality in fan studies methodologies. Indeed, the double position of fan and researcher can inform and enrich research by bringing fannish practices and sensibilities to research projects. This tension between attachment to and detachment from the field influences the research process, leading to ethical challenges that acafans must face as a result of their dual positionality. Drawing on affect theory, and reflecting on our own research experiences from an autoethnographic perspective, we show how fannish attachment to the subject-object of study can be a driving force—a resource rather than an impediment to good research. An affective turn in methodology could improve knowledge not only within the field of fan studies but in the social sciences in general.

[0.2] Keywords—Affect theory; Autoethnography; Fan studies research; Feminist theory

1. Introduction

[1.1] What is the use of fannish feelings in research? How can fannish attachments to our research subjects be used, productively and critically, in our work? The tension between fan studies scholars' (emotional) attachment to the phenomenon they are studying and the supposedly detached, critical role of a researcher is a recurring issue in discussions on methodology. Emotional attachment to the field of study seems to contribute to this tension, but it is rarely explicitly addressed. Fan studies are a multifaceted (sub)discipline that developed from widely different fields of research, resulting in a great variety of methodological approaches (Coppa 2006; Hellekson and Busse 2014; Evans and Stasi 2014). The double position as both a participant in and an observer of the communities that they are researching has led to valuable discussions about reflexivity and positionality in fan studies methodologies. We seek to go beyond the acafan discussion and explore how fannish feelings and attachments to our research subjects can be put to work for the production of knowledge, both in fan studies and beyond.

[1.2] To illustrate our point, we make use of a collaborative autoethnography (Lapadat 2017), where we both reflect upon our personal experiences with researching fan cultures and discuss how our respective emotional attachments and reactions played into research. Our thoughts here have their origins in the Fan Studies Network Conference (FSNC) in 2016, where we met over breakfast on the first day and discovered that we were both master's students in a gender studies program, writing about fanfiction, and attending our first academic conference. Sophie Hansal was there to present the results of her master's thesis on the meaning of fem-/slash fanfiction for LGBTQ+ fans, and Marianne Gunderson was just embarking on her thesis on the construction of sex and gender in omegaverse fanfiction. We soon bonded over similar research interests, but also our similar methodological anxieties. Two years later we returned to copresent what would be a prelude to this article at FSNC 2018, where we talked about the methodological relevance and use of fannish feelings in our research.

[1.3] The reflections we made in preparation for our presentation form the basis for the empirical part of this article, in which we contrast two different personal accounts from our research experience to allow for a multivocal approach to (auto)ethnographic inquiry (Denzin 2014). Matt Hills (2002) has underlined the importance of self-reflexivity in autoethnographic fan research. We would like to extend that by calling for an approach that includes reflections on the researchers' emotions throughout the research process. For this purpose we are drawing on the works of Carolyn Ellis (1999, 2004), who coined the term "heartful autoethnography," meaning an ethnography that views researchers' emotions as a crucial part of self-reflexivity. With our methodological choices we aim to demonstrate how the use of autoethnographic accounts can facilitate a productive reflection upon researchers' own emotional attachments to the field. By choosing

this specific method, we also want to acknowledge what Sara Ahmed (2014) calls the "sociality of emotions" (218) and connect our individual experiences as researchers to a structural level.

[1.4] By presenting two accounts of our own research experience, reflecting on them from an autoethnographic perspective, and analyzing them through the lens of Sara Ahmed and other theorists' work on feelings and affect, we want to show how feelings can work not only (1) as motivation and fuel for research, (2) and as a basis for analysis, but also (3) as a starting point for critique of social and academic norms and values. We want to shift the perspective to how fannish attachment to the subject(s)-object(s) of study can, in fact, be a driving force, and a resource rather than an impediment to good research.

[1.5] We also suggest that fan studies scholars might have a specific attachment to their objects of study—a fannish sensibility, if we may call it that. When addressed in a self-reflective way, the double position as both a fan and researcher can be a resource, rather than a drawback. Actively drawing on (fan) researchers' emotional entanglement in the field ultimately has the potential to enrich and deepen our academic engagements. Most importantly, this approach questions the academic devaluation of emotion and can be a basis from which to critique existing norms and develop new methodologies within the humanities and social sciences.

2. Fan studies as an emotional field of research

[2.1] The emotional investment of fans in their fandom has been a recurring topic in fan studies from their inception (Russ 1985; Grossberg 1992; Hellekson and Busse 2014). Henry Jenkins's now classic book on fanfiction, *Textual Poachers* (1992), opens with an account of how fans are characterized as obsessive, hysterical, or dangerous, and their behavior is seen as an expression of excessive enthusiasm and inappropriate attachment to cultural objects. The rebuttal of this pathologization by Jenkins and other early fan researchers such as Joanna Russ (1985) and Constance Penley (1991), and their insistence on taking the interests of fans seriously, paved the way for a new understanding of (media) fan practices and communities, one that tried to "map out fans' intricate and thoughtful engagements with popular culture texts, and with each other" (Busse and Gray 2011, 425).

[2.2] Yet fans' emotional attachments remain at the core of many fan researchers' analyses of fan(dom)s. Most famously, Henry Jenkins (2006) stated that fanfiction is born out of "fascination and frustration" (247). Abigail de Kosnik, drawing on Ann Cvetkovich's work on queer archives, has argued that fanfiction collections are archives documenting fans' sentiments and emotions (2016, 152). Cornel Sandvoss (2005) described "fandom as the regular, *emotionally involved* consumption of a given popular narrative or text" (8, emphasis ours), and Matt Hills (2001) called (online) fandoms "affective spaces." Finally, Mark Duffet (2013) argued that,

however difficult it is to define fan(dom)s, "a positive emotional engagement with popular culture" lies at the base of fan practices and identities (17).

[2.3] The emotions and attachments of fan studies researchers have also become an object of scrutiny. Because many fan studies scholars are also active in fandom communities, the tension between the researchers' attachment to the phenomenon they are studying and the more detached, critical role of a researcher has been a recurring issue in discussions in fan studies. Following discussions around *Textual Poachers* (1992), Henry Jenkins coined the term "aca-fan" to describe his own position as co-currently both academic and fan. Although this definition has been criticized for drawing a hierarchical line between fan scholars and fans (Stein 2011) and manifesting academic hegemony of knowledge, it has been undeniably influential. By highlighting and acknowledging the double position of researchers as both participant in, and observer of, the communities that they are researching, the term has contributed to valuable discussions about (self-)reflexivity and positionality in fan studies (see, e.g., Evans and Stasi 2014; Ford 2014).

[2.4] Acknowledging this double position meant having to take the researchers' emotional involvement and attachment as fans into consideration. Even though the double positionality of so-called acafans has been described as useful (and sometimes necessary) for gaining access to fan communities (e.g., Jenkins 2006; Philipps 2010; Roach 2014), the resulting affective involvement of fan researchers in fan communities has mainly been addressed as detrimental to the research process. Even when fan scholars explicitly position themselves as fans, their emotions are often brought up in regards to whether and/or how affective involvement might pose an ethical challenge (Busse and Hellekson 2012). For example, Adrienne Evans and Mafalda Stasi (2014) have argued that the researchers' individual feelings may inhibit potential for politically engaged research in fan studies, pointing out that "it can be hard to criticize your own tribe—or indeed yourself" (16). And in *Fan Cultures* (2002) Matt Hills explains that "academic practice…typically transforms fandom into an absolute Other" (5). He sees this as the reason for the difficult and (at least) ambivalent relationship between fans and fan studies scholars. Hills has a performative understanding of fandom, framing both fandom and academia as performative acts rather than fixed entities. He points out that scholar fans "must still conform to the regulative ideal of the rational academic subject, being careful not to present too much of their enthusiasm while tailoring their accounts of fan interest and investment to the norms of 'confessional' (but not overly confessional) academic writing" (11–12). In his distinction between fan practices and academic ones, Hills reproduces the existing cultural bias that associates fans with emotions and academics with rationality. That way the fannish emotions of researchers remain largely disregarded—and even more so, they are viewed as detrimental to the research process.

[2.5] But fannish emotions and attachments are not portrayed as exclusively negative. It is not uncommon to see fan studies scholars acknowledge the productive force of fannish emotions in their scholarship. For example, Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (2012) recognize that fannish passion is often what motivates fan studies research. And Rebecca Wanzo (2015) explicitly counters the claim that fannish "love obstructs good knowledge production" with the assertion that "it is also the love—and at times disappointment—that can produce scholarship that really articulates the intellectual stakes of a work" (¶ 4.1). However, these mentions usually remain fleeting, and the ways in which fannish emotions feed into the research remains obscure. Consequently, while fans' emotions have been understood and examined as a process of meaning making, the productive potential of fan researchers' emotions and attachments remains largely undertheorized.

[2.6] However, fannish emotions are not unmediated and are not experienced the same by all fans. Rukmini Pande makes an excellent point of this in *Squee from the Margins* (2019). She uses Sara Ahmed's concept of the feminist killjoy (Ahmed 2010) to illustrate how fannish engagement with media work is structured around axes of race. Pande builds on the work of Wanzo in her critique of the "continued and glaring absence of race as an aspect of analysis in fan studies" (2019, xii). In doing so, she questions the idea of fan practices as resistant to societal norms. Pande shows how fan studies' focus on fannish enthusiasm is a racialized concept, as it does not take into account how fans of color experience media and fandom. Finally, she points out that "it is vital to stop the practice of using universalizing labels such as 'transgressive' or 'transformative' pleasure without explicitly identifying whom these definitions exclude" (195). Approaching fandom from the position of undiluted joy is not achievable for everyone, and fannish attachments must be understood against the backdrop of societal power structures.

3. Affect in/and methodology

[3.1] Although affect seems to play an important role in research on fandoms, fan communities, and fannish behavior, it still remains undertheorized. We argue that affect theory can be a valuable resource for methodological questions in fan studies because it offers a deeper understanding of what a fruitful academic engagement with affect could look like.

[3.2] Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014) can be considered as one of the central works in current affect theory. In it, she argues that emotions must not be seen as apolitical or ahistorical. She describes how in Western thought emotions are commonly constructed as separate from, and "beneath, the faculties of thought and reason" (6) because "to be emotional is to have one's judgement affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous" (3). Emotions are seen as interfering with one's ability to make judgments; to conform to the standards of objectivity and impartiality, emotions must be

separated from the process of thinking and perceiving. This separation of researchers from their emotions goes hand in hand with the separation of researchers from their research objects; if researchers become too involved in the topic (or worse, the people) they are researching, their work becomes suspect. The entanglement between researcher and research object may lead researchers to form emotional attachments to the objects, people, groups, or phenomena they are studying, thus undermining their ability to comply with the norms of unbiased and objective knowledge production. Contrary to these assumptions, Ahmed suggests that emotions and affect are valuable for academic research because she is convinced that "theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin" (10).

[3.3] The concept of objectivity as value neutrality has been questioned and critiqued by researchers from several disciplines, many of whom have drawn on or been based in feminist theory. For example, Genevieve Lloyd's *The Man of Reason* (1984) provides an in-depth analysis of how deeply gendered the concepts of emotionality and rationality are in Western philosophy. In her article "Situated Knowledges," Donna Haraway (1988) called the notion of objectivity as a seemingly all-knowing perspective a "god trick" (582), and she proposed the concepts of situated knowledges and partial perspectives as alternatives. Much in the same vein Sandra Harding (1986) promoted feminist standpoint theory as a way to address researchers' bias and guarantee what she calls "strong objectivity," arguing that people in marginalized social positions are better placed to develop new and socially useful knowledge. Feminist criticism of scientific concepts of objectivity such as these have had a strong influence on a wide range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, perhaps especially so on the interdisciplinary and highly qualitative field of fan studies (Jenkins 2013). As Busse and Hellekson (2012) have pointed out, the ideal of the objective and disinterested researcher is no longer a given.

[3.4] Despite the increasing influence of what has come to be called the affective turn, texts that explicitly discuss the role of emotions in research methodology are still scarce, but they are slowly accumulating. For instance, Alison Jaggar (1989) points out how emotions are intrinsically linked to the process of evaluation and observation, in that they both arise from that which is observed and also shape and color our perceptions. As a result, emotions are instrumental in defining the values and norms of both individuals and society. She further argues that emotions that align with these values and norms are seen as acceptable, while emotions that do not align with these norms are outlawed. Jaggar remarks that these outlaw emotions "are necessary to develop a critical perspective on the world" (1989, 167) by not only working as motivation but also granting the ability to perceive the world differently from conventional descriptions. Furthermore, in "The Feeling of Finding Out," Colleen McLaughlin (2005) argues that "emotion and thinking are inextricably linked in the research process" (65) and that the imperative to ignore and separate oneself from emotions in the research process is detrimental to scientific knowledge production. She goes on to emphasize that the researcher's

ability to "hold and endure" feelings of discomfort, ambiguity, and insecurity are essential to the research process (70). McLaughlin points out that "emotional blindness will not enhance the research process: It will only drive underground the examination of assumptions and processes in individuals and groups that hinder fruitful exploration" (76). Similarly, in her article "Emotions and Research," Janet Holland (2006) states that "emotions are important in the production of knowledge and add power in understanding, analysis and interpretation" (195). It is not enough to simply accept that research can be an emotional process; we also have to ask how emotional processes can be integrated in academic work, and how they can be mobilized in an academic context.

[3.5] Even when they are not explicitly framed as methodological texts or directly address the topic of research methods, recent theoretical works on affect and emotion offer the potential for insight into the role of emotions in the production of knowledge. Sara Ahmed's interest in the work that emotions do in the world, how they orient bodies toward certain objects, and how they shape the way these objects appear made her work especially salient for the development of our analysis of the methodological role of emotions. Rather than asking what emotions are, Ahmed asks what they do (2014, 4). Challenging the idea that emotions are only interior, she makes the "sociality of emotion" (9) the focal point of her work. Ahmed views emotions as "social and cultural practices [that] should not be regarded as psychological states" (9); in other words, she treats emotions as a social, not an individual phenomenon. Ahmed goes on to argue that emotions are never unmediated, that they always involve particular readings of both the world and of the emotions themselves. This means that emotions become part of the social webs that structure our existence, that frame how we see and interact with each other, including in our work as researchers. Our emotional investments are not entirely under our control because, as Ahmed points out, "emotions are 'sticky,' and even when we challenge our investments, we might get stuck" (16). This means that to simply be aware of one's emotional attachments—or even to attempt to fight or counteract them—would not in itself be productive.

[3.6] Ahmed explores how emotions such as pain, anger, love, joy, wonder, and hope are instrumental in producing a feminist understanding of the world (Ahmed 2014, 168ff). She argues that feminism involves an emotional response to society, a response that has the power to reorient one's relation to social norms. For instance, feminist anger involves a reading of pain—an interpretation of that pain as wrong, unjustified, and something that should be undone. By reading the relation between affect and structure, emotions can reorient people's relations to social norms and help produce new understandings of the world. This means that, for emotions to be a starting point for social critique, they need to be translated from the individual to the structural level (Ahmed 2014, 173–74). It is in this process of translation that we locate the productive potential of emotions in the research process. As researchers, we should cease to think of our emotions as individual experiences to be overcome (or embraced, or endured) and instead approach them as opportunities

to trace our entanglements with social structures and actors, in order to unlock the potential for valuable insight.

[3.7] Ahmed explains that the hierarchy between emotion and rationality functions to hide emotional aspects of rationality (2014, 670). In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017, 27), she elaborates that even gut feelings should be taken seriously in the research process as sources of information. We believe that including Ahmed's approach to methodological discussions has the potential to provide a productive intervention in some of the recurring ethical debates within fan studies about research positionality. Applying Ahmed's ideas to empirical research on fan(dom)s and fan communities requires researchers to engage with the notion that emotions are part of how we experience the world and that they are carriers of information. Following Sara Ahmed, we build on a tradition of feminist thinking that deliberately puts an emphasis on emotions, regarding them as just as valuable and potentially informative as affect.

[3.8] Even though emotions have always been a part of the research process, that doesn't mean that all research is emotional in the same way. It is easy to imagine that different affective orientations to the same project could lead to vastly different research outcomes. In "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (2002), Eve Sedgwick argues that a great deal of contemporary research and theory is written from what she calls the paranoid position. Driven by anxiety, the paranoid position is characterized by a need to be alert to, and ward off, possible dangers to avoid experiencing negative affect. Sedgwick further posits that this position privileges the production of "knowledge in the form of exposure" (138), producing research that draws on a hermeneutics of suspicion that seeks to expose hidden violence and reveal complicity with oppressive systems. In opposition to the paranoid position, Sedgwick proposes the concept of "reparative reading," an approach arising out of what she terms the depressive position. Driven by love and care, and characterized by the pursuit of pleasure, this approach seeks to repair the flaws of and add to the work upon which it builds.

[3.9] It is possible to trace these two positions and resulting approaches in both fandom communities and fan studies scholarship. It could, for instance, be argued that the practice of writing fanfiction itself is a form of reparative reading of the source works, while ship wars and some critical fan discourses that seek to expose problematic aspects of the source works or fandom itself may be seen to arise from a paranoid position. However, although we agree that the concepts of paranoid and reparative readings point to something significant about how different emotional positions lead us to different readings (and writings) of our research subjects, the distinction between the two seems a bit too simple. For instance, love for a thing might work as a powerful motivator for the kind of critique that Sedgwick would characterize as paranoid.

[3.10] One illustrative example of this may be found in Alexis Lothian's 2018 article "From Transformative Works to #TransformDH," in which she analyses the academic field of digital humanities as a fandom, based on the observation that "the fervor and intensity with which digital humanities nerds and geeks appreciate their objects of study" (371) parallels those of fan communities. She posits that the humanities as a whole may be said to operate like a fandom, asking, "How could one devote a life to study without an intense affective connection to an object of fascination—whether it begins in love or as anger, discomfort, a critical itch?" (376–77). To account for the situations in which love for a thing gets channeled into transformative critiques of that thing, Lothian introduces the term "critical fandom," an affectively intense relationship in combination with a critical stance, referring specifically to situations where the critique targets "dominant raced and gendered power structures" (377). People who find themselves marginalized, sidelined, or misrepresented may channel their emotional investment into critical fandom practices, though this often comes at the price of pushback from those who do not share their experiences. Drawing on discussions of race in fandom, she shows the critical potential of those who find their fannish pleasures spoiled by alienating and violent structures of exclusion embedded within the communities and objects into which they have invested their time and love—be it in fandom or academia.

[3.11] Whether or not we can claim the methodology of critical fandom for ourselves in this article, given that we as (albeit queer) white women can hardly insist to have a marginalized position within the field of fan studies, we very much subscribe to Lothian's argument that structures of fannish engagement are reproduced in academic communities, and that critical approaches and insights of fan communities could be used to inform and illuminate our academic work.

4. Working with fannish emotions: Two autoethnographic accounts

[4.1] In the following, we present two different accounts of affective responses to the field and research process. We deliberately chose one account that shows how an emotion that is generally perceived as negative can be of motivation for the research process; the second account will illustrate how a sense of belonging to the field and a positive emotional attachment to it can lead to what we might call a (fan) researcher's fannish sensitivity. By choosing two seemingly opposing experiences, we want to challenge hierarchical concepts of affective attachment and superficial distinctions between good and bad feelings that disregard the underlying sociocultural norms that shape our emotions.

[4.2] When we met at the Fan Studies Network Conference in 2016, we were both writing our master theses on fanfiction. Although the topics of our work differed, we instantly connected over our similar interests in fan studies methodologies. We

discussed how our own emotional attachment to the field motivated us but also led to methodological and methodical insecurities. This insecurity certainly was a result of the lack of discourse on fan studies methodology to refer to (Evans and Stasi 2014). Over the last two years, we have continued to reflect upon our (emotional) experiences and their connection to methodological questions in regards to fan studies. The following accounts are a result of this ongoing discussion.

5. Autoethnographic account of Sophie Hansal

[5.1] When I interviewed self-identified LGBTQ+ fanfiction readers for my master's thesis, I was convinced that they would share my belief that fem-/slash fanfiction is *always* (also) a political tool and that it comments on societal norms regarding gender and sexuality. However, I could not find empirical evidence for this hypothesis in my interviews. It soon turned out that for the vast majority of my interview partners, politics wasn't a relevant topic at all in the context of fanfiction. Some of them even seemed to be annoyed by the fact that I addressed politics at all in the interview. I found this result immensely frustrating. After all, I did not want my thesis to state that LGBTQ+ fanfiction readers are simply consumers whose main objective is to gain pleasure through this kind of media use. I felt defensive and threatened, and I reached a point where I felt tempted to "distort the material that does not fit, and so ignore data that counteracts hypotheses or challenges values" (McLaughlin 2003, 72). I started to view my interview partners as *others,* and wanted to distance myself from them. My own feelings of frustration, disappointment, and hurt formed a barrier between the experiences of my interview partners and my own.

[5.2] It was only when a friend with whom I had shared my concerns confronted me about this that I started reflecting on why I felt so strongly and negatively about my interview partners' accounts. I slowly began to realize how much it had to do with my own history. For me, discovering fem-/slash fanfiction was closely connected to my coming out as a lesbian. Additionally, it happened during a time when I had become more and more politically conscious and active, and more sensitive toward feminist topics. Actively engaging with my negative emotions finally helped me realize that, in fact, I mostly associated fanfiction with politics because I discovered it for myself at around the same time.

[5.3] At the time, I didn't read fan fiction because I wanted to make a political statement. I read it for comfort, for distraction, and as a sort of escape from my then mostly heteronormative surroundings. There has been a lot of controversy regarding the question whether fanfiction can and should be viewed as a commentary on societal norms on a textual level (e.g., Russ 1985; Jones 2002; Flegel and Roth 2010). When I started writing my thesis, I wanted to write about how the process of reading fanfiction can be an act of resistance that challenges

societal norms. While I still believe that this is a topic worth further investigation, I could not find empirical proof for it in my own research. But engaging with my own emotional attachment to the field completely altered my perspective as a researcher.

[5.4] Confronting myself with my emotional entanglement in the field allowed me to be more open for the individual accounts of my interview partners. In the end I discovered that my own frustration was connected to the anger I felt toward structural homophobia I encountered in aspects of my everyday life. Engaging with fanfiction helped me escape from these experiences. For a long time I understood my own use of fanfiction as a political statement. I now believe that, in fact, it offered (and still offers) me an escape from my otherwise very politically conscious life.

[5.5] My emotions defined which narratives of my interview partners I was (un)able to hear. Only after I had actively engaged with the source of my frustration was I able to recognize that for the fans I interviewed reading fanfiction provided a safe space, not an act of active resistance. Comparing and contrasting my own experiences with those of my interview partners added a new layer of understanding for my own experiences not only as a lesbian fan, but also in regards to my expectations for the field. In the end, the feeling of frustration was a productive force in the research process that also led to methodical changes: a reflection on my own positionality as a lesbian fan and researcher became a key element of my thesis. Ultimately, the feeling of frustration became a starting point for the engagement with my affective attachment to the field and thus a valuable source of information.

6. Autoethnographic account of Marianne Gunderson

[6.1] When I was deciding on the topic of my master's thesis in gender studies, I was initially oscillating between two ideas. One concerned immigration policies, family reunification, and gender. I had a connection with this topic from working in a nongovernmental organization (NGO) dealing with these issues, where I had daily contact with the people whose lives were affected by these policies. My other idea was, more vaguely, to write something about fanfiction. This impulse came to me from a longtime proximity to and appreciation for fannish online spaces. Although I was not much of an active participant in fandoms in terms of content creation, much of my digital reading habits and online social life was infused with transformative fan culture. The first idea seemed to me like the more serious, respectable, and politically salient issue, while writing about fandom felt like the less legitimate, less tactical choice. There was also a sense of moral obligation connected to the immigration policy thesis idea—here I was strategically placed to try to make a difference, politically, with my work—but I could not make myself

embrace it. I was also hesitant to embrace the fanfiction idea, as a master's student with academic ambitions, I was concerned that this choice would preclude any future for me as an academic.

[6.2] These emotions did not become easier after I started looking at omegaverse fanfiction, a trope that, among other things, builds on wolf/human hybridities. These stories both fascinated and, initially, slightly repelled me. I was wary of doing my master's thesis on something that weird and academically obscure. Yet the discomfort I experienced at the thought of embracing this choice was different from the aversion I had toward researching immigration policies. I realized that my discomfort stemmed from becoming attached to the kinds of feelings and states that are commonly associated with fanfiction: frivolous, trivial, childish, lewd, too emotional, unserious, obsessed. Sara Ahmed (2014) talks about how emotions can be attached to certain objects, which then cause the emotions to circulate around those who become attached to them. "Such objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension" (11). This was the effect I was wary of: that I would be associated with the emotions and judgments that are attached to fanfiction communities, with devaluation and disregard by fellow students and academics that these labels could be used to justify. Conversely, with regard to the first topic idea, I was seeking to attach myself to the respectability, seriousness, and importance I considered it to hold.

[6.3] Tracing the origins of these notions was difficult. I cannot point to any one situation or interaction that planted them in my mind; rather, they seemed to have crystalized out of often unstated notions of academic respectability and rigueur diffused throughout my university education. However, retrospectively looking at the composition of the center for gender studies where I did my master's degree, the majority of the senior academic positions were held by people in the social sciences who were researching the kinds of politically salient social issues among which the topic of family reunification and immigration would be an easy fit.

[6.4] Sara Ahmed doesn't only talk about negative emotions; she also talks about the productive potential of responding to the world with wonder, joy, and care—paying attention to the ways in which the world may surprise you (2014, 178–88). She specifically highlights wonder as a driving force, as something that makes you look at the world with fresh eyes. Paying attention to my wonder, curiosity, and joy was what ultimately tipped the scale. My wonder and curiosity were sparked by the narratives about gender and sexualities I found in these stories that were unlike any I had seen elsewhere, and I found joy in the enthusiasm that permeates fan practices and communities. These affective states became the basis of my attachment to the thesis topic, their stickiness pulling me in. While I was considering the other topic, there was no such joyful attachment; it was instead connected to a sense of frustration and ire over what I perceived as an inhumane political system. At one point I realized that these emotions would never be enough to carry me through a year-long thesis writing process. This realization was aided by the support and

encouragement of faculty members whose research interests in weird, monstrous, or uncanny texts and topics mirrored my own, and two of them would become my thesis advisors.

[6.5] In working with my thesis, I found that the affective modes that seem common in fan communities—the intensity, the enthusiasm, the desire to reach out to others, the fascination and frustration—were reflected in how I felt about my project. It seemed to me that the affective modes of fandom were indeed sticky, but not in the way I had feared. Instead, I found that fan practices and fannish emotions were feeding my research, giving me confidence and drive. This was further supported by Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading (2002), which gave me the theoretical underpinnings to let go of the rails consisting of other people's thoughts and to begin to formulate my own. The irreverence with which fans appropriate media works affected my approach to theoretical perspectives, giving me the confidence to draw on theory from multiple disciplines both within and beyond my academic background, to own my interpretations, and to patch them together according to my own vision, eventually explaining my approach to theory as "textual poaching" in my thesis defence. Furthermore, in a manner that echoes Lothian's (2018) use of fan discourses to analyze the critical issues in the digital humanities, the critical discourses and analyses I observed among fans challenged me to sharpen my own perspectives.

[6.6] Connecting with other fan studies researchers, I began to notice what seemed like a common thread among fans, researchers, and my own approach to the fanfiction I was studying: a certain vein of enthusiasm, emotional involvement, and attachment to rather than distance from the material. There was a desire to engage and produce works that are meaningful to other researchers but also to an extended community of nonacademics fans. Whether this is a product of the dual position as fan and researcher, or the affective contagion from the communities we study, or a bit of both, is unclear. Certainly, it is not only limited to fan studies researchers because both the cosupervisors on my thesis met my ideas with a very similar infectious enthusiasm.

[6.7] It took me longer to recognize that my enthusiasm for and easy attachment to both fandom and fan studies was buoyed by my whiteness. Rukmini Pande's 2019 critique of the treatment of race in fandom and fan studies as well as Samira Nardakrni's characterization of fan studies as a field "structured by whiteness" (2019), prompted my awareness of the ways in which being white allowed my enjoyment of fandom to remain a relatively uncomplicated and unambiguous source of motivation. Retrospectively, I can see how my reading of omegaverse fanfiction operated from a position in which whiteness was taken for granted, allowing me to overlook how these narratives were reproducing the marginalization of people of color. This realization, of course, came with its own bundle of feelings, signalling the task that lies ahead.

7. Affect as an asset in (fan studies) research

[7.1] Contrasting these two accounts shows that while we both had different approaches to and experiences during the research process, we still had a shared experience—namely fannish emotions that troubled but ultimately informed and aided our research. Our respective emotional attachment to fannish communities not only was part of what motivated our research but also was instrumental in identifying what perspectives and ideas were worth pursuing. It informed our theoretical and methodical choices. Our affective responses to the field were connected to our own involvement in the fandoms we were studying, but in a broader sense they also reflected our position in societal structures. The way we engage with fandoms and research was influenced by many factors, such as our position as graduate students, our theoretical background in gender studies, but also our individual socialization as white, queer women.

[7.2] But to speak with Sara Ahmed, to make visible how these circumstances influenced our research, we needed to translate our emotions (our fascinations as well as our frustrations) into something we could work with. We had to actively reflect upon our emotions in the context of our relationships with fandom and our research projects. In *Living a Feminist Life* Ahmed states that "we have been taught to tidy our texts, not to reveal the struggle we have in getting somewhere" (2017, 13). Treating emotions as carriers of information requires a move in the opposite direction: researchers need to pay a lot of attention to these exact struggles during the research process. In order to use affective attachment to the field as a resource for self-reflection, it is not enough to simply accept that the research process is emotional. It is important to view the engagement with emotional aspects as a part of research work. If emotions are seen as antithetical to research, information may be lost. You have to put effort into understanding the emotions that come up during research and the context in which they appear.

[7.3] Questioning the dichotomy of good versus bad feelings (Ahmed 2014, 227) can be useful for challenging your own presuppositions both as a researcher and a fan. Applying Ahmed's affect theory to fan studies and reflecting upon one's own emotional involvement in fan communities might also be of special use when it comes to analyzing hierarchical structures and discriminatory practices within fan communities (such as racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia…). In *Knowing Otherwise* (2011), Alexis Shotwell argues that feelings of discomfort and shame can be instrumental in making white people reflect upon racism (229). Shame, according to Shotwell, "signals the need for a change in the world" (254), a need that challenges us to meet it with action. Actively listening to the experiences of black fans and fans of color, disabled fans, and LGBTQ+ fans, including their affective attachments and experiences in the discussions on fandom, and engaging with the cultural politics of emotion can thus make visible the processes of othering within fan communities.

[7.4] Addressing problematic issues can be especially challenging for researchers who are involved in the fan communities they are researching. If taken seriously, engaging with emotional aspects in research can be a difficult process that needs to be considered in time and resource administration accordingly. Affective involvement in the field of research can undoubtedly pose ethical challenges to researchers. Being emotionally attached to the field and subjects you are studying oftentimes comes with a sense of responsibility and might result in blind spots. Drawing on affect theory does not solve these problems, but addressing our affective relation to the field can add transparency to the research process. An affective approach to the field—one that translates emotions from an individual to a structural level—can add depth to academic work when done in a reflective, self-critical, and transparent way. Providing an account of the ways in which feelings play into research should be regarded as a part of the work of explicitly situating oneself in relation to ones' research and as a way of showing and accepting the partiality of all research (Haraway 1988).

[7.5] Additionally, it reformulates the question of what and how we, as fan studies researchers, want to research. Engaging with methodological questions in fan studies research means reflecting on what we as fans *and* researchers want to know about fan communities. We suggest that the rejection of emotion as a productive resource within media studies in general has to do with the wish to comply with academic norms that label emotions and attachment as improper. For a fairly young field of research such as fan studies, it might be even more important to comply with these standards in order to be established as an academic subdiscipline. Although this desire is understandable, it refutes the very nature of fan studies, which have always been trans- and interdisciplinary and therefore impossible to condense into one fixed set of academic rules. Seen through Lothian's analysis of digital humanities as a fandom, it becomes obvious that we think these fannish modes of engagement are an enrichment to the academic environment, and that they can be mobilized to engage cooperatively across disciplines and possibly also across the fan/researcher divide.

8. Conclusion: Toward a fannish methodology

[8.1] Against the background of Ahmed's work on the cultural politics of emotion, our respective accounts serve as examples of why and how Ahmed's theoretical framework can be especially suited for methodological discussions in fan studies. To sum up some of our main arguments, we propose the following characteristics for what we would like to call a "fannish methodology."

[8.2] A fannish methodology critically reflects upon and questions the dichotomous and oppositional conceptualization of emotion and rationality and its hegemony in academic thought. Drawing on "the affective technologies of fannish love" (Lothian 2017, 238) the researcher's emotional attachment to the material is

considered as a resource, and affective responses and emotional aspects of the research process are seen as useful sources of information and insight. A fannish methodology generally understands emotions as beneficial to the research process and views affective responses as clues for research questions, issues, and problems.

[8.3] A fannish methodology accepts that fan studies scholars write from a specific position, where they oftentimes are both researchers and fans, both participants and observers. Rather than denying existing emotional entanglements, the dual position as fan and researcher is both actively embraced *and* critically reflected upon. It challenges emotional hierarchies and acknowledges the critical potential of negatively connotated feelings. In its research output, a fannish methodology actively articulates the emotional aspects of the research process, using them to trace the entanglements among researchers, fan(work)s, and social structures.

[8.4] A fannish methodology is collectivist and community-based. Research is conducted based on the premises of cooperation and reciprocity, seeking to provide value both to the field of fan studies and to the fan communities it draws upon. It challenges existing academic practices that focus on competition between researchers and make a clear distinction between the subject-objects of study and the researcher. In so doing, it acknowledges and addresses what Ahmed describes as "academic walls" (2017, 148) that serve as a mark of distinction. A fannish methodology involves a commitment to remain sensitive toward hierarchical structures within academia and fan studies, among fan studies scholars, and between different fan communities. By examining the social conditions in which both positive and negative feelings arise, it does not overlook existing power imbalances and discriminatory practices.

[8.5] Fannish methodologies are irreverent toward authority and canons, as fan studies cannot be confined in one distinct definition and/or discipline. Fan studies have to be seen as "a truly interdisciplinary field, one that has adopted and adapted ideas from various other disciplines, particularly audience and cultural studies" (Hellekson and Busse 2014, 1). Consequently, a fannish methodology encourages academic textual poaching—drawing on different traditions, disciplines, and fields, bringing them together in potentially new and unexpected ways. Rather than adhering to a specific theoretical approach, it accommodates the scavenging of theory and ideas from different research traditions as it serves the purpose of the researcher. Instead of lamenting the fact that "fan studies remain an undisciplined discipline" (Ford 2014, 54), this diversity of methodical and theoretical approaches in the field should be viewed as a strength.

[8.6] We do not want to present this as a definitive list of characteristics but rather as a starting point for further discussion. Given the growing variety of scholars from different disciplines who engage with audience and fan studies, it is questionable that identifying *one* methodological approach to the field is either achievable or relevant. However, focusing on fan researchers' shared (emotional)

experiences—their fannish sensitivity—offers one possible answer to the question of how we can grow a sense of community among fan studies researchers (Ford 2014). With our article we have illustrated how an application of Sarah Ahmed's approach to affect could add new perspectives and depth to a much-needed broader discussion on fan studies methodology. We argue that an affective turn in methodology will improve knowledge within the field of fan studies research, and that it can help fan studies scholars in finding a common ground despite different backgrounds.

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