

-POPULAR PRIVATION-

SUFFERING IN FAN CULTURES

**A PHD THESIS
PRESENTED TO THE SCHOOL OF DIVINITY
AT NEW COLLEGE**

BY DANIEL PAWLEY, 2007

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DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the contents of this PhD thesis represent the author's original work. It is the result doctoral study prescribed by the University of Edinburgh, and the planning, research and writing took place while the author, Daniel Pawley (b. 12 March 1953), was registered as a full-time PhD student at New College. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree, or at any other institution, or for any other professional qualification, except as specified here.

Daniel Pawley

15 September 2007

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Fandom is a cultural practice that provides significant meaning to fans through their consumption of texts (the objects of fan devotion) and through social behaviors which accompany heightened textual consumption. This practice also functions as a means by which fans attempt to satisfy variable states of deprivation I have called privation. Fans do this by seeking rewards that alternate between pleasures and deeper satisfactions.

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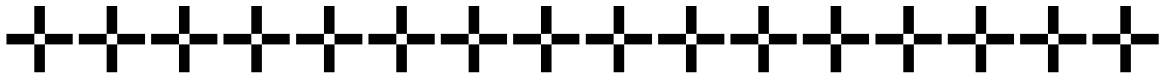
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ABSTRACT

Contributing to scholarship that explores human suffering within mediated culture has provided the impetus for this PhD thesis. I propose that suffering in mediated modernity be considered in social, cultural, and theological terms; and specifically in the context of privation, a term applied by Saint Augustine to the integrated problems of suffering and evil. Privation, to Augustine, meant negation: a vacuum of human existence understood as the absence of positive, sustaining life forces. I attempt to update this concept by arguing that a modern definition of privation can be conceived of as variable states of human deprivation such as loss, dislocation, isolation, and hunger. Privation encompasses these states of deprivation, expressing the kind of suffering that occurs in mediated culture. To narrow the mediated-culture aspect of the study, I explore the topic of fandom, which I define as “the intentional socialization of textual consumption,” and I attempt to show how privation exists in several well-defined forms within a wide variety of fan cultures (groups of fans). In short, fans use their fandom to satisfy their privation in four ways: through connectivity, release, identification, and empowerment. The corresponding deprivations include dislocation, animus, isolation, and hunger. I bring these concepts together in the form of deprivations requiring satisfactions described as dislocation/connectivity, animus/release, isolation/identification, and hunger/empowerment. In each case I attempt to provide analysis and discussion of relevant findings based on empirical research, and in a final discussion I integrate supportive ideas from theories of attachment, catharsis, identification, and empowerment. My methods of research include a combination of secondary source analysis; two distinct phases of questionnaire-based research among 256 fans from various fan cultures; and a case study approach to the online fan culture of the Harry Potter books by Edinburgh author J.K. Rowling.

I

INTRODUCTION



CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1 QUESTIONS FRAMING THE STUDY

How do people suffer in today's world of mediated culture? Do habits of media consumption decrease experiences of human suffering? Can mediated experiences function as predictors of the internal and external suffering states of media consumers? Are old ideas in communication theory, such as the likening of media to magic bullets and hypodermic needles, still relevant in a world of cultural consumers seeking new ways to salve psychological wounds?¹ This first set of questions marks the beginning of this Ph.D thesis.

Certainly, any discussion of suffering and the media is framed today by the commonly held belief that media consumption has reordered human experience away from participation and toward spectatorship.² We have become a world of watchers, the argument holds, who are far more comfortable watching suffering

¹ Magic bullet theory and hypodermic needle theory were primarily expressions of symbolism relevant to the overall negative view expressed toward media during the era of mass society theory, which is sometimes thought of as the first era of mass communication theory. The symbolism was obvious: the media could function as a dangerous anesthetic or, in fact, prove fatal to the defenseless media consumer. The use of media for purposes of escape and relief from pain are also implied. Ensuing eras of mass communication theory, which tested such ideas scientifically, asserted that media effects were highly complex and could be more accurately explained by examining their social and cultural associations.

² See p. 1 of "The Appeal of Experience; the Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Time," by Arthur Kleinman, in *Daedalus*, Winter 1996.

events unfold from a distance than in taking part in such events ourselves. Possibly, in some ways, we even watch ourselves, transferring the image of who we believe we are onto real or imagined screens and stages, thereby finding some sense of relief from the subjectivity and present reality of our own personal sufferings.

In many places the very young themselves become acclimated to environments of spectatorship when suffering is involved.³ Children watch televised events such as the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, alone, or with their caregivers, or with their peers. Even if they choose to view other types of programming, they are often witnesses to the increasing practice of interrupting television networks with the day's "breaking news," which often features an event in which suffering or violence rules the content. Studies have consistently shown that "aggression," "fear of the world as a scary place," and "desensitization" are among the probable results for child spectators of suffering's realistic portrayals.⁴ A reasonable discussion, therefore, emerges pertinent to whether or not ingrained, habitual spectatorship eliminates the capacity for correct involvement and meaningful participation in the future when human suffering is involved?

The body of literature emerging from this discussion includes works such as *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (Susan D. Moeller, 1999) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Susan Sontag, 2003). This is a

³ See, especially, pp. 1771-1773 of "Violence and Suffering in Television News: Toward a Broader Conception of Harmful Television Content for Children," by Juliette H. Walma van der Molen, in *Pediatrics*, Vol. 113, No. 6, June 2004.

⁴ Ibid., p. 1772.

literature in which habitual spectatorship is portrayed as having rendered human suffering an object, a distant object, a mechanism of fatigue, a form of entertainment, and an object of ultimate unknowability. Moeller's acknowledgment of the simultaneous deaths of Mother Teresa and Princess Diana, and the disparity of media coverage given to each,⁵ was presented in a context of dramatic celebrity news versus news of a less sensational nature, but it could also have been presented against a backdrop of media-facilitated spectatorship. The Diana story was the spectator's ideal story with its lurid details of shock and fantasy, while the Mother Teresa story existed in a realm inhospitable to spectatorship: a world of ordinary human suffering possessing little more than the poverty that produced it.

The world of media spectatorship, moreover, is a world slow to recognize non-spectacular human suffering, in itself and in others, and be moved by it. To paraphrase Sontag, suffering is served up as images we remember while simultaneously forgetting what they depict. We are left with image upon image, scene upon scene, divorced from meaningful analysis and memory, until our appraisal of suffering becomes one conditioned by habituation and "the blunting of mind."⁶ The only suffering to which we can relate is that which is attached to media-facilitated spectacle or something "exotic." In this way, we can see that media have indeed reoriented our perspectives, transforming us into Sontag's "co-

⁵ See pp. 309-311 in which Moeller states that the American evening news "devoted a total of 197 minutes to the death of Princess Diana" during the week of September 1, 1997, while giving Mother Teresa's death only "16 minutes" of coverage during that same week.

⁶ Sontag, p. 109.

spectators” who operate under a negatively compromised awareness of human suffering.⁷

A second set of questions opening this thesis concerns suffering itself? How should suffering be studied, and what range of disciplines should be brought to bear upon it? Which metaphors should be employed in describing suffering? Is suffering even the right word to use where clinical studies of suicide, depression, alcoholism, drug addiction, family breakdown, and other human ailments, reside in the realms of cause and effect, prevention, statistical analysis, and other placements that reduce ambiguity in favor of scientific precision?⁸

A “word like ‘suffering’ does little to help us imagine the modern disasters we are challenged to confront,” Lawrence Langar writes.⁹ Langar expounds persuasively about the limited power of applying often-used concepts to spectacular modes of human affliction, but what if the affliction being considered can be appropriated more as a function of ordinary, day-to-day existence? If the term suffering can be employed in these situations, then the ensuing challenge becomes centered upon which metaphors and descriptive concepts to use in applying

⁷ Even our common memories are largely media constructions, according to Sontag. We are more likely to remember the suffering of 9/11, for instance, as if it were “a movie” rather than “a dream.” See pp. 21-22, 60, 67, 70-71, 89, 106-107, 109, and 111 for notable observations.

⁸ In a standard text on suicide, for instance, such as Mark Williams’s *Suicide and Attempted Suicide*, Penguin, 1997, the topic of suffering is rarely mentioned by name except as a barely visible backdrop to concepts such as anger, anomie, bereavement, bipolar disorders, cognitive destruction, depressions, deprivation, helplessness, hopelessness, insomnia, melancholy, mood disorders, neuroses, panic disorder, physical illness, psychiatric illness, sadism, seasonal affective disorder, sexual abuse, substance abuse, therapy, and other terms related to causes and effects of suicide.

⁹ See p. 1 of Langar’s article, “Alarmed Vision: Social Suffering and the Holocaust Atrocity,” *Daedalus*, Winter 1996.

suffering to one's discourse. Spiritual desolation, for instance, can be thought of as a kind of suffering that encompasses sadness without apparent cause, religious faith which has been disturbed by circumstances, and feelings of emotional abandonment.¹⁰ Or the term, demoralization, can be applied to situations in which "existential distress" and the disruption of one's valuation of himself or herself as a person is present.¹¹ Other writers have used the concept of loss in their discourses on suffering. Loss of self, described by one writer as social isolation resulting from an erosion of self-validation, is applied to the suffering of chronically ill individuals.¹² And sacred loss, a suffering applied to individuals who have experienced "a violation of fundamental spiritual symbols and values," is appropriated as a spiritual suffering that can be produced by ordinary localized events or catastrophic global events such as the 9/11 scenario.¹³

These two sets of questions, moreover, one related to suffering and mediated culture and the other to the nature of suffering itself, occurred to me as I entered into this study, which I refer to as *Popular Privation: Suffering in Fan Cultures*. My engagement with this study was incidental during my first year of doctoral research at the University of Edinburgh. In residence at New College, I had originally

¹⁰ See pp. 23, 24, and 28 in Jesus Corella's article, "Spiritual Desolation in Today's World," *The Way*, 43/3, July 2004.

¹¹ David W. Kissane applies this concept to the most "ordinary" suffering of all: decision making which takes place near the end of one's life. See pp. 21-24 of "The Contribution of Demoralization to End of Life Decision Making," *Hastings Center Report*, July-August 2004.

¹² See pp. 190-191 of "Loss of Self: A Fundamental Form of Suffering in the Chronically Ill" by Kathy Charmaz, *Sociology of Health and Illness*, Vol. 5 No. 2, 1983.

¹³ See pp. 59 and 74-75 of "Sacrilege: A Study of Sacred Loss and Desecration and Their Implications for Health and Well-Being in a Community Sample," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 44(1), 2005.

wanted to explore the emerging topic of fandom, a subject of scholarly interest in my field of communication studies. Wanting to establish a theoretical framework for thinking about fandom in theological terms, I sought to add to a discussion within Media, Religion, and Culture (MRC)¹⁴ centering on the premise that fandom features elements of non-conventional or cultural religion¹⁵; that fans of various mediated cultural products possess a cosmology which defines and sustains them as a religion defines and sustains its adherents.¹⁶

Well into laying foundations for the study, however, I began to observe what I interpreted as patterns of mental, emotional, and even spiritual suffering among fans. At that time, I had been looking only at fans of the mass-marketed Harry Potter books, and as I will later show, these patterns of suffering were well represented. I initially resisted centering my research on these observations of suffering in the Harry Potter fandom, arguing that fandom was about more than suffering. However, after moving into a data collection phase involving the execution of questionnaire-assisted interviews with fans of many cultural products, I

¹⁴ Media, Religion, and Culture (MRC) attempts to understand the presence of mediated religion in the context of participatory declines in formal ecclesial structures across the world. It originated at the University of Uppsala in 1993 and has since attracted scholars from the humanities and social sciences.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Michael Jindra's essay, "It's About Faith in Our Future: Star Trek Fandom as Cultural Religion," pp. 165-79, as contained in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, edited by Bruce David Forbes and Jeffery R. Mann, University of California Press, 2000/2005.

¹⁶ I hold that such a study has value for its relevance to the MRC dialogue on the role of cultural consumption and its associated social components in the development of non-conventional religion. It also may possess implications concerning the origination and development of established contemporary religions such as Scientology, which warrants study pertinent to whether or not Dianetics and Scientology grew out of the fandom inspired by science fiction writer, L. Ron Hubbard.

began to see that a sense of suffering, or something like it, pervaded many fan experiences. This observation was strong enough, I believed, to stimulate informational, diagnostic, and therapeutic dialogue on the subject of suffering in media and popular culture, a mostly silent area within studies linking media and religion. It was also something that could legitimately add to the growing body of research into fandom. Thus, I began to relocate my study of fandom to the context of human suffering in our modern, mediated world.

1.2 SUICIDE OF A FAN IN THE FAMILY

At the same time—the end of year one of the study—my family and I were affected by the suicide of a family member. In April of 2001, a niece ended her life by carbon monoxide poisoning in the garage of her parents' home. Jerusha was a young woman in her mid-twenties, an honors student, and loved by those who knew her. She left no note and it is still not clear why she took her own life. Shortly after her suicide, however, the family learned of the sequence of activities which preceded the event, a portion of which I now report here with the permission of her parents. The night prior to the suicide, Jerusha indulged herself a final time in her practice of karaoke singing.¹⁷ She went with a younger sister to one of their favorite

¹⁷ Singing to prerecorded music, Karaoke usually takes place in public recreational settings such as pubs, lounges, or restaurants. The singer uses a microphone to provide vocalization to familiar recorded songs and themes. Enthusiasts describe themselves as karaoke fans and their activities certainly fall within my definition of fandom as “the intentional socialization of textual consumption”—the text in this case being the musical content of the karaoke experience.

karaoke rooms, and according to the sister, Jerusha sang her heart out.¹⁸ She had described herself as a karaoke fan over the years, but this time she brought even more fannish enthusiasm to the music and microphone. She indulged herself until well after midnight, and then drove home with her sister. At some point a few hours later she rose in the early morning, slipped silently out of her house, drove across town and into the garage of her parents' house, closed the garage door, and left the car engine running.

How she negotiated the silent passage from the social world of her fandom to the individual world of her suicide prevails as a mystery. Yet, it would seem on the surface that two forms of escape, punctuated by unnamed and untreated suffering, were in operation here. The first was the temporary escape provided by Jerusha's fandom: the opportunity to leave her personal problems behind for a few hours of social engagement in a public setting. The second form of escape was the permanent self-imposed finality of suicide.¹⁹ How had this happened, and what did it mean? Does the suffering which can lead to suicide also find itself expressed in a person's cultural choices? Can we look into the expressions of suffering within that person's fandom to inquire about where suffering might lead if left unapproached and

¹⁸ Informal conversation with Mary Kesler (and earlier with Diane Kesler Bergquist) on 31 August 2002.

¹⁹ Williams, in *Suicide and attempted Suicide* (1997), argues, "The predominant motivation in suicidal behavior is escape. The person feels trapped. They can see no way out of their prison, and take little account of the possibility that some of their feeling of entrapment comes from a biased view of their own past life that feeds into their hopelessness about the future" (p. 218). Williams also asserts that suicide is far more of "a cry of pain" than the traditionally understood "cry for help" (p. 147-9). The suicidal person experiences a kind of "tunnel vision" whereby all "normal escape routes are not noticed" and the person "begins to seek alternative ways of escape" (p. 217).

untreated? Where do the roots of such expressions of suffering lie, and how might one best describe the suffering which exists in these contexts?

We need a framework for knowing how to approach these questions, and we need students of media, religion and culture to have a hand in fashioning it. The social sciences tell us much about underlying motivations and psychological states of consumers. But, until we have a clearer picture of media products and their uses—particularly with respect to consumptive practices and the social behaviors accompanying them—our search for answers will not be fully engaged. Why did Jerusha sing to pre-recorded music hours before her suicide?²⁰ Why did she socialize immediately prior to entering a final state of destructive aloneness? What would she have said about this, and more importantly, what revelations would have been detected in her sudden silence?

The questions produce more questions, and my hope is to be an intelligent questioner, and a seeker of insights, throughout the course of this thesis. Asking questions and seeking insights, furthermore, requires a method accommodating of personal narratives such as Jerusha's. Narratives using culture as a starting point are rich reservoirs of human nuance because they reveal habits, patterns, values, and struggles shared by many people in their day-to-day existence. They can be seen as contributing to "the shared blueprint of both the local and larger world into which

²⁰ While not speaking directly to fan karaoke, Wayne Cristaudo does theorize a relationship between karaoke and human despair in rock music. His article, "The Truth and Divinity of Sickness and Rage in the Karaoke of Despair" (p. 1, *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. III, Spring 2003) places "the spiritual impoverishment of modern life" in a context of karaoke-like articulated rock lyrics espousing Nietzschean chaos. See especially pp. 7-10.

we are born and take part in shaping.”²¹ We may even choose to see the human subjects of such narratives as “protagonists” whose “lived experiences” make valued contributions to the literature of “subjectivity and the self.”²² Analysis, interpretation, and perspective must be applied here; but the simple narrative reporting of how people live, and how they make sense of their cultural choices, will show us how little we know and how much we need to know concerning the topics we study. Hence, a major goal of the present thesis is to explore the worlds of suffering and nuance as they appear in narrative form among people who describe themselves as fans.

Other specific goals include defining and describing modern, mediated suffering as *privation*: variable states of deprivation experienced in our modern mediated world. Secondly, for reasons of providing needed background to a discussion of privation in fandom and other aspects of popular mediated culture, I will show how the concept of privation is supported within social, cultural, and theological approaches to human suffering. Thirdly, I will seek to present fandom as an emerging discourse of non-conventional religious meaning pertinent to the discussion of privation among fans, their texts (“texts” meaning all objects of fandom), and their social worlds. Fourthly, I will discuss merits and limitations of the eclectic methodology employed by this study in the achievement of its goals.

²¹ See p. 2 in “Themes of Suffering in Later Life” by Helen K. Black and Robert L. Rubinstein (*The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 59, 2004). Black’s and Rubinstein’s method for exploring suffering in the lives of people over 70 relies on collection and interpretation of cultural narratives.

²² Ibid., p. 5.

Fifthly, I will explore privation among fans in multiple fan cultures with respect to four dynamics which emerged from interviews. I express these as deprivations and their accompanying satisfactions, stating them as the following: dislocation/connectivity, animus/release, isolation/identification, and hunger/empowerment. Sixthly, I will explore the isolation/identification dynamic at work in the online culture generated and sustained by fans of the Harry Potter books. Finally, I will attempt to present theoretical insights that carry the four specific deprivational contexts a step further, toward the makings of a unified theory of suffering among fans and the cultures they inhabit.

1.3 GEOGRAPHY OF THE STUDY

Here, I would like to add a note on the geographical settings of the present study. *Popular Privation: Suffering in Fan Cultures* emerged as a transatlantic study. It has drawn from primary and secondary information sources in the United Kingdom and the United States (plus material acquired from online environments). All of the questionnaire-assisted interviews, for instance, were conducted in the United States, initially near my home in the Tampa Bay region of Florida and later in the states of Minnesota and California. Of the Florida-based fans, my belief was that fandom sampling within south-central Florida's popular media culture would potentially yield concentrated, regionally sensitive results possessing comparative value. Indeed, regional interests were represented, just as they were in both Minnesota and California.

Likewise, a significant UK component of the study stemmed from the collection and inclusion of published British fan narratives obtained primarily through various UK libraries. Narratives such as *Faith of Our Fathers: Football as a Religion* (Edge, 1999) and *Fanclub: It's a Fan's World—Pop Stars Just Live in It* (Divola, 1998), provided guidance in exploring fan psychology from a uniquely British perspective. They also provided raw data which has served to illuminate British theoretical and academic discourses on fandom advanced by recent scholarship such as *Fan Cultures* (Hills, 2000) and *No One Like Us, We Don't Care: the Myth and Reality of Millwall Fandom* (Robson, 2000).

Another aspect of the UK side of the study involved Edinburgh itself: the city and the university. Well into my search for an understanding of relationships between culture and human suffering, I began to view the city of Edinburgh as a metaphorically important setting for reasons of its visible juxtaposition of both culture and suffering. Each August the Edinburgh Fringe Festival explodes with multiple expressions of popular culture. The city becomes a cacophony of sights, sounds, meanings, performances, and experiences, spreading from one end of the cityscape to the other. For these few weeks, this side of Edinburgh's fame shifts attention from another source of notoriety: its homelessness problem. When the festival ends and the fall winds return to scour the landscape, the presence of dispossessed individuals becomes visible again. Culture moves indoors while the homeless occupy strategic foot-traffic locations near museums and art galleries,

shops on Princes Street and the Royal Mile, and beneath the outdoor facades of ATM machines operated by the Bank of Scotland.

Many cultural consumers know something about this juxtaposition through *Trainspotting* (1993), the Irvine Welsh novel and Miramax film (1996) exploring Edinburgh's underside. A voice-over in the film, inserted as the main character flees capture by two store detectives, articulates intense suffering, interspersed with images of cultural consumption, in a language of uncompromising candor:

Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a f---ing big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and electrical tin openers.... Choose DIY and wondering who the f--- you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pi--ing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, f---ed-up brats you spawned to replace yourself. Choose your future. Choose life....²³

Indeed, Welsh's harsh word choices and brutal imagery articulate a suffering consistent with that appropriated by this thesis, though not stated with such uncompromising candor. The burden of choices relevant to the experiences of a meaningful life sits in uneasy coexistence with the escapes and addictions offered by modern culture. With meaningful life an unreachable prospect for many people, the escapes and addictions are employed, often ineffectively, and the sufferer may never truly escape his or her condition. I appropriate this type of intense modern suffering by bringing together insights from theology, culture, and the social sciences, and by going to the sufferers themselves for new data. What such voices express is

²³ See Movieweb.com, 18 July 2002.

sometimes overt and specific and other times devoid of anything that seems revelational. The voices of suffering become silent, too, and I would like, beyond the contents of this thesis, to begin to understand the silences of fans and less organized consumers of modern media. Indeed, is suffering in the modern world better comprehended through what is said or what is not said? one may ask.

Edinburgh, the city and its university, have been good places for asking such questions. One means of preserving a global dialogue on suffering and culture for more than a century has been the commitment by the four ancient Scottish universities (Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and St. Andrews) to the maintenance of the Gifford Lectures, which have sought to gain further insights into questions formulated by scholars and students of suffering. Relevant to Lord Adam Gifford's original emphasis on natural theology are questions posed by theodicy: "What does God do when people are suffering?" "How is evil overcome?" and "Is evil necessary?" Such questions have been part of the Gifford dialogue from its beginnings in 1888 to the present.²⁴

²⁴ David Samuel Hughes of Baylor University has studied the Gifford lectures with respect to their role in furthering our understanding of suffering and evil in what he describes as four contexts: the "logical problem of evil," the "probabilistic problem," the "existential problem," "the unanswered questions argument or theodicy" ("The Problem of Evil as Discussed in the Gifford lectures from 1889-1986"). Hughes's first context explores a Gifford perspective on "whether [suffering and] evil's existence is logically consistent with an omnipotent and morally good God." His second context does the same with the question of the excessive amount of suffering and evil which would seem to render God's existence improbable. His third context attempts to apply a Gifford perspective to "the emotional and spiritual difficulty caused by the existence of evil in the world," and his fourth context is concerned with the theodical idea that God "has or may have morally sufficient reasons" for allowing suffering and evil. All are familiar elements of the dialogue related to suffering and theodicy, and Hughes shows how the Gifford lectures have maintained them across the decades. For additional information on The Gifford Lectures, see "The Gifford Lectures:

Studies within New College's Faculty of Divinity, moreover, have preserved the dialogue, especially as suffering has remained relevant to theology and practical theology.²⁵ Noted, for instance, are theologies acknowledging the dangers of specialized research approaches losing sight of broader topics—human suffering, for one—which produced and legitimated them. A need for aerial photography identifying macroscopic features of a problem is as much needed as a visual technology that looks at problems microscopically.²⁶ Indeed, the analysis and use of suffering to illuminate such topics as universal affliction, and the argument that all people suffer after Christ's "determinative agony," bear a compelling timelessness and universality.²⁷

Suffering is, indeed, a timeless, universal condition, and the present thesis joins itself with an ethics seeking to employ a non-reductionist view of suffering while also drawing on social and cultural resources for interpretive insights. Non-reduced approaches to human suffering span centuries, even millennia, of

Over 100 Years of Renowned Lectures on Natural Theology"
(<http://www.giffordlectures.org>).

²⁵ A small sampling of studies at New College over the past four decades include the following: "Jesus Christ in Human Suffering: a Theology of Suffering Interpreted through the Incarnation" (Bomberger 1968), "Anointing the Sick: Studies in Theological Development and Pastoral Method" (MacDougall 1974), "Political Theology and the Theology of Pastoral Care: a Comparative Study, with Special Reference to Jurgen Moltmann and Seward Hiltner" (Purves 1978), "Pastoral Care of the Sick, the Dying, and the Bereaved in Early Swiss and South German Protestantism" (Olson-Dopff 1979), "Pastoral Care in Psychiatric Hospitals: an Approach Based on Some of the Insights and Methods of Schizophrenic Persons" (Davidson 1985), and "God and the World in Saint Irenaeus: Theological Reflections" (Forster 1985). Understanding suffering, as well as developing diagnostic and therapeutic models for treating afflicted persons, emerge as critical emphases in this sampling of studies.

²⁶ See Forster's "God and the World in Saint Irenaeus: Theological Reflections" (1985).

²⁷ See Bomberger's "Jesus Christ in Human Suffering: a Theology of Suffering Interpreted through the Incarnation" (1968).

philosophical and theological searching. Many can be seen as being grounded in preserving belief in the “intactness” of persons and a conviction that “suffering with” others occupies a significant moral position in human history.²⁸ The blending of this ethics with an acknowledgment that social and cultural approaches to suffering bring the discussion forward into present-day contexts can be both enriching and welcome.

1.4 CONTINUED HOPE FOR INTEGRATED MODELS

It is, finally, my hope that the present study adds something to the understanding of suffering as it is expressed within our exceedingly complex, mediated world. Another purpose here is to provide a useful study for those who work to ease suffering through their involvement in ministry and the caring professions. The prospect of providing assistance to those who counsel, nurture, listen, respond, and prescribe relevant to the healing of those who suffer from lived ills of modernity, makes this project entirely worthwhile. I seek to add to what is known about how ordinary people attach themselves to popular media for utilitarian purposes, how cultural products can be used to facilitate processes of escape from the pressures of life, and how media-related consumptive behaviors are employed in attempts to satisfy deprivations which other societal functions leave

²⁸ See pp. 10-12, 15-17, and 20-21 of “Levinas, Psychotherapy, and the Ethics of Suffering” by Edwin E. Gantt, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 40 No. 3, Summer 2000.

unaddressed. A fine-tuning of healing ministries within practical and pastoral theology may be an unexpected benefit of this study.

The contributors to *They Shall Not Hurt: Human Suffering and Human Caring* (1989), called over a decade ago for cooperation between the humanities and caring professions in the creation of integrated models for the relief of human suffering.²⁹ The humanities were seen at that moment as a slave to methods and theory, lacking human application in the real world; and the caring professions were criticized for their overemphasis on adapting technologies to healing processes, an approach which disallowed interdisciplinary alliances seeking to unravel causes and effects of suffering. Yet, with suffering as the central component of each pursuit, it was argued that only in cooperation would that center receive adequate attention. Truth-telling in the patient-physician relationship, for instance, had something to learn from truth-telling processes in art and literature. Also, respect for the idea that suffering might possess meaning beyond itself and its realized effects, as espoused within some religious traditions, might have applications in the diagnostic, therapeutic centers of medicine, from the ER to the recovery room.

What was left out of this study, however, was any attention to how mediated popular culture might be drawn into cooperative approaches. How might the internal processes of popular rather than elite texts be adapted to healing efforts in

²⁹ This anthology, edited by a religious studies professor and a health sciences professor, offered perspectives on suffering ranging from Job to the Good Samaritan to those provided by the major Eastern religions. See the "Introduction" (Rodney L. Taylor and Jean Watson, pp. 1-9), "Woman's Answer to Job" (Nel Noddings, pp. 73-8), and "Human Caring and Suffering: A Subjective Model for Health Sciences" (Watson, pp. 125-35).

the caring professions? How might the reception of meaning from media texts speak to the meaning, or lack of it, from suffering in the contexts of diagnosis and therapy occurring in healthcare settings? What revelations about audience uses of entertainment products might stimulate thinking in caring communities about how suffering people use the information they receive about illness, disease, and the myriad ailments which cause their suffering? As Jean Watson writes,

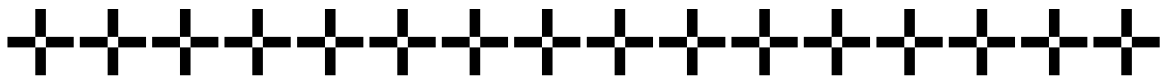
Whether one starts with human suffering, or the humanities, or from philosophical questions about the nature of persons, caring or health sciences, one ends up worrying about the same values—the enhancement, fulfillment, and enrichment of human life—the meaning one finds in one’s existence.³⁰

I would add that the integration of media into cooperative approaches (especially as they include theological perspectives) also seeks to comment on the problem of “the meaning one finds in one’s existence.” To acknowledge the presence and forms of suffering—in this case, within fan cultures—is one way of getting to that point, as the pages lying ahead attempt to illustrate.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 134.

II

A FOUNDATIONAL CONTEXT



CHAPTER TWO: A FOUNDATIONAL CONTEXT

SUFFERING AS PRIVATION IN SOCIAL, AESTHETIC, AND THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO HUMAN SUFFERING

2.1 PRIVATION AS A CONTEXT FOR SUFFERING CULTURES IN MODERNITY

Human suffering, the primary context of this PhD thesis, is a topic of concern for each generation. Since suffering is universal, existing across the whole of human experience, every member of our species derives some benefit from participating in this ancient discourse.¹⁶ The discourse may be informational, an acknowledgement that to suffer is to be human, a normal and natural part of being born, living, being alive in the world, and dying, too. Or, it may range into the diagnostic, whereby the ills of a society (if our context is collective suffering) at a specific time are gathered together and presented as the diagnosis of an age. We may agree or disagree, for instance, with novelist Salman Rushdie, whose diagnosis of our own age stems from suffering produced by what he calls the global “permeability” of once-secure borders. An “open frontier” created by “the bringing down of walls,” he adds, has

¹⁶ Even though ultimate answers to human suffering are elusive and inadequate, suffering’s constancy and universality require that it be addressed by every generation. As Pope John Paul II stated in his *Apostolic Letter on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering* (no.13), the constant reconsideration of suffering respects its unknowability in such a way as to produce benefits from mere discussion and recognition. To ignore such recognition is not an option.

left in its wake a world of uncertainty, insecurity, and despair.¹⁷ Had Rushdie sought to provide concrete ways of negotiating this “open frontier,” he would have moved his analysis of our times from the diagnostic into the therapeutic, still another type of suffering discourse which exists from age to age.

The suffering discourse may, therefore, range into informational, diagnostic, and therapeutic realms. It benefits, too, from being attached to a descriptive concept which persuasively expresses the spirit of the age that produced it. For our own age, I propose that this concept is privation, and it is the purpose of this chapter to locate modern suffering in a range of deprivations encompassed by this term. In addition, privation is presented here as a human context for the forthcoming discussion of fandom. The study of fans and the cultures they inhabit are seen as relevant to suffering which is expressed as a range of deprivations. Fans exhibit these deprivations, I will argue, and are therefore reasonably placed in a context of human suffering.

We may think of privation historically, as an early medieval concept, knowing that Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.) used the term extensively in his deliberations on the nature of suffering and evil. The fame of his *privatio boni* (privation of good) theory of evil as a negation still leads discussions exploring suffering and evil from the perspective of “ontological shortcomings” and “absences

¹⁷ See Rushdie’s collection of essays, *Step Across this Line*, Random House, 2002.

of existence.”¹⁸ In no way is evil, by this rhetorical locution, to be given any sense of a positive, active role in the universe: since God created everything that exists, and God cannot create anything that is less than perfect, then evil must be seen as residing in a nonexistent state, a realm described as privation of good (or, may we say, good that has been negated). Suffering, of course, resides in an existent state, and it may produce positive benefits, as many have argued. Thought of as privation, however, suffering may also be comprehended through explicitly stated negations. Loss is such a negation. Separation is a negation. Isolation is another negation. Each of these may be seen as relevant to the privation concept. Despite the influence of Augustine’s use of privation, I note that he did not invent the Latin word *privatio*. This term’s etymological roots include the Latin word *privates*, a participle form of *privare*, meaning to strip or deprive of, and also *privus*, which means alone or private.¹⁹ Also, whatever obscurities of usage may encompass Augustine’s adoption of *privatio*, the term itself would have been of significant value to expressions of suffering during Augustine’s life, which coincided with the sufferings and negations associated with the collapse of the Roman Empire both as a social system and a morally authoritative governing body.²⁰ Privation is, therefore,

¹⁸ These are terms expressed by Charles T. Mathewes in *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

¹⁹ See any numerical edition of *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, including the 9th edition (1986), which is used here.

²⁰ Volumes, of course, have been written about the fall of the Roman Empire. From the perspective of the term *privation*, moreover, one may choose from among many sources which approach Rome’s fall through applied negations which seek to understand and express both internal and external collapses. One source, now fifty-plus years old, is C. Delisle Burns’s *The First Europe* (1947), which, though not devoted in its entirety to the fall of

older than Augustine, and it is younger than the medieval church father, too, occupying a relevant position before and within other ages, including our own.

Many descriptive words go into the modern definition of privation, including terms such as dispossession, divestiture, destitution, impoverishment, poverty, and want.²¹ We think of privation as “the condition of being deprived of what one once had or ought to have”; as “an act or instance of depriving”; or as “the state of being deprived of something, especially of something required or desired.”²² We use privation to describe human isolation. We use it in discussions of economic poverty. We employ it in analyses of child privation and maternal privation, where the issues of human attachment and social, emotional, and cognitive disorders are the result of the alienation of the human person.²³ We apply privation in the natural and health sciences to explore and remedy conditions of loss, as in the loss of hearing²⁴; and in the social and behavioral sciences to describe the process of withholding, such as in

Rome, nevertheless attributes the turbulent beginnings of early Europe to Rome’s social and moral disintegrations. See Chapter Two, “The Dissolution of a Social System,” and Chapter Three, “Decline of Moral Authority,” whereby Burns addresses Augustine’s role in understanding the privation felt by Rome’s citizenry as their city, long held to be eternal, was showing that it was merely temporal and about to fall. Of Augustine’s perceptive insight—plus the comfort he gave through his book, *The City of God*, Burns writes, “The City of God[’s]...importance for those who read it in the dark days of the fifth and sixth centuries, lay in the fact that it gave them confidence and hope, while the Roman world collapsed around them. It was indeed a refusal to accept disaster and defeat as final. It was a call to endure suffering as only a trial through which right and justice might be at last established, not by our own strength, but by celestial Powers, and not in this, but in another world” (p.79).

²¹ Roget’s II: *The New Thesaurus*, Third ed., 1995.

²² Dictionary.com/archive/2001.

²³ *The Observer*, 3 December 2000, and www.fairfax.bham.sch.uk/psychology/hodgesandtizard.html.

²⁴ “The Development and Testing of Hearing-Related Frustration Scale,” by Daniel Grant Lagace-Seguin, Laurentian University, 1996.

the studies of addiction.²⁵ Privation has even served as a military term, used in war narratives where accounts of starvation, scarcity of rations, and desertion have been documented.²⁶ It has also provided a way to think about the political understanding and relief of suffering in human societies through moral legislation: by seeing privation as the absence of pleasures and in the context of the memory of pleasures once possessed, a path to the experience of genuine future pleasures, facilitated by law, can be realized.²⁷

From the outset, therefore, privation may be thought of as possessing a variable nature. It is variable not only in its etymological roots but in the variety of ways its meaning can be employed. Privation cannot be easily reduced to mean loss, isolation, or any specific term expressing negation, but must be seen as relevant to all such terms. It is an inclusive concept, and the present thesis rests on thinking of privation as encompassing variable states of deprivation experienced in contemporary life.

It will be helpful now to consider how this encompassing term may be seen to exist in social, aesthetic, and theological approaches to suffering.

2.2 PRIVATION IN SOCIAL THINKING ABOUT SUFFERING

²⁵ "The Measurement of Craving in Relation to Cigarette Deprivation (Addictive Behavior, Tobacco Withdrawal Syndrome)," by Patrick Olen Smith, the University of Mississippi, 1991.

²⁶ Americanrevolution.org, 7 June 2002.

²⁷ *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, by Jeremy Bentham (1781), Batoche Books, 2000.

Arguably, privation is most often the product of social approaches to suffering in the modern world. Studies of loss, alienation, and separation possess obvious social implications. If someone suffers from separation anxiety, for instance, whom or what has been lost in such a way as to produce regret? Indeed, privation is implicitly or explicitly represented in virtually all social narratives which attempt to explore the human condition from social scientific perspectives. “Categories such as ‘lone’ or ‘single’ parent, ‘second family’ and ‘absent father’ all emphasize the separateness of persons rather than the ways in which they retain connections economically, socially, and emotionally after divorce,” argues Bob Simpson in *Changing Families: An Ethnographic Approach to Divorce and Separation* (1998). Privation here emerges in the very social terminology applied to suffering which results from divorce: the words themselves speak to existent separateness rather than retained connectedness.²⁸

Privation may also be seen as a key factor within the larger topic of social suffering.²⁹ Suffering is itself a “social status,” argues David B. Morris in the “Social Suffering” issue of *Daedalus* (1996). It “is not a raw datum, a natural phenomenon

²⁸ See especially Chapter One, “Divorce: Towards an Anthropology of Endings,” and Chapter Four: “The Fractured Triangle: Disputes after Divorce,” both of which, commencing with their titles, offer a rhetoric of extreme social alienation. In one paragraph on p. 83, *absent fathers drift* from notions of family in the form of *progressive disengagement*.

²⁹ See, for instance, Pierre Bourdieu’s *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, Stanford University Press, 1999, which attributes social suffering, to universal human alienation. Where economic poverty was previously thought of as producing the bulk of social suffering, a more insidious enemy now evokes much consideration: the denial of access to changing societies, and the social statuses they possess.

we can identify or measure,” he adds, “but a social status....”³⁰ Unidentifiable and immeasurable, privation is the suffering social void characterized by negated connections: between people and real objects of meaning, satisfaction, and belonging.

2.2.1 PORTRAITS OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PRIVATION

One reason why social suffering occupies a place in the center of suffering discourses owes to the proliferation of non-fictional sources which, in recent times, have revealed persuasive portraits of individuals and collectives who suffered through social and political privation of the Twentieth Century. Human beings displaced by wars, genocides, and the totalitarian control of personal freedoms have written about their privation in ways which argue for understanding the sources of modern suffering as being socially produced. One of many such texts is Liu Binyan’s *A Higher Kind of Loyalty: A Memoir by China’s Foremost Journalist* (1988), which documents the social privation of a disparaged journalist in Maoist China.³¹

What is striking about Liu’s portrait of social suffering is that it is drawn without a presence of physiological pain. The physical torture of exiles is rarely mentioned, other than periodic references to discomforts which accompany states of forced removal. The portrait emerges as one of comprehensive social privation

³⁰ See p. 18 of “About Suffering: Voice, Genre, and Moral Community” (*Daedalus*, Winter 1996).

³¹ The interior chapters, 6-10, respectively titled “A Trap Laid for a Million,” “Prison without Walls,” “Agony,” “Drained of the Milk of Human Kindness,” and “Return to a Strange World,” document a persuasive narrative of social privation orchestrated by the Mao regime to silence dissenting voices.

inclusive of complex separation anxieties, the effects of subjugated aspirations, and the extinguishing of personal talents. While in exile, in fact, Liu reflected on what he had come to see as Mao's cleverness in eliminating his foes by sequestering them rather than using physical torture or murder as instruments of oppression. Without being allowed to connect with the daily processes of public life, and without avenues for independent thinking, political exiles would be reduced to an existence of robotic stasis, the alienation of personhood. If those exiled maintained this stasis, they were seen in Mao's eyes as "rehabilitated"; whereas, if they transcended the effects of their social privation, bringing personal convictions back into public society, they were considered as without an ability to reform and subsequently re-exiled.

2.2.2 PORTRAITS OF CHILD PRIVATION

Another narrative force behind the acceptance of social suffering as a preeminent suffering discourse is that depicting the privation of children. The context for such narratives is represented by Douglas Sturm in *Solidarity and Suffering: Toward a Politics of Relationality* (1998), which locates child suffering in the dysfunction of contemporary social environments.³² "Throughout the course of history, the suffering of children has been, in large part, a function of social systems," Sturm writes. "To this degree, the suffering of children is not 'natural.'" Sturm, moreover, is clear about how the social suffering of children is to be

³² See Chapter One, "Prelude: Toward a Politics of Relationality," and Chapter Three, "On the Suffering and Rights of Children: Toward a Theology of Childhood Liberation," both of which locate the suffering of children in states of social privation.

recognized: in states of deprivation. "Suffering, in its most elementary meaning, is deprivation," he writes. "It is the loss (or threatened loss) of something of vital importance in one's life, including life itself." Deprivation, furthermore, "narrows the limits" of love, faith, freedom, and "the dignity of life" itself. It is degrading, impoverishing of meaningful common life, and, Sturm argues, "linked" with the dominations and conformities associated with abusive relationships.

Child abuse is, in its broadest definition, a condition of deprivation whereby normal child development is prohibited from occurring through physical, spiritual, emotional, and psychological poverty. It is the privation documented in *There Are No Children Here*, by Alex Kotlowitz (1987), which provides a stark narrative of two boys growing up in Chicago's public housing environment.³³ The boys, their mother, and their loosely structured inner city community emerge as physically and spiritually isolated from "the other America" and are caught by Kotlowitz in the process of implosion. This occurs when a young man seeking to escape his social privation by entering a respectable profession is shot down by the local police. "The community itself turned inward, sorry for Craig's family, but worried about their own well-being," Kotlowitz writes while observing the funeral. Afterwards, one of

³³ In a telephone interview with Kotlowitz in 1992, he told me about his own upbringing within New York City's urban environment. The sense of privation (though he did not use the word) he experienced as a child had prepared him for the intense alienation he witnessed in Chicago's inner city. At the time of the interview, he said that the mother, Lajoe, and the younger brother, Pharaoh, had found ways to escape their privation physically and emotionally, though the older brother, Lafayette, had not been as fortunate.

the two boys, who are the subject of the narrative, is observed walking bent-over like an elderly man, from the weight of all he has witnessed.

This privation, expressed through the physical poverty of low-income environments, sits beside equivalent impoverishments which express themselves, according to Sturm, through mindless media habits, random materialism, junk food nutritional privation, and other consumptive behaviors satisfying temporal desires but neglecting a more permanent fulfillment of real needs. Sturm's conclusions about child social privation, moreover, rest on the argument that the cultures and societies of modernity increasingly "run counter" to the genuine needs of their youngest members. He writes,

In sum, the suffering of children can take many forms. Its concrete manifestation may be culturally specific. However, its generic meaning...is deprivation. From another angle, its deepest meaning is alienation, for, in effect, children are coerced by means direct and indirect to participate in a social system that runs counter to their own good. The suffering of children is more than a matter of pain and distress. It is to be deprived of the conditions and possibilities of positive freedom, of self-development, of a society characterized by friendships and mutuality. It is to endure constrictions on their creative participation as younger members of the world community.³⁴

A politics of relationality, which Sturm endorses as his therapeutic remedy to the privation characterizing mass suffering, will never occur until "the quality of our connectedness with each other" is addressed and improved. This connectedness must be seen as more important than the products ("goods and benefits") of culture

³⁴ *Solidarity and Suffering: Toward Politics of Relationality*, by Douglas Sturm, State University of New York Press, 1998, pp. 53-4.

and society which are experienced in our “separateness” from each other. In other words, consumptive behaviors occurring in relative isolation and separateness only compound the problem, and increase the suffering, within modernity. They spoil the possibility of meaningful human interaction, not only affecting children and their intense, if subtle suffering, but encapsulating all of humanity in a pervasive, unilateral, social privation. Sturm argues,

We are living in a time of intense suffering. In large part, that suffering is a consequence, directly or indirectly, of patterns of human interaction. By suffering, I mean not so much discomfort (a subjective feeling) as deprivation (an objective condition.) We suffer when deprived of that range of possibilities that makes up a vibrant community.

To be so deprived is a function of prevailing forms of symbiosis. Those deprived, even those living under the most dire of circumstances, are still, in their suffering, participants in the human community. That is why I use the term alienation. Alienation is a negative form of belonging. Alienation is not so much the separation of person from person or group from group as a form of interaction through which a people is constrained...to act against their own good.³⁵

Of note, the suffering portrayed here is arguably a suffering which is easy to ignore, both by those experiencing it and those who may miss seeing it as an everyday occurrence. Since physiological “discomfort” is not overtly generic to states of internal or external deprivation, as Sturm implies, the suffering of privation is not likely to announce its presence in the way physiological pain does. It is instead “the negative form of belonging,” an alienation that can be temporarily

³⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

dismissed and dealt with through artificial means and temporary escapes, via media consumption, for instance. One sees the relevance of privation to fandom here.

Fandom, a practice built on media consumption, offers a means of escape from these stated woes of modernity. Many fans consume and socialize media texts, often believing they have found an escape from mere boredom. Yet, quite possibly it is more than boredom they are fleeing as attempts are made to escape deep separations and alienations. It is correct, moreover, to think of privation as an “intense suffering.” Sufferers, be they fans or otherwise, are still members of communities, participants in economic systems, and in general proximity to all that happens, yet they are isolated from the meaningful interactions that are occurring in these places.³⁶

Even the most private forms of suffering, furthermore, likely occur in some kind of social context.³⁷ Suffering manifested in the lack of control over one’s life circumstances occurs often in close proximity to social environments featuring those who are more fortunate by being in control of their own lives. When the two

³⁶ This is an important premise of an argument which holds that suffering is present in a socio-cultural phenomenon like fandom. My experience has been such that fans do not like to be informed that their behavior within fandom expresses evidences of suffering. Yet, such evidence exists, as will be shown in Chapters Five and Six. Carla, a fan of popular vocalist Mary J. Blige, for example, said, “I have had a lot of pain,” a condition she satisfies through deep identification she experiences with the object of her fandom.

³⁷ See pp. 3-5 of “Themes of Suffering in Later Life” by Helen K. Black and Robert L. Rubinstein (*The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 59, 2004), which theorizes a “social milieu” existing beyond the private suffering experienced by elderly people. See, also, pp. 172-81 in “Loss of Self: A Fundamental Form of Suffering in the Chronically Ill” by Kathy Charmaz (*Sociology of Health and Illness*, Vol. 5 No. 2, 1983) in which social isolation in the chronically ill takes the form of retreat into a “restricted life” measured by sharp contrast “with the lives of other adults.”

environments do not intersect, the individual selves within the sphere of deprivation are undermined to an even greater degree by the meaningful life they see as unreachable and unachievable. They exist as residents of their own self-perceived meaningless space, unable to make the leap into the space they perceive as being in possession of meaning. Likewise, the inner city community that cannot intersect with the prevailing culture, the exiled journalist shut out of the improvement of his society, and the child who is present but not humanly involved, experience this intensity. Privation, in the domain of social suffering, therefore, emerges as a painless hell marked by lost connections and unsatisfied hungers to belong, identify, and participate.

2.3 PRIVATION IN AESTHETIC ARTICULATION

If privation is primarily a social topic in modernity, it also falls prominently within aesthetic articulation as a specific concept in literature and art. The “hardships and privations” written about by Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables*, for instance, laid the foundations for Hugo’s graphic portrayals of human isolation, abandonment, and hopeless futures depicted in his masterpiece:

Life became hard for Marius. It was nothing to eat his clothes and his watch. He ate of that terrible, inexpressible thing that is called *de la vache enrage*; that is to say, he endured great hardships and privations. A terrible thing it is, containing days without bread, nights without sleep, evenings without a candle, a hearth without a fire, weeks without work, a future without hope....³⁸

³⁸ See Chapter 185, p. 1,079.

As this passage shows, Hugo articulates a privation which originally encompasses physical deprivations such as lack of bread, sleep, and warmth. But privation does not end there. Eventually, for Hugo, privation extends into a realm of emotional and spiritual deprivation expressed by his phrase “a future without hope.” This presence of a spiritual component, moreover, fits well with the understanding of privation offered by this thesis. It is fundamentally a problem of spiritual and emotional impoverishment endemic to our age of media and mass consumption. In fandom, our topic of study here, we are able to see evidence of this impoverishment in the dislocation, anger, and isolation many fans express. The craving for meaning amid spiritual deprivation is strongly at issue.

Other aesthetic statements may be seen in images presented by the poem *Street-Walker*, by the Bulgarian poet Hristo Smirnenski (1898-1923).³⁹ Smirnenski casts privation into the role of the opposite: the thing or condition that is the reverse side of luxury, festivity, laughter, companionship, and “powerful life”:

You were born in the lap of privation,
Your childhood was useless strife,
Today you dance, your eyes full of tears,
To the tuneless violin of life.

Your implacable stepmother, Night,
Is an evil creature of evil fame;

³⁹ Smirnenski was the pen name of Hristo Dimitrov Izmirliiev, who was born on 29 September 1898 in Koukoush, Bulgaria. He is reported to have enjoyed a happy childhood, but respiratory illnesses and “deprivations” (See Slovo, the Virtual Library of Bulgarian Literature, <http://slovo.orbitel.bg/f/en>) undermined his health, eventually taking his life at twenty-five. He changed his name while writing for the magazine, *Smyah I Sulzi* (Laughter and Tears).

She tore the narcissus from your breast,
And she dragged you down the path of shame.

You celebrate the festival of sin
Beneath the street-lamp's dusky light;
No one can hear the pain in your laugh
When you laugh in the quiet night.

Drunk with illusions and deceptive hope,
With a withered hyacinth on your breast,
You return to your dingy little room to dine
With hunger, your one and only guest.

There hangs on the wall the photo of a child
With pretty and innocent face;
The wistful look it has is now the only trace
Which [privation] has not effaced.

The days and nights drag on unchanged...
When ugly and relentless Death
Arrives in the chilly autumn of your life
To wring from you your final breath.

It will discover with a shock,
That powerful Life has got ahead
Leaving nothing to destructive Death,
That you have long been dead....

Smirnenski offers aesthetic elaboration on the idea that privation is understood when it is juxtaposed with inverted conditions. It is a negativity existing inharmoniously with abundance, goodness, sufficiency, prosperity, and all manner of well being. Being born "in the lap of privation" has removed the street-walker from the possibilities of happy, healthy childhood. It has separated her from laughter, hope, satisfied hunger, innocence, and companionship. Her privation is illuminated by its opposites, and it illuminates them, too, by calling into question false affirmations of a world ruled by contradictions.

Another aesthetic mind, that of artist Ann Hamilton, articulates similar contradictions in her installation, *Privation and Excess* (1989). Here, Hamilton distributed 750,000 copper pennies on a floor that had been coated with honey. She then placed a lone, plainly clothed human figure in the background, who sits in close proximity to grazing sheep enclosed behind bars. Many statements about worth, consumption, and excesses are possible for the viewer of Hamilton's installation, but the overwhelming message articulated by the placement of images and objects is that of privation: the absence of community, the craving for companionship that sentient beings possess, and the loss of meaning in a society of random economic symbols.⁴⁰ These images, alone, go far in expressing the understanding of privation which undergirds the present thesis.

Aesthetic production suffuses cultural approaches to human suffering with images and metaphors, supplementing the verbal rhetoric of expositional commentary with the visual and imaginative rhetoric of art. Just as images of Christ's suffering have, across the ages, presented a pietistic rhetoric⁴¹ of physical

⁴⁰ Los Angeles art critic, David Pagel, sees this lone figure in Hamilton's installation as isolated "from its animal need for companionship yet profoundly incapable of finding satisfaction in...leftovers from an increasingly abstract economic system" (See "Still Life: the Tableaux of Ann Hamilton," *Arts Magazine*, 1990). See also *ArtsEdNet* (<http://www.getty.edu/artsednet/resources/ecology/issues/hamilton.html>) which applies this statement: "Cumulatively...*Privation and Excesses* speaks to the loss, in post-industrial societies, of community, the separation of humans from activities that provide meaningful social interactions and life-sustaining labor, and the resulting isolation of individuals in them. Materials...are in excess, much as we have an excess of material goods, in general, in the West. But they become empty when the basics of life, including meaningful social interactions, are absent."

⁴¹ Art historian, David Morgan, for instance, notes "a rhetoric of immediacy" in images of Christ's passion and resurrection as expressed in some pietistic paintings. See Chapter Two,

torment, soulful pathos, and compassion, for instance, a contemporary rendition of suffering — such as Hamilton's — presents a rhetoric of spatial emptiness. It articulates the nature of privation by drawing upon large empty spaces interrupted only by structural building supports and crisscrossed iron bars. Beings are present, but they do not intersect or interact in any socially constructive way. A means of partaking of Hamilton's complete vision is to situate one's self at the end of its rectangular setting. There, one sees the long expanse of pennies spread out like an undulating pool, behind which sits the isolated human figure and two physically separated sheep behind confining bars. The human figure is present but in no way part of, and he is dwarfed by the size of the room housing the installation. The rhetoric here inverts any positive space which might have encompassed the images (pastoral serenity for the sheep, for instance), infusing the entire scene with negative, meaningless space.

In literary art, again, the imagery is equally persuasive, with privation being represented by skilled writers.⁴² Judging from the assemblage of text and footnotes

"Empathy and Sympathy in the History of Visual Piety," in Morgan's *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (University of California Press, 1998).

⁴² Recent scholarship which explores privation in literature includes, for instance, Natalie J. McKnight's *Suffering Mothers in Mid-Victorian Novels* (1997). Mothers, McKnight argues, suffer immense physical, emotional, social, and economic privations within Victorian literature, possibly due to an authorial reaction directed toward the power a female monarch, Queen Victoria, exerted on all British subjects, male or female. Charles Dickens, for instance, emerges as the writer who possesses "a need to make mother suffer" either to salve emotional wounds inflicted by his own mother or to respond to the "forced submission to...a female sovereign." Though McKnight's larger purpose is to explore the comprehensive privation of the pathetic mother-figures portrayed by such authors as Dickens and William Thackeray, she also alludes to the reader's *reception* of such characters. Here, she enters the very contemporary arena of reception and meaning, arguing that

here, it may appear that my selection of such writers has been randomly conceived and presented. However, the citation of Victor Hugo's novel, *Les Misérables*, and Hristo Smirnenski's poem, *Street-Walker*, is based on each writer's inclusion of the specific term, privation, in their writing. Many aesthetic writers portray privation through imagery, plot, and characterization, while writers such as Hugo and Smirnenski do the same but also present the concept attached to the word itself. Semantically, the reader is able, therefore, to locate the subject of suffering in a clearly bounded verbal entity encompassing the lived deprivations experienced by literary characters. Hugo's Marius and Smirnenski's Street-Walker are examples of characters specifically designated as victims of lived privation. Aesthetic writers

readers find enjoyment in watching mother suffer. "We experience a gratuitous glee in...watching Mrs. Clennam collapse, Miss Havisham burn, or Mrs. Skewton disintegrate," McKnight writes. "We cannot help but be fascinated by such suffering, while we, perhaps, vent some of our own infantile frustrations." This is fandom-relevant material, of course, which aligns with the present thesis: that, indeed, a suffering element exists within textual consumption. Is the reader *venting*, as McKnight conjectures, using the text as an animus-release mechanism? Is the response more punctuated by "gratuitous glee" or "grim pleasure?" Is a voyeuristic subtext present in the reader's enjoyment of mothers who "collapse," "burn," or "disintegrate?" See especially Chapter One, "Introduction to Suffering Mothers," and Chapter Three, "Making Mother Suffer, and Other Fun in Dickens."

Still, one more text, Adrian Caesar's *Taking it Like a Man: Suffering, Sexuality, and the War Poets* (1993) explores privation in the work of British poets Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Robert Graves. Like McKnight, Caesar is interested in suffering as it applies both to text and receiver, stating that his interest in war poetry grew out of an attempt to understand his own complex attraction to a literary amalgam of violence and sexuality. He argues that readers of war poetry have "peeped" at images of suffering as a form of voyeurism which celebrates physical pain, emotional privation (though he uses the term *suffering*), and sexuality. He attributes this phenomenon to the influences of English-middle-class Christianity and its "central icon" of "a young man nailed onto a cross." The young man, moreover, is only partially clothed, or naked, and he suffers his barbaric cruelty so that others might receive salvation. Those who become saved are then asked to bear their own cross and endure the suffering which comes with it, and "treasures in heaven" will be the reward. See pp. 2-12, 230-35.

who develop the same concept without naming it as privation, on the other hand, may be just as persuasive, if not more so. I have chosen two World War I era writers, E.M. Forster and Ernest Hemingway, because much of their critically evaluated work coincides with mass suffering in the wake of "The Great War." Unutterable suffering existing among inarticulate voices⁴³ and an "ever-present sense of deprivation"⁴⁴ identifies many literary voices from this era, of which Forster and Hemingway are leading examples.⁴⁵

British novelist Forster located a descriptive metaphor for expressing profound separation and alienation in the hollow, circular caves of, *A Passage to India* (1924). As the novel's central metaphor, the caves exist as huge dark spaces of nothingness which throw back sounds uttered into them. They are vacuous, a void, and the booming echo that consumes any meaningful voice returns it as a vacuum which is repeated over and over. Human beings articulate, but no receiver awaits their message, a metaphorically-expressed problem which becomes perfectly integrated into Forster's narrative about frustrated attempts to belong in an

⁴³ See the entirety of Chapter 4, "Temporal Form and Wartime: Modernism After World War I," in *Writing After War* by John Limon (1994), especially pp. 91-2 which discusses narrative degeneration in relation to a post-war narrative by Hemingway.

⁴⁴ See Chapters 13-15 of *An American Procession* by Alfred Kazin (1984), especially pp. 352-3 in which Kazin describes the post-war literary style as having been forged by a unique suffering: "Because of the war and the uncertainty of everything in sight, the twenties lived with a sharp, baleful sense of time....Style was heightened consciousness, the only defense against the fatal ordering of things...."

⁴⁵ I bring to this study my own educational and publishing background, including a master's thesis exploring reception and composition of Hemingway's war-era writing for *Esquire* Magazine and several relevant articles. See Hemingway's *Esquire* Articles and the *New Journalism* (1984), "Ernest Hemingway: Tragedy of an Evangelical Family" (*Christianity Today*, Nov. 23, 1984), "A Passage Toward India" (*Aramco World*, May-June 1988), and "Ecclesiastes: Reaching Out to the Twentieth Century" (*Bible Review*, October 1990).

environment, India, teeming with people. The British, who rule India at that moment, are present, but cannot belong. The Indians cannot belong within the British system. Muslims cannot belong to Hindus, neither Hindus to Muslims, and communication itself among the races, the sexes, the religions, and even among friends, grows increasingly strained, and ultimately lost, in Forster's literary environment of privation.⁴⁶

Forster's contemporary, the American novelist Ernest Hemingway,⁴⁷ was also a master at articulating privation in fictional settings, a quality expressed in the stylistic rhetoric of his prose: lean, sparing, and symbolic of spiritual nakedness as it has been critically judged for the past seventy-five years. His carefully chosen words have the effect of standing alone, existing in an emotional and spiritual vacuum Hemingway himself felt as a war-era writer of spiritual and moral absences. His books are replete with suffering characters and events clearly crafted in the

⁴⁶ See the final chapter of *A Passage to India*, in which Forster speaks one final time of human beings trying to overcome their privation by trying to reconnect in a world and universe oriented toward keeping them separate. David Lean's film version of the novel developed this portrayal of privation until its final scene, which placed an optimistic ending on Forster's otherwise pessimistic conclusion.

⁴⁷ Partially because of Hemingway's well-documented suffering-celebrity status, and partly because of the enduring fandom attaching itself to his literary legacy, Hemingway is an important component of my enquiries into both fandom and aesthetically articulated privation. His intense personal pain and privation, often exhibited publicly throughout his career, was authentic, but it was also manufactured and exaggerated (not unlike the suffering celebrityhood of J.K. Rowling, to be discussed at length) by an emerging literary celebrity culture of the early and middle twentieth century. These problems have periodically compromised the integrity of Hemingway's literary reputation among cultural critics and special-interest groups (feminists and animal rights groups, for instance) who have tended to devalue his stature as a serious novelist while simultaneously arguing that the Hemingway (or "Papa") myth was designed to facilitate literary immortality in a way that his works alone would not have done. One must allow that some truth to these positions exists, yet one must also acknowledge critical opinion upholding the enduring quality of Hemingway's literary voice.

suffering spirit of privation. They depict characters who are measured by how much they have lost in life and how alone they have now become. From Jake Barnes, the protagonist of *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) who lives in impotent isolation from having been emasculated during World War I, to the solitary Santiago of *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) who lives and fishes alone in the Gulf Stream and has only dreams to remind him of any vibrancy his life once held, Hemingway's characters notably suffer their privation with dignity. They must locate their personal integrity from deep within their isolation and aloneness. Doing so with some degree of success, they emerge as respectable code heroes⁴⁸ who find and articulate meaning in solitary suffering.

The characters and situations in Hemingway's short stories may be said to depict privation with an even greater degree of starkness, being that they provide capsulized representations of the same code-hero process. Krebs, the protagonist of an early short story "Soldier's Home," for instance, returns to his hometown from World War I after the return of war heroes has ended, and he finds that no one in his town wants to hear any more war stories, including his own. Daily, he exists in an ambitionless, emotional vacuum. He holds people at a distance, and he himself is prohibited from belonging. He says he doesn't love anyone. He cannot pray when

⁴⁸ A concept advanced in the early days of Hemingway scholarship, the code hero embodied values of bravery, honor, and perseverance amid external and internal conflict. The code hero concept has undergone critical reevaluation due to its oversimplification of Hemingway's characters. However, the fictional Hemingway hero as a subject of isolation and solitary suffering has remained intact. Discussions of the Hemingway code hero may be found in *New Essays on The Sun Also Rises* (Linda Wagner-Martin, 1987). See Chapter 5, "Decoding the Hemingway Hero."

his mother asks him to join her in prayer. He has no relationship with his father, who lacks any ability to see into his son's privation. When the story's narrator gives the reader access to Krebs's thoughts we learn that a combination of extreme fear and a sense of guilt from lying about his war experiences to those few who listened to him, have placed him in complete isolation. "In this way he lost everything," Hemingway writes.

This portrayal of privation exists elsewhere in the short stories as the same code hero operates within various settings: hospitals, cafes, moving vehicles, wilderness landscapes (or anywhere a solitary figure in psychological distress can be painted onto Hemingway's literary canvas).⁴⁹ Furthermore, Hemingway's privation remains a diagnostic portrayal in the sense that it reveals what is wrong with his characters but doesn't offer much in the way of a therapeutic context. By the time we get to his collection of short stories, the spiritually barren *Winner Take Nothing* (1933), this diagnostic privation is so complete (and reflective of Augustinian

⁴⁹ The best-known of the short story code heroes is the character, Nick Adams, critically argued to be Hemingway's alter-ego within his early short stories, which have also been judged as his best work. Adams appears as a young boy, an adolescent, a World War I veteran, and finally as a middle-aged man. Perhaps the best known of these stories, "Big Two-Hearted River, I and II," portrays a completely solitary Nick Adams, alone in the woods of upper Michigan, trying to escape his privation as a shell-shocked war veteran by resacralizing himself through a deep identification with nature. Hemingway writes, "He sat on the logs, smoking, drying in the sun, the sun warm on his back, the river shallow ahead entering the woods, curving into the woods, shallows, light glittering, big water-smooth rocks, cedars along the bank and white birches, the logs warm in the sun, smooth to sit on, without bark, gray to the touch; slowly the feeling of disappointment left him. It went away slowly...."

privation) as to constitute both a *privatio* and a *pervertio* of all things good.⁵⁰ This is accomplished rhetorically in “A Clean Well-Lighted Place,” which narrates a discussion about suicide between two men in a bar and closes with a rhetorical negation of *The Lord’s Prayer*:

What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was nothing that he knew too well. It was nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was nada y pues nada y pues nada y pues nada. Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee.⁵¹

All of these noted sources contribute to an understanding of privation as it is aesthetically presented. Each offers some type of effective verbal or visual rhetoric, which helps us see into the emptiness, isolation, and spiritual hunger present within variable states of deprivation. Each source is also remarkably contemporary in depicting privation. Hemingway’s isolated soldier, Smirnenski’s dispossessed prostitute, and Hamilton’s solitary individual adrift in a sea of consumptive excesses, contribute to a telling of privation’s story in modernity. They supplement

⁵⁰ Charles T. Mathewes advances the terms *privatio* and *pervertio* in *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, arguing that they represent the “conceptual contours within which the [Augustinian] tradition proposes its practical response to evil.” Mathewes views *privatio* as an *ontological* concept which establishes evil as an absence of being, where as *pervertio* is to be seen as an *anthropological* concept: the idea that evil must also be seen in terms of the sinful perversion of *imago Dei*, man created in God’s image.

⁵¹ Nada is a term expressing negation in both formal and informal Spanish usages. It means “nothing,” as Hemingway’s correct Spanish-English juxtaposition (“...pues nada. Hail nothing...”) illustrates.

media age narratives depicting the same condition, including the narrative of fans seeking to engage their privation in and through the social processes of their fandom.

Methodologically, emphasizing texts from literature and art as they provide meaningful background to contemporary topics bears resemblance to the portion of William James's methodology in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), which assembles many aesthetic texts in support of his enquiries into religion. This is a valuable methodological paradigm, I argue, for media studies attempting to synthesize cultural artifacts into contemporary problems so that the problems are comprehended with greater insight against a background of cultural history and production. James's sources, in this regard, range from Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau to Leo Tolstoy and Thomas Carlyle, and they help him articulate a fuller, richer study of topics as diverse as mysticism, melancholy, and optimism.⁵² Just as mass communication theory is structured upon existing theories from the social sciences (to be referenced in Chapter Three), so individual topics such as the theorization of suffering in fandom become more substantial when their grounding in cultural history is allowed to be referenced.

2.4 PRIVATION IN THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO SUFFERING

⁵² Sporadic aesthetic references underlying and illustrating James's arguments include his enlistment of Whitman on the subject of healthy-mindedness in religious experience (p. 83); his inclusion of Leo Tolstoy on the subject of melancholy in religious experience (pp. 146-7); and his reference to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe on the subject of optimism in religious experience (p. 134). All page numbers are from the 1929 edition of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James (Longman's, Green and Company).

An effective transition from looking at privation aesthetically to seeing it theologically lies in making reference to the subject of tragedy. One way of looking at tragedy in literature has been to visualize it in a context of Augustinian theology. This involves seeing the tragic as an embodiment of loss, isolation, and other components of privation. Douglas Cole's enduring study, *Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (1972), does this exactly. Cole's understanding of the tragic is Augustinian, infused especially with the theme of loss as the essence of extreme suffering. Cole writes,

...the pain and suffering...is revealed as what theology calls the pain of loss: the pain that is not death, but the loss beyond death.... Essentially, it is the pain of loss, either in its precise theological definition or in an analogous form, which constitutes the greatest anguish...⁵³

Cole's Augustinian perspective here implies that privation—"the pain of loss"—exceeds other forms of human suffering because it is the despair that is measured by the agony of the soul's separation from its creator. He writes,

The pain of loss is the greatest of all known sufferings because it represents the alienation of the creature from the Creator, the interminable separation of the human soul from the one Being in which it could have found perfect fulfillment.⁵⁴

Marlowe's characters emerge as suicidal from this privation. "[S]uicides, and the suffering that prompts them, stem from an agonizing and unbearable sense of loss, a loss that the sufferer refuses to endure," Cole states.⁵⁵

⁵³ See Chapter VI, "Marlowe's Vision of Suffering and Evil."

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 254.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 86.

A more recent text along these lines is Larry Bouchard's *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology: Evil in Contemporary Drama and Religious Thought* (1989), which criticizes Augustinian thinking for its location of tragedy "solely in the realm of sin and interiority," yet offers a salient portrait of Augustinian privation. Evil, Bouchard accords to Augustine, originated "not in the nearly nothingness of matter," but "in the turning of the will from the divine Light that creates, sustains, illuminates, and guides it."⁵⁶ This turning predated human life and is, in fact, a matter of "celestial history" for Augustine, a "rebellion" rooted historically in the angels' turning away from the Infinite Being. "Augustine's formal reflections on...privation," Bouchard adds, "occur in the context of a prior need to fathom why evil is experienced as it is.... The presence of evil is inward, within his mind, yet outward, weighing down upon his thought against his will."⁵⁷

Ascribing suffering and evil to the inward parts of beings—to the cognitive, emotive, even mnemonic realms and processes—yet leaving a sense of externality in the picture may be seen as adequately representing the tragic theological texture of privation. It sees privation as interior, the place where suffering is felt as losses, separations, alienations, and other internal experiences which operate within the interiority of the human person. Yet, the idea that privation transcends the internal state by possessing a kind of exteriority that weighs upon the human condition is warranted. Rhetorically speaking, we may also, therefore, visualize privation as an

⁵⁶ Bouchard, p. 53.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 55.

external lacking which exists as the negation Hemingway sought to describe in the tragic “A Clean Well-Lighted Place.” As well as being an internal reality affecting the interiority of the human person, it is equally an external depressive state in which physical reality is reasonably depicted as a place devoid of meaning. This is where privation, and indeed Augustine himself, blend into the aesthetic, and as Bouchard concludes, it is where Augustinian theology ultimately locates the essence of tragedy.

2.4.1 ADAPTATION OF THEOLOGICAL/PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

Just as this thesis on suffering in fan cultures values the importance of adapting social and aesthetic understandings of privation as important subcontexts to its ultimate goals, so it looks to theology and related disciplines of moral philosophy and philosophy of religion for equally useful insights where possible.⁵⁸ Theologically, in this regard, I rest primarily on a foundation of Augustinian theology, largely because of the diagnostic strength of Augustine’s thoughts on privation.⁵⁹ Diagnosis, an act of identifying the specific nature of conditions, can be thought of as Augustinian theology’s primary benefit to studies involving media and culture, I argue. Augustinian diagnosis is the result of the deepest experience-

⁵⁸ I am thinking here specifically of moral philosopher Hannah Arendt and philosopher of religion William James, each of whom will be appropriated as being of significant value to the problem of diagnosis in the present study.

⁵⁹ In saying this, I am ascribing value to the “majority report” of Augustinian thinking for its role as a diagnostic tool. However, I will also acknowledge briefly in this chapter’s conclusion that the “minority report” of Irenaean theology may also have an important role in future studies of fandom, media, and culture.

based reflection and is extremely useful in illuminating the conditions in which media processes operate.

In this regard, let us take a closer look at Augustinian privation in an effort to amplify Augustine's inclusion of privation in his thinking on suffering and evil. The term applies to both problems, even though the present thesis seeks to present privation as a condition of human suffering rather than as a definition of evil. I begin by looking again at the Latin term *privatio*, which is the precise word Augustine adopted. Possibly more than any other concept associated with *privatio* is that of loss: partial loss (*privatio non pura*) and complete loss (*privatio pura*).⁶⁰ *Privatio non pura*, partial loss, can be applied to situations and conditions in which partial losses or partial impairments are accurately descriptive. Pain, a partial but not a total loss related to physiological discomfort, can be seen as a type of *privatio non pura*. Suffering, too, a partial but not total loss related to emotional, mental, or psychological discomfort, may be seen as a *privatio non pura*. It might be argued that some kinds of pain and suffering are experiences of totality, though we may rhetorically counter this notion by arguing that only the experience itself might be thought of as total and not the loss. As has been often argued, pain and suffering can yield benefits and that, in fact, they do not need to be seen as conditions of total loss. They may be conditions of gain.⁶¹

⁶⁰ See p. 246 of Richard A. Muller's *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Terms*, 1985.

⁶¹ See, for instance, pp. 119-22, 123-9, and 134-5 of Simone Weil's "The Love of God and Affliction" in *Waiting for God* (1951).

When we talk about privation as a form of human suffering, moreover, we are talking about conditions of *privatio non pura*. And while we think of Augustine primarily for the sense of *privatio pura* which pervaded much of his locution, we must also recognize that *privatio non pura*—the presence of partial losses, pains, and sufferings—describes much of what we know about him through his autobiographical accounts. He was a real person who experienced pain in the form of illness and physiological discomfort. He was even more prone to prolonged periods of suffering which were the result of grief, restlessness, and regret. The loss of his parents, the broken relationship with the woman who bore his son, and disruptions of his emotional health by grief associated with the loss of loved ones, marked his pilgrimage through life. Of equal significance were the sufferings that grew out of frustrations in his search for truth. His early rejection of Christianity as well as numerous instances of confusion over recognizing his lack of moral purpose and his alienation from righteousness led to conclusions about the inevitable misery he understood as every human being's destiny on earth. This is the Augustine of *privatio non pura*: the embodiment of personal privation and misery of existence in the temporal earthly state.

Because Augustine arrived at his conclusions about privation out of personal experience, his earthly life takes on the form of a persuasive autobiographical method of enquiry for generations of appropriators who enlist his thinking in their own diagnostic explorations of the human condition. His life experiences as documented in his surviving works support his thinking, rendering his diagnoses of

human misery too valuable to neglect. Many of his appropriators, too, are valuable for the purpose of better understanding the cultural stage on which media processes and other contemporary phenomena occur. Directed toward privation among mass populations, or fixated upon privation within the individual, the discussion is carried forward where and when it can enrich topics that warrant critical attention.

2.4.2 INSIGHTS FROM HANNAH ARENDT AND WILLIAM JAMES

Situating her discussion of the human condition in the twentieth century privation of alienated mass cultures, moral philosopher Hannah Arendt painted a verbal picture of entire populations identified by organized loneliness.⁶² These were populations loosely held together by the systemic structures of legality and commerce yet lacking the meaningful cohesion of a consciousness produced and nurtured by self-sustaining common interests. Shared trust in the company of equals, mutual confirmation of personal identity, and the psychological fulfillment “of being seen and heard by others,” were all communication related processes operating within Arendt’s framework of mass loneliness.⁶³ The image of an organizing factor in the existent loneliness, moreover, suggested a type of suffering propped up by weak, inadequate, and soulless supports. Suffering was, therefore, an object of containment in modern society; something managed by systems and

⁶² See p. 478 of Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and pp. 58-9 of *The Human Condition* (1958).

⁶³ Ibid., p. 58 in *The Human Condition*, and pp. 311 and 475-77 in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

structures in the body politic but only at a superficial level. A deeper management of the self provided by reciprocal human bonds, created and nurtured by the sharing of felt commonality, had been displaced by ravaging, impersonalizing forces of modernity.

How relevant is this to the privation expressing itself in contemporary fan cultures? Extremely so, one would argue from many perspectives. At its most basic levels fandom is about a craving for meaningful social organization: a sub-surface yearning for coherent unities and functioning wholes not existing in the fan's everyday life and world. Superficial supports provided by modern society maintain a status quo of social constructs, but a human commonality based on the mutual reciprocation of interests and identities is often lacking. Isolation, moreover, is by no means too strong a word to find residence within the consciousness of many fans and groupings of fans. In favoring the term loneliness as a description of "human life as a whole," Arendt restricted the term isolation to the political realm in her discourse.⁶⁴ Yet, isolation is actually more descriptive in fandom because it enlists the presence of a more clearly stated reciprocal concept, identification, as its corresponding other. Loneliness may, in a broader sense, enlist identification as a satisfying other, but isolation and identification are more clearly stated corresponding opposites. Fans and fan cultures experience isolation which craves identification. Nevertheless, Arendt's repeated emphasis on ruptured human

⁶⁴ See p. 475 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

commonality as a key element of mass organized loneliness is highly relevant to fandom and other social phenomena in contemporary society.

Arendt also spoke of a privation measured by the loss of self in a social context involving the trust of equals. Her exact words bear repetition here: "What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals."⁶⁵ Again, the relevance of this statement to privation and its accompanying satisfactions in fandom is significant, I argue. Arendt's phrases "realized in solitude," "confirmed in identity," and "trustworthy company of my equals" work together to articulate another underlying behavioral craving comparable to that which exists in fandom: the socialization of something received and valued in the company of one's trusted associates. Arendt does not elaborate here on her view of how selves are realized in solitude, but solitude is never the equal of loneliness. It can become loneliness but only when the self is lost through boredom or other experiences in which lacks of personal meaning degrade the self. Had she mentioned self-development through the reception of meaning from texts, her statement would be of even greater relevance to fandom. The social processes of fandom are constructed around texts, the objects of fan devotion, and texts are most fully realized when they are socialized with other fans. Texts may be enjoyed and actualized, to a limited degree, by fans in experiences of solitude, but they take on much larger engagements of meaning and fulfillment when socialized by fans with

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 477.

others in their fan culture. Fans, in this sense, can be seen as types of the trustworthy equals alluded to by Arendt. Indeed, they are equalized in terms of their interests by the text, and confirmed in terms of their identity by socialization of the text. Trust, therefore, emerges from shared interests and identity among mutually trusted co-equals: the very same values missing in Arendt's culture of mass loneliness.

Though much of Arendt's moral philosophical concern is directed toward society as a collective exhibiting the privation of modern, technologized existence, her diagnostic instincts remain grounded in Augustinian thinking.⁶⁶ Hers is primarily an articulated *privatio non pura* of mass culture and is valuable for acknowledging that the outer wheel of humankind's anomie influences the turning of the inner wheel of individual privation. Like Augustine she sees the individual and his or her condition of anomie, yet many of her philosophical concerns are expressed toward a world of inescapable, hostile influences created and perpetuated on a very large stage of human existence. For an exploration of privation conditioned more by a focus on individual selves, we turn to the philosopher of religion, William James.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James's consistent acknowledgment of the value in appropriating individual concerns is notable in the narrative empiricism

⁶⁶ See pp. 149, 154-5, and 160-1 in *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* by Charles T. Mathewes (2001) for additional insights into Arendt's Augustinian thinking. Mathewes draws upon Arendt to write about public and private alienation in which human beings "lose a context for conversations about those things we care about" (pp. 160-1).

pervading his study of religious motivations and behaviors. Repeatedly, he draws upon the narrative vignettes of individuals to assemble his exploration of healthy minds, sick souls, and divided selves, to name three religious types he encounters on his empirical journey through ritualized elements of human nature. James's empiricism alone functions as an important historical guide for contemporary studies linking media and religion because it synthesizes and distills common human stories into a framework allowing descriptive analysis by the reader. We see the persons—the selves—integrated into James's discussions, and are able therefore to place his ideas onto a rich, visible background of behavioral nuance. Indeed, as contemporary studies in media, religion, and culture emerge from a basic assumptive platform, James's empirical methodology becomes an important standard of collection and enquiry: a standard facilitating the presentation of real people who are able to add human realities to research agendas and assumptions.

Arguably, the religious type most applicable to the present thesis is the type James referred to as "the sick soul."⁶⁷ Whereas previously he had described individuals who could rather easily use superficial variants of religious experience to cure themselves from their "mal-adjustment" with external conflicts residing within their particular "environment," he then turned to individuals suffering from a far deeper kind of Augustinian privation.⁶⁸ These were individuals who dwelled beyond the reach of easily managed external conflicts and saw their own suffering

⁶⁷ See pp. 125-62 of the 1929 edition of *Varieties*, which originally were lectures VI and VII in the Gifford Lectures of 1901-02.

⁶⁸ See pp. 131-2.

as existent in the “essential nature” of the self. Implied here were notions of an endemic spiritual alienation and separation residing in a deeply flawed sense of personhood. Ultimate cure, in these cases, existed not in “any superficial rearrangement of the inner self,” James wrote, but in remedies calling forth elements of the “supernatural.”⁶⁹ The afflicted individual, moreover, required inner transformation likely occurring in an extremely complex trajectory of processes consisting of conversion, saintliness, and mysticism, though these processes were likely also to vary markedly from individual to individual. Prior to becoming engaged, however, in this trajectory, if indeed such was to be the case in the life of each individual sufferer, the sick soul was described by James as a dweller near a “misery-threshold.”⁷⁰ Crossing over this threshold produced in the individual a sense of privation characterized by depressive conclusions: that life’s rewards, including economic stability, love, youth, good health, and esteem from private or public sources, were all fleeting propositions.

In further diagnosing the sick soul, James enlisted Ecclesiastes to support his statement that within this diseased entity existed a sense that “life and its negation are beaten up inextricably together,” and that “all natural happiness” was conditioned by the underlying contradiction that, despite its temptations, lived happiness was not possible in any earthly state.⁷¹ He also engaged Epicurean and Stoic traditions of Greek philosophy to remind the reader of timeless human

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 132.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 136.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 137.

responses of the sick soul to its predicament. The Stoic perspective constituted an attitude of abandonment, James suggested: an abandonment of seeking any form of reward extending beyond the preservation of one's own soul. That immaterial essence harboring the fullness of one's human nature could remain intact as the only reward worth protecting. The Epicurean view, on the other hand, spoke across the ages of human privation not about seeking happiness but rather escaping unhappiness through adoption and engagement of an "economy of indulgence." Expectations and aims were to be lowered, safe shores were to be hugged, and the "deeper raptures" of metaphysical soul-searching were not to be tempted. Both philosophical strains were despairing, James admitted, yet both would likely "be to all time typical attitudes" expressed within stages of the sick soul.⁷²

It is tempting to approximate the range of potential applications existing between *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and contemporary studies linking media and religion on a cultural stage. It would be possible, for instance, to locate some fan processes and behaviors to within James's analysis of religious types whom he describes as being merely out of touch with their surroundings. Individuals suffering from superficial "mal-adjustments" and "wrong correspondences" found cure in basic modifications of self or the superficial reordering of interests, habits, and preferences, James suggested.⁷³ These were not sufferers in any profound sense, and neither were the remedies anything much greater than a process of rearranging

⁷² Ibid., pp. 140-1.

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 131-2.

one's life to align it better with current existing circumstances. In fandom, similarly, it is possible to see some fan behaviors as simply a healthy-minded response to external, or superficial internal, life circumstances. These are the fans situated near an invisible yet evident plane of organized tastes and preferences.⁷⁴ Suffering is present within these fans, but it can be interpreted as the kind of suffering germane to many of James's descriptions of superficial suffering: mal-adjustments, wrong correspondences, and even experiences of finding relief in forms of relaxation and "letting go."⁷⁵ Some individuals identified in this thesis as animus/release fans describe a relief from disordered life activities they derive from listening to certain musical products furnishing relaxation, peace, and even sleep. Such experiences may not be the norm in fandom, but they should be noted and understood as having a possible, relevant alignment with James's thoughts on healthy-mindedness in human behavior.

Overall, however, there is greater insightful purchase in applying James's discussions of the sick soul to fan behaviors and processes. Especially as fan experiences ascend from organized tastes and preferences to extreme adherence and allegiance, the sense of Augustinian privation advances in trajectory. Texts are socialized with an increasing intensity until the process reveals more and more of what lies beneath individual fandoms, motivationally speaking. Fans identified by

⁷⁴ See thesis Chapters 3-5 for detailed explanations of fans situated between the plane of organized tastes and preferences and the plane of extreme adherence and allegiance.

⁷⁵ In his discussion of healthy-mindedness, James referred to these forms of experience in a context of psychological "regeneration" facilitated by "relaxing, by letting go." See p. 109.

their craving for reciprocal identification in a media product or celebrity, for instance, reveal more about the isolation of personhood, whether emotional or psychological, which motivates their cultural choices. In other words, demonstrated increases in stated satisfactions derived from fandom reveal more elaborate evidences of deprivation, I argue, and it can become difficult in this sense to separate obvious deprivations from less obvious or even hidden ones.⁷⁶ Are fan motivations, therefore, really that unique from each other, one is inclined to ask, or should they be treated more as growing out of the same soil of human experience? My argument favors the latter of these two choices while acknowledging that motivational differences exist primarily in matters of degree: fans should be thought of as experiencing a common sense of overall privation expressed differently by different fans and to varying degrees.

James's sick soul, finally, comes ultimately into play with his diagnosis of this soul as being formed by an individual's recognition of "a wrongness or vice in his essential nature."⁷⁷ There is nothing external to the self in this picture as far as cause is concerned, and there will be no superficial reordering of external forces or internal processes sufficient to provide cure. Suffering lies deeply encased in the individual's interior spaces, and cure resides in an infilling of those spaces whether through relationship, ritual, belief in a supernatural other, or some likely combination of all three elements. As previously mentioned, the trajectory of cure in

⁷⁶ I am referring to the problem of fan silences, which cloak evident deprivations.

⁷⁷ See p. 132.

James's appropriation of individual religious experience will likely pass through the realms of conversion, saintliness, and mysticism, though each individual's participation in these realms remains indeterminate. In a similar way, it is engaging but challenging to bring James's ideas forward a hundred-plus years onto a contemporary stage where modern actors, such as fans, are portrayed as traveling from states of deprivation to experiences of satisfaction. How deep are the deprivations, how substantial are the satisfactions, and where do the two states of human experience meet in modern mediated culture? A place to start in addressing such questions, I argue, is at the level of suffering: the level of varying deprivations understood as Arendt's organized loneliness, James's sick soul, or Augustinian privation.

2.5 CONCLUSIONS

An Augustinian perspective, it is evident, runs through the discussions of privation as presented in this chapter, primarily because of its role as a diagnostic tool useful in chiseling off the exterior from deep depictions of human deprivation. The consistency of such majority report thinking with the social and aesthetic approaches to suffering herein is evident, also, and adapting Augustine's concept of privation as an approach to the study of suffering in fandom is always diagnostically persuasive, I argue. It should be mentioned too, however, that other

theologies and theological perspectives might well have value in approaching some aspects of fandom. Theologies structured on the minority report of the Irenaean theological tradition, for instance, might be useful in evaluating the nature of fan behaviors in a context of human evolutionary growth theorized along theological lines. John Hick's foundational perspectives on human beings evolving in a process of unfinished creation, for instance, would seem to find plausible application in the appropriation of fan behaviors as expressions pertinent to a perilous human journey in individual freedom.⁷⁸ Fandom as a contemporary expression of Hick's soul-making theodicy might be a topic for future study. The inclusion of Augustinian thinking, moreover, should not be about eliminating the potentialities other discourses could bring to fandom, but rather it should be of an enriching nature both descriptively and analytically. In the present thesis, it should be about projecting a clearer picture of suffering onto a screen of contemporary life as it is lived in our mediated age.

As we move, now, into a secondary context focusing on fandom as a media-based practice fans use to satisfy variable states of deprivation, it is worth pointing out that the present study benefits from a broad sense of theological, philosophical, and methodological accommodation. Allowing that adjustments of thought and perspective may enrich fandom scholarship at each step of research should be a guarded method of proceeding toward new knowledge of fans, their social and

⁷⁸ See pp. 253-61 of Hick's *Evil and the God of Love* (1966).

cultural choices, and the range of motivations lying beneath their tastes and preferences in media.

III

A SECONDARY CONTEXT



CHAPTER THREE: A SECONDARY CONTEXT FANDOM: A CONTEMPORARY, MEDIA-BASED PRACTICE FANS USE TO SATISFY VARIABLE STATES OF DEPRIVATION

3.1 TEXTUAL AND SOCIAL APPROACHES TO SUFFERING MEET IN FANDOM

In this second of two contextual chapters an attempt is made to place the subject of fandom in a setting of media and mass communication theory, and to argue that fandom can be thought of as a type of non-conventional religious practice pertinent to the experience and relief of suffering. Also, where the problem of suffering in popular culture has been approached at all, it has enlisted textually based and socially oriented methodologies. Moreover, because fandom incorporates both textual and social meanings in close proximity to each other, it provides a superior platform on which to examine such issues. We see suffering in what fans like. We see suffering in what fans do. And when we combine insights from both activities, the results can be most revealing. I define fandom as the socialization of textual consumption, and my central thesis here is that fandom is a contemporary practice fans use to satisfy variable states of deprivation I have referred to as privation.

Where suffering and popular culture have previously been explored in tandem, they have often intersected over questions related to the meaning of life, argues Jeffery Mahan, author of *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (2000).⁷³ Steeped in John Cawelti's enduring textual study of the subject, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (1976), Mahan stated that to understand popular culture's historical treatment of suffering, at least with respect to the texts of popular literature, one must first examine the moral fantasy existing at the heart of melodrama. This moral fantasy provides justification of suffering as the heroes and heroines of popular narrative grow in character from the hurtful circumstances and episodes they experience.⁷⁴ "Characters learn from their suffering, their character improves, and in the end the story rewards them for their suffering," Mahan states (again, in correspondence on 19 and 20 July 2001). His example is that of the romance heroine whom, wrongly accused and rejected by her true love, experiences terrible suffering. "But in the end the truth emerges, the lovers are reunited, and we are assured that their bond is stronger for the trials they have been through," he states. The result here is that a fundamental "rightness within the order of the world" has been presented in popular narrative, and this redemptive quality is an example of suffering playing into larger questions about the meaning of life.

⁷³ Correspondence on 19 and 20 July 2001.

⁷⁴ In Cawelti's own words, "...the main plot works out in proper melodramatic fashion to affirm, after appropriate tribulations and sufferings, that God is in his heaven and all's right with the world" (p. 261).

Another recent example of suffering begging larger questions occurs in Tom Beaudoin's *Virtual Faith: the Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (1998), though the "larger questions of life" here are those conditioned by the negations of a modern generation of young people steeped in what Beaudoin calls "a tremendous inventory of suffering." Attempting to find some sense of spiritual and cultural equilibrium amid the recognition of unilateral social failures—"AIDS, divorce, poor schools, recessions, youth poverty, teen suicide"⁷⁵—has produced an interactive, media-consuming generation intrigued by differences between constructive and destructive suffering, the role of suffering in religious experience, the meaning of Christ's unjust suffering, and suffering's role in connecting one generation's personal narrative to the sufferings experienced by other generations. Beaudoin, moreover, is clear about naming the suffering experienced by his generation: it is, he argues, a form of separation. Perhaps best illustrated by trends in gothic fashions which clothe some Xers in an attire which symbolizes "a nocturnal life, lived away from the daylight," Beaudoin quotes a gothically-outfitted cab driver who tells him, "Gothic [suffering]...is all about separation. Separation from society and from God."⁷⁶

Despite seeking a unified conclusion—that suffering in popular culture asks larger questions about the meaning of life—Mahan approaches this topic from a textually-informed perspective while Beaudoin leans more toward a view which is

⁷⁵ See pp. 97-120 for Beaudoin's primarily social analysis of his generation's suffering.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

socially-informed. Mahan, in other words, is most interested in what popular media texts say about suffering, while Beaudoin seeks to understand how suffering is received, interpreted, and acted upon by his generation of media consumers.

As a textual critic, Mahan follows the movements of popularly-drawn characters and the dynamic tensions which lead them into states of deprivation contained within melodramatic narrative. Suffering occurs as a result of popular literary conventions fulfilling designated roles and functions within the text: a mystery character is falsely accused of a crime, for instance, imprisoned in conditions of appropriate discomfort and separation, and ultimately relieved of this suffering by melodramatic redemption generic to the genre. The meaning of suffering here will become an involuntary social reality when the narrative is received by a reader (and possibly an intentional social reality when it is deliberately socialized in some way by the reader), but until that happens it remains textually conceived, constructed, and nurtured within the confines of itself: the text. (I will add here that this term, text, possesses two meanings in the present thesis. As fundamental to my definition of fandom, text refers to all objects of fan devotion, whether the text is verbal, visual, or some other embodiment which yields information received by a consumer. Text also refers, however, to the narrower concerns of popular literary products, as is the case here.)

Beaudoin, on the other hand, an observer of generational peer activity, follows the movements of his own generation along a life course in which loss, separation, and alienation occur on a stage of social interactivity. Suffering happens

within the web of demands and responses which are the result of instabilities in the collective grouping. The creation, production, and reception of Gen-X texts reflect and influence these instabilities, but Beaudoin is more interested here in their root social causes rather than their expressions through textual production. He writes:

Our society has unjustly demanded something of us, and we have responded by giving what others ask. For example, our generation pays a higher proportion of its income to fund our elder's retirement. We were also the objects of educational experimentation...no fault divorce...and the negative effects of the sexual revolution. In more ways than these, we were called as a generation to suffering servanthood, a religious way of framing secular demands and responsibilities. Whether Isaiah or Jesus is the ultimate referent, suffering servanthood illustrates one religious dimension of our pain.⁷⁷

The term "objects" is instructive here as Beaudoin portrays his generation, in this case, as having been acted upon by uninvited and unavoidable social forces which have produced suffering. Implied losses, separations, and alienations imposed by the social causation of no fault divorce, for instance, play an important role in Beaudoin's socially-informed presentation of his generation's suffering. They also contribute to defining Gen-X's "lived theology in the popular culture": the experience of faith founded upon states of deprivation.

With both textual and social approaches to the combined study of suffering and popular culture evidenced by commentators such as Mahan and Beaudoin, it follows that fandom, defined once more here as the intentional socialization of textual consumption, affords us with an opportunity to witness both approaches as

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 111.

they occur within a single format. I will return to this premise after providing needed background to the topic of fandom by placing it in its appropriate setting within the history of mass communication theory.

3.2 FANDOM IN ITS MEDIA CONTEXT

Fandom, as a topic of increasing interest during the past decade, is very much a product of the current era of mass communication theory: the Era of Cultural Theory. However, it should be mentioned that the study of fans, their texts (again, meaning all objects of fan devotion), and their social interactions, could have been formally theorized in earlier theoretical eras. Since mass communication theories attempt to explain and predict social phenomena which link mass communication to what happens in the lives of media consumers, and since all mass communication theories rest on cultivation analysis (the idea that media consumers' conceptions of themselves and their place in the world is shaped and maintained through media consumption), the social construction of reality (the conclusion that common, meaningful realities are constructed from signs and symbols), and attitude change theory (the idea that how we perceive things shapes our behavior toward them), a social phenomenon such as fandom, which encompasses all of these ideas and their

fundamental building blocks, could have been addressed at any point in the comparatively brief history of mass communication theory.⁷⁸

While this is true it should also be mentioned that theorizing fandom in earlier periods almost certainly would have yielded results prone to massive revision in subsequent eras. Had fandom been significantly approached during the Era of Mass Society Theory, for instance, when media consumption could only be comprehended against the backdrop of harsh societal conditions germane to the Industrial Revolution, it most likely would have acquired an unnecessarily extreme negative status. The likening of media (newspapers, magazines, print advertising, photographs, print graphics, and eventually early cinema and radio, for instance) to hypodermic needles and magic bullets during this era had presented a paradigmatic understanding of media as corruptors of the natural human self; and fandom, certainly seen as a model of intense and excessive consumption, would likely have been presented in overt support of this view. Unfortunately, the latter stages of this era coincided with the origin and rapid growth of early science fiction fandom (and other less-organized groupings of media and cultural consumers), and had overall

⁷⁸ For an introductory overview of mass communication theory, see pp. 372-399 of Stanley J. Baran's *Mass Communication: Media Literacy and Culture* (2002), which summarizes four distinct eras of mass communication theory (mentioned above). For deeper insights into theory, see Baran's and D.K. Davis's *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future* (2000), P.L. Berger's and T. Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966), M.L. De Fleur's *Theories of Mass Communication* (1975), D. McQuail's *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction* (1987), and R.K. Merton's *On Theoretical Sociology* (1967). Each provides indispensable background to fandom as I have defined it: the intentional socialization of textual consumption.

attitudes of the period been more sophisticated, fandom research may have gotten a significantly earlier start.⁷⁹

The following period, thought of as an Era of Scientific Perspective (emergent in America near the time of Orson Welles's radio broadcast of H.G. Wells's science fiction story *War of the Worlds*, which produced a panic among American radio listeners, yet whose effects later, under scientific examination, were revealed to be exaggerated) would likely have rescued fandom from unnecessarily biased and unscientific research approaches. As with the Welles broadcast, organized research into the mass audience revealed that only a small portion of listeners had actually panicked, suggesting that conclusions about media effects were in need of scientific analysis.⁸⁰ Yet, it wasn't until the subsequent Era of Limited Effects when fandom as a scholastic discourse might have received adequate treatment. There, the work of social theorists who were engaged in mass communication research would have set an interesting stage for examining fandom. Attitude Change Theory, which held that attitudes are formed and transformed by selective attention (attending only to

⁷⁹ Sam Moskowitz's study of science fiction fandom, *Immortal Storm: a History of Science Fiction Fandom*, did not appear until the 1950s (and was ahead of its time, at that). As we look back at *Storm* now, we see many topics and observations Moskowitz had made which would have advanced fandom research significantly. His observations and insights into factionalism within fandom, for instance (which bears similarities to denominationalism in conventional religion) would have shown fandom to be of value to discussions in the sociology of religion.

⁸⁰ Some might say that one in six people who panicked (out of a total of six million listeners) was no small number. Yet, the assumption had been that a much higher number of listeners had been scared enough to take some kind of action. The lower actual number, moreover, showed that the audience was in greater control of the effects of this media consumption than had previously been thought. This became one of the early moments of recognition that audiences were not media dupes, an awareness which would evolve into a kind of sovereignty whereby the audience, not the media, was the strongest cultural player.

what interests us), selective retention (remembering only what interests us), and selective perception (interpreting all messages based on these preexisting notions), was already charting a course toward the revision of suspect conclusions about the extent of the media's power of influence and a simultaneous recognition of the audience's own power and insularity: each of which were precursors to the current theoretical acceptance of fandom as a resistant consumer subculture.⁸¹ Other theories of the era, such as cognitive dissonance theory (which held that we filter out whatever causes us mental discomfort), reinforcement theory (the argument that if the media have impact, it lies in an ability to reinforce what consumers already deem important), and uses and gratifications theory (a position which inverts traditional thinking by holding that people do things with media, not vice-versa), contributed to the movement of mass communication theory—correctly or incorrectly—toward further recognition and acceptance of the audience's ability to exert power over its own consumptive habits and processes.⁸² Media and its content are seen here as a commodity which may have effects if consumers allow them to

⁸¹ Many fandom commentators have followed this approach, whereby fans consume but they do so in ways that resist conventional patterns and processes of consumption. Retail coupon fans, for instance, have been portrayed as exploiters of retail purchasing norms and resistant toward the retail marketplace. See "Redeeming Values: Retail Coupon and Product Refund Fans" in Harris and Alexander's standard anthology, *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity* (1998).

⁸² The statement "correctly or incorrectly" is made here to reflect the idea that newer theories, such as Agenda Setting Theory, have in turn taken back some elements of audience sovereignty. If the media is capable of exerting some control over what we think about (let alone how we think), sovereignty is compromised. Also, uses and gratifications theory, holding that media use is a motivated process, is arguably the theory of greatest importance to the present study. Fans are motivated to seek satisfactions to various deprivations.

happen, but the tastes, preferences, and backgrounds of media consumers render them in semi-sovereign control of their own destiny.

3.2.1 FANDOM: RIPE FOR THE ERA OF CULTURAL THEORY

By the time we arrive at the present Era of Cultural Theory, fandom is ripe as a topic for serious consideration. Hindsight has legitimated a healthy questioning of media effects through systematic, scientific study; but more than these factors, we have witnessed the triumph of the audience, respecting its self-determinative capacities. Certainly, there are cautions exerted by new theories: agenda setting theory (which holds that the media do not necessarily tell us how to think but what to think about), dependency theory (which argues that we are dependent on media for information, entertainment, companionship, advice, and escape), and social cognitive theory (the argument that we learn from observing, which leads to imitation of that which we observe), and it is wise to think of audiences as being self-determinative within an overall context of inescapable media influences. Cultural theory of the present day, however, has continued to ascribe power to the audience, visualizing it as in daily negotiation with the media it consumes; accepting, reshaping, and storing that which serves culturally defined needs. We give meaning to cultural artifacts, whether a flag, a pop star, or a sports team, and the meaning which we have the freedom to assign becomes an essential force as we live out our lives in constant negotiative space within mass-mediated culture.

3.2.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF MEANING

Meaning, moreover, has become of prime importance, applicable generally to the entire Era of Cultural Theory and applicable specifically to the narrowly-focused interests of individual topics such as fandom. Through socio-cultural theoretical developments such as social construction of reality theory, we now understand that individuals who share space within a culture also share objective meanings through symbols (an automobile, for instance, which means basic transportation) and subjectively through signs (a Hummer, for instance, which means power, wealth, and status).⁸³ Fandom has entered this picture, importantly, because it raises questions about the distribution of both objective and subjective meaning: specifically as regards the relationship between a person's reception of meaning, as from a product or a media text of some type, and the resulting socialization of meaning, through involuntary social responses such as spontaneously-expressed verbal satisfaction and voluntary (or intentional) social responses such as group consumption rituals or artifact collection.⁸⁴ When is a Hummer most meaningful, for instance: when it is experienced in solitary conditions by a motorist, or when it is displayed in front of one's friends at a local Hummer rally? At or about the same

⁸³ See Baran, pp. 389-90.

⁸⁴ To be sure, any line between spontaneous and intentional socialization is a hazy one. We may choose, in the context of fandom, to visualize it this way: We hear a catchy but unknown song in a Barnes and Noble record department and spontaneously look up to see who is the featured artist. We purchase the CD, and enjoy the music so much that we purchase others by the same artist, displaying both the music and the CD cover in our home where friends can see it, listen to it, know that we like it, and join us in this musical and social enjoyment. It is difficult to know precisely where spontaneity gave way to intentionality, though we know that it has indeed happened.

time, would be the response of one of fandom's earliest and most influential commentators, Henry Jenkins, who in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), argues that semiotic (or textual) meaning, and enunciative (or social) meaning, exist in virtual inseparability within fandom. "For the fan...the moment of reception is often also the moment of enunciation," he states.⁸⁵

Meaning, I will add, became and remains fandom's most important feature. Moreover, whether one draws the textual and social dimensions of meaning together into inseparability, as Jenkins does, or visualizes a greater separation between meaning at its moment of reception and meaning as experienced within expressions of intentional socialization, the fact remains that because of the interplay between these two co-existent and dynamic centers, fandom warrants scrutiny as a location of meaningful objects and activities for the modern media consumer. A fan's experience of a Disney character, a football team's victory, or a comic book genre—and his or her resulting emotional responses of joy, mirth, or sadness—becomes an important way of placing human emotion in the context of mediated cultural experience within modernity. We see human suffering, for instance, the topic at hand, from two closely combined perspectives, and better still, from an amalgamated concentration of both perspectives: a distillation. Suffering becomes

⁸⁵ See Jenkins, pp. 277-8, which places corporate television viewing among fans in a context of inseparability between textual and social meaning. "Fan viewers watch television texts with close and undivided attention...[while translating] the reception process into social interaction with other fans," he writes.

something consumed and something expressed, a thing taken in and a thing sent out. In collective experience with other fans, suffering takes on a dimension of dense experience as the meshing of receptions and socializations of suffering's meaning occurs in collective consciousness. This kind of intensity which happens "where two or three are gathered together," becomes as much a fandom statement as one expressive of an ecclesial referent.

Most of fandom's commentators have recognized this (though not specifically in the context of suffering) in one way or another over the past decade, whether acknowledged within concentrated studies of individual fandoms or in broader considerations of miscellaneous and interdisciplinary fandoms. Fans scribble in the margins of media texts, to paraphrase Jenkins, then socialize their scribbles upon scribbles, until their "ravenous subculture of existing hungers" reaches an ongoing sense of critical mass.⁸⁶ Alternative texts, layers of meaning, cravings for stability and coherence, selecting, evaluating, interpreting, lobbying, and rallying, allow the subculture to escape mundane existences toward becoming the experience of higher sociality that many fans ultimately desire. In addition, the flux and fluidity of consumptive practices, creative processes, and social interactions within fandom add to the experience of this self-made utopia where much that is important—gender, sex, emotionality, intimacy, role, place, status, authority, pleasure, pain—are negotiated in a broad cultural space which lies between semi-fixed planes of existence and experience. Matt Hills, in *Fan Cultures* (2002), sees

⁸⁶ Ibid., Chapter V: "Scribbling in the margins: Fan Readers/Fan Writers."

these planes ranging from such semi-fixed points as community and hierarchy to consumerism and resistance, accurately visualizing fandom's placement in modern mediated culture as a location in between: an intermediary cultural location.⁸⁷

3.2.3 TWO FLUID PLANES: ORGANIZED TASTES AND PREFERENCES/EXTREME ADHERENCE AND ALLEGIANCE

Cult and culture are two additional planes of existence noted by Hills, which allow, as other commentators have recognized in their own work, a visualization of fandom as a type of non-conventional religious space or experience.⁸⁸ Cult, which I define as the semi-fixed plane of extreme adherence and allegiance, exists at the opposite end of a continuum which originates with and is rooted in culture, the semi-fixed plane of organized tastes and preferences. All fan experience occurs between these two planes, I argue, and the space in between can be seen as religious, or like religion, or indeed authentic religion, defined here as the synthesis of ritual experiences and beliefs. Hills recognizes this, arguing that fandom may be a kind of neo-religiosity (like, but arguably not, religion). Following the lead of Daniel

⁸⁷ Hills's insight here places fandom in a transitional state, whereby it can be visualized as a cultural stepping-stone to some other destination. Some fans, to be sure, never leave a static location, but I believe that many do move on to other planes of experience—for which they have been prepared by their fandom. A mobility exists between "fantasy and reality" and "cult and culture," to mention two of Hills's categories.

⁸⁸ Erika Doss, for instance, in *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Image* (1999), sees Elvis Presley fandom as at least functionally if not substantively religious (despite the fact that Elvis fans argue to the contrary). Fans "establish the depth of their devotion" (p.62), Doss argues, to Elvis through his image emblazoned on collectible artifacts. In addition, fans use their collections of memorabilia to construct Elvis's immortality (p.66), and even feel they are atoning for the role they believe they may have played in his earthly suffering. "We know he's gone," Doss quotes one fan. "These things keep him alive in our hearts" (p. 61).

Cavicchi (*Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans*, 1998), he is skeptical about theorizing fandom as religion, partially because of religion's definitional instabilities and the problem of choosing from among any definitions of religion that exist and could be accepted as reliable. A larger problem concerns Hills's inability to accept that the ritualistic experiences of fans and those of religious devotees are "similarly liminal." Devotional liminality existing within *Star Trek* fandom, for instance, cannot be comparable to the same experience within "religion proper." This "identity" drawn between the two phenomena is not an appropriate one, Hills argues, and "however much religion-proper may operate as entertainment or diversion, it could hardly be argued that this is its primary function as compared to popular culture." On the other hand, he concedes that employing "the language of religion" to describe experiences in fandom may have a limited usefulness (as when Cavicchi labels as converts the fans of rock musician Bruce Springsteen), but comparing "fan-produced texts" with "religious texts" and the social applications they might be seen to possess, ultimately serves a minimal usefulness.

3.3 FANDOM AS NON-CONVENTIONAL RELIGION

Hills's skepticism is noted, and making a persuasive argument here for the existence and importance of suffering in fandom does not rest on theorizing fandom as religion. However, as suffering is an explicit component of recognized traditional

religions (and a dominant factor in non-conventional religions⁸⁹), it is worth challenging the skeptical position by exploring again fandom's possible status as a non-conventional religion. What is at stake here, importantly it would seem, is the idea that modern media and its myriad related components (such as fandom) operate as an increasingly emergent religion: a mass-mediated, cultural religion which may be transitional or an end in itself.⁹⁰ If human beings can release themselves (with any success at all) from their problems—such as the comprehensive suffering of privation—through mediated consumptive behaviors, is this not in itself a persuasive argument?

3.3.1. A RELIGION OF FUNCTION AND EXPERIENCE

I begin here by noting the work of Michael Jindra, an object of interest for Hills with respect to Jindra's argument that liminal experience exists between the functions of entertainment and seriousness within *Star Trek* fandom. Jindra's fundamental position is that the "ongoing" ritual experiences of *Star Trek* fans through both textual consumption and intentional socialization are what make it

⁸⁹ Suffering and "the roots of spiritual travail," for instance, lie at the heart of Scientology, whereby adherents seek auditing which addresses and removes their suffering, they believe. One of Scientology's best-known figures, actor John Travolta, has said of this non-conventional religion founded by science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard: "The gift of freedom from pain and upset that Ron has made available to me and the world will not soon be forgotten." See *Theology & Practice of a Contemporary Religion: A Reference Work Presented by the Church of Scientology International* (1998).

⁹⁰ Many writers have followed early voices on this subject, such as that of John Wiley Nelson, whom in *Your God is Alive and Well and Appearing in Popular Culture* (1976) noted that mediated popular culture could be seen as a religion which embodied worship, sources of deliverance, eschatological hopes, and other topics relevant to conventional religion.

possible to classify them as religious. Religion appropriated primarily as ritual experience rather than transcendent, supernatural belief, in other words, provides the bedrock assumption for theorizing *Star Trek* fandom as religion. Fans convert to *Star Trek* fandom and experience enlightenment as initiated members of the subculture. They undergo various forms of ritual immersion at conventions. They partake of activities resembling religious fellowship in symbolic communities which “resist the secularization...of modern life.” They acquire experiences of inspiration and a foundational sense of existential support through *Star Trek’s* canon of manuals, histories, and stories. They collect and display artifacts, as in religion where the acquisition and exhibition of icons is standard practice, and they engage in cultural production directed toward the consolidation of “a consistent universe [they] so desperately want to create.” Finally, according to Jindra, fans experience liminality through their fandom’s balancing of “play and ritual,” and all objects, activities, and experiences are framed by *Star Trek’s* future-centered orientation.⁹¹

Similar variants of religious behavior exist throughout fandom. They are, in fact, a mainstay of fan narrative literature, whose primary purpose is to show how the active functioning of fan behaviors and practices does indeed reach the level of religious intensity as understood by the fan authors. Whether presented in autobiographical form or in the third person, narratives such as Alan Edge’s *Faith of our Fathers: Football as a Religion* (1997), Barry Divola’s *Fan Club: It’s a Fan’s World*—

⁹¹ See “Star Trek Fandom as a Religious Phenomenon,” *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 55, no. 1, pp. 27-51.

Pop Stars Just Live in It (1998), Dave Henderson's *Touched by the Hand of Bob:*

Epiphanel Bob Dylan Experiences from a Buick Six (1999) would have no way of approximating the intensity of fan experience without showing how, to them, their fandom functions as religion. Edge, who claims that "the earthly paradise" of [British] football replaced "the religious oppression" of his boyhood Catholicism, sees his fandom as existing in total replacement of high-church rituals that were the center of his religious heritage. His new ecclesia, in which baptism, penance, indoctrination, confirmation, communion, and confession (all football terms, now, according to Edge) provide a culturally-revamped doctrinal structure, is preferable to the old ecclesia because 1) it possesses a palpably reliable text ("One True Team" rather than "One True God," according to Edge) and 2) it is naturally ecumenical, inviting the multicultural participation of "ordinary" people.⁹² In addition, the stadium has replaced the cathedral for corporate worship; the pub has replaced the small-group sanctuary setting; and Saturday, game day, is now the recognized Sabbath. Of the totality of his indoctrination, Edge writes, "In the end, for me, there could be but one winner in the indoctrination stakes, and ultimately, I chose an earthly path of perpetual [football] for my spiritual path."⁹³

Likewise, in media fandom, the "indoctrination stakes" may reflect a number of activities, from the inverting of traditional texts which underlie conventional religion (so that they now serve non-conventional approaches) to the transfiguration

⁹² Edge, p. 15.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 67, 76, and 221.

of celebrities into spiritually heroic figures. Divola begins his fan narrative with this inversion of a conventional symbolic text:

Jesus was the first person to have fans. In fact, he was probably the first pop star. Consider the evidence.

He bided his time before stardom in a normal everyday job (a carpenter). Then he became really famous quite quickly, and the fame lasted around three years—the average pop lifespan for someone under the scrutiny of the public eye. He had a bunch of guys follow him around on tour throughout the Middle East. Many left their jobs as fishermen just to hang out in his entourage and bask in his reflected glory. A few of them decided to start their own fanzine—they called it the New Testament. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John gave varying personal accounts of what went on (miracles, wise words, encounters with the general public) and put it in their own language. The main man couldn't turn water into wine or bring a dead guy back to life without these four scribbling it down. One female fan was so enamored of JC that she washed his feet and used her hair to dry them.

Of course, like any pop phenomenon, there was a backlash. And like a true pop star, he died young and tragically, at the age of 33, and became more popular in death than in life. His fans went on to commemorate his birthday and the day of his death every year. They built shrines in his memory, and created a following of almost (well, literally) religious proportions over the years. Relics and merchandise—crosses, little models of his birth scene, statuettes of his mother—still change hands today. And everything he ever said is quoted, re-quoted, and dissected for meaning.

The final pop star trademark? His true fans don't believe he's really dead, and they're eagerly waiting for his comeback.⁹⁴

We might have occasion here to question the sincerity of Divola's *Jesus Christ Superstar* theologizing, until we realize the seriousness of its intent. Placed, as it is, at the beginning of the narrative, it articulates a rationale for popular music fandom

⁹⁴ Divola, p. 10.

and the suffering celebrities it deifies and transfigures.⁹⁵ The conventional Christ of the New Testament functions as a prototypical Elvis Presley, John Lennon, Jimi Hendrix, or Kurt Cobain: culturally engaging sufferers, all, with fans who adored them on earth and quasi-mystically, at least in Elvis's case, await their return. A desire to give an exalted or spiritual appearance to the objects around which fans organize seems a common experience, not only in popular music fandom but in other fandoms, too.

3.3.2 THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL HEROISM AND ENGAGEMENT

Such deifications and transfigurations within fan narratives sound like expressions of substantive religious faith, even to the point of including worship of a numinous or supernatural other. It is possible, however, to see them reasonably as expressions of a functional religious sensibility reflecting a need among fans for spiritual heroism lifting them out of ordinary, non-liminal life experience and into the ritual space they say defines and describes the textual component of their fandom. Indeed, Henderson's narrative about Bob Dylan fandom features numerous fan vignettes portraying Dylan as Christ revisited, Christian encourager, object of worship, equal to Scripture and as God. One fan says, "I came to believe that Dylan was Christ revisited. I felt that everything fit, without being Christian-religious or anything. I felt that what he had to say about living and communication with people was the truest, most honest, and most Christ-like thing I've ever

⁹⁵ See Chapter Six for an analysis of the role suffering celebrities play in fandom.

heard.”⁹⁶ Here, Dylan, the spiritual hero, exists at the construction point of non-conventional religious meaning for the fan, even as it transcends a sense of conventional religious orthodoxy. The fan experiences a liminal moment “without [it necessarily] being Christian-religious or anything.” In other words, the religious experience here is authentic; it is simply articulated as a kind of non-conventional spiritual heroism. Another Dylan fan places himself in a similar ritualized space when he argues that human beings need spiritual heroes to worship, and if such heroes are no longer to be found in conventional religious texts, then fans will find them elsewhere in culture. This fan says, “I had worshiped Bob Dylan for years, and I was finally going to get to see him in the flesh.... Here that please: I need to worship someone. That’s how I’ve been created....”⁹⁷

Such liminal experiences, we should add, are not limited to the textual side of fandom. To return for a moment to sports fandom, William Freedman in *More than a History: An Oral History of Baseball Fans* (1998) offers an account of a fan whose textual consumption and accompanying spontaneous and intentional socialization are so steeped in baseball and related referents of his Catholic faith, it would be difficult to separate one source of ritual from the other. Baseball and Roman Catholicism rule in his world of sacraments, rewards, conversions, participatory community, and an experience he refers to as “Jesus in me.” “After we win a baseball game, I feel great,” the fan states, [and] that’s how I feel after I go to church.

⁹⁶ Henderson, p. 35.

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 156-7.

I...feel like I've just received communion and I've got Jesus in me. After we win a baseball game I have this feeling.... The fact that Jesus is in your body, the fact that you're number one—it's like an adrenaline rush.”⁹⁸ Here, it is clear that the fan's enjoyment of baseball is framed by sacramental and ecclesial referents which are socially experienced. He enjoys baseball as he enjoys church. A victory by his team produces an internal experience of ritual, just as the social sacrament of communion leaves him with an internalized sense of Christ's presence. Later, he links the corporate activities of Christian community with those rising out of the social realm of baseball fandom. Corporate worship activities occur in the ecclesial, as well as the sporting, environment. “You can even compare the *wave* to singing or chanting in church,” the fan adds. “Everyone at church gets into that. The choir starts the singing and the next thing you know the whole church has broken into song all together.... I feel the same way at the stadium.”⁹⁹

It should be clear from all of these examples that one reasonable conclusion to be drawn about fandom as religion is this: some fans say that, to them, their fandom is a religious experience or very much like a religious experience. From this perspective, we can respond in at least two different ways. First, we can argue that these fans, and the commentators who evaluate them as religious, are inaccurate: that the ritual experiences they accept as the equivalent of religious function is misplaced. Fandom may be understood as reflective of the excessive and obsessive

⁹⁸ Freedman, p. 85.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 85.

rites of the cult, which may operate entirely apart from normative religion, but assumptions of equivalency (or appropriate identity, as Hills states) between religion-proper and fandom as a phenomenon of popular culture are going to have to rest on more than the comparisons offered by Jindra and others. Another response would be to take these fans at their word, acknowledging that they comprehend at least something about their own ritual experiences in conventional religion and are therefore able to re-appropriate them into the context of their fandom. A corollary to this second response, however, arises out of what to do about fans seeming to be similarly religious but say they are not. If we take the confessors at their word, how is it that we should not take the dissenters at their word, too?

3.3.3 RELIGION AS PRACTICE AND RELIGION AS SUPERNATURAL BELIEF

The dilemma is not easily solved, yet I argue after much personal deliberation on the subject that enough evidence and analytical rationale exists in measured support of the confessors while simultaneously arguing that the dissenters should also be considered as engaged in the activities of a religion, despite their statements to the contrary.¹⁰⁰ In this, I am saying that it is reasonable to visualize fandom as part of a mass media religion possessing both the ritual experiences of *religion as*

¹⁰⁰ Thus, where Erika Doss's Elvis Presley fans, for instance, say that their fandom is emphatically not religious, we must respectfully disagree. As Doss notes, "'Elvis was no god,' his fans say again and again, but the ways many of them revere him suggest that he is often perceived as a saint and a savior, an intercessor and a redeemer" (p. 105, *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Image*).

practice and a possible numinous element consistent with *religion as supernatural belief*. Both parts of this visualization have emerged from several intensive years studying fan responses to questions about meaning in fandom and also from recent contributions to the emerging architecture of media-religion discussion. It is easier, I would note, to take a skeptical position here, especially as regards the presence of a numinous element in both fandom and other categories of media consumption. Such skepticism may be rooted in three common problems: a general distrust toward equating contemporary phenomena with the verifiable integrity of ancient practices, a difficulty in supporting component similarities between accepted religion and other behavioral systems, and a resistance expressed by fans and similarly studied media consumers to questions linking their activities with religion.

Skepticism can even take an apparent form of doubt expressed toward the idea that a plurality of religions in the world exists at all. Joseph Bulbulia's argument holding that semantically and cognitively all religions share a common "psychological design," despite "variation in religious thought and expression," may be seen, superficially at least, as a kind of skeptical outlook directed toward efforts seeking to identify specifically differentiated non-conventional religions.¹⁰¹ Yet, even this perspective can be seen as contributing to the allowance of religious behavior in processes occurring outside traditional religious experiences. Human

¹⁰¹ See pp. 72-3, 76-9, and 95-6 of Bulbulia's "Are There Any Religions? An Evolutionary Exploration" in *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 17, 2005.

cognitive processes emanate from “the same mental dictionary,”¹⁰² Bulbulia states, and who can rule out the likelihood that human cognition existing in the form of religious practice and belief also occurs in media contexts? Arguments for a mass media religion adopt this very same point: that some of what goes on in conventional religious cognition also goes on in non-conventional religion, though the symbols important to each form may differ.

Suspensions directed toward equating contemporary phenomena with ancient practices may be more difficult to approach. Here, we are juxtaposing mass media processes barely a century old (though mass print media extends roughly another century back) with religions evolving over millennia. Can the evolution of mass media behaviors in such a comparatively short time even be considered an evolution at all? Anthropological approaches to this dilemma are much needed, building perhaps from the work of commentators such as David Chidester who has addressed the comparative value of Native American ritual practices to contemporary rock music. The potlatch, a ritual practice facilitating spiritual ascendance to a higher plane through the sacred interplay of giving and receiving in Native American tradition, can be seen as bearing similarities to rituals of exchange and negotiation leading to *communitas* in rock culture’s anti-structural social environment.¹⁰³ What is equally of interest is Chidester’s acknowledgment of how,

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁰³ See pp. 752-61 of Chidester’s “The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock ‘n’ Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture” in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, LXIV/4.

historically, European observers of Native American religious traditions moved gradually from befuddlement to acceptance of these traditions as religion.

Comparing and analogizing facilitated an understanding that the familiar and the strange were not necessarily all that different from each other. They were each about “the religious character of beliefs and practices.”¹⁰⁴

Another stumbling block, the difficulty of supporting specific component similarities between accepted religion and other behavioral systems (such as fandom) is also relevant to this discussion.¹⁰⁵ Is the component of conversion, for instance, an object that possesses reasonable comparative authority as it exists outside of accepted religion? Daniel Cavicchi’s analysis of the becoming component in Bruce Springsteen fandom placed the act of becoming a Springsteen fan into a context of self-surrender conversion and volitional conversion, drawing upon William James for conceptual support. The self-surrender convert became a fan after a period of frustration and unhappiness, while the volitional convert’s trajectory was a more gradual process of habit and temperament development. Whichever pattern Springsteen fans followed, Cavicchi found evidence of changed attitudes toward life in fans who had become devoted to the object of their fandom. They were changed as a religious convert is changed, it is at least possible to conclude. Still, we may ask, can this becoming component reside on its own next to

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 759.

¹⁰⁵ Spectacle, alternative community, curatorial consumption (the collection and display of meaningful artifacts), and factionalism (which in fandom resembles religious denominationalism) are examples of components.

conversion in religion? The formal literature on conversion in religion is extensive, commencing topically with the pre-conditional act of an individual's response to the prompting of an other, after which follows some pattern of confession of faith, obedient submission, healing, and a metaphorical "jump into the depths."¹⁰⁶ It seems doubtful that becoming in fandom would resemble these elements as they have been understood across the ages, yet some type of conversion worthy of critical attention still occurs in fandom, though it should likely be comprehended on its own terms rather than compared to religious conversion.

A final obstacle to the acceptance of a mass media religion, especially as it entails belief in a numinous element, concerns the nearly universal resistance fans and other intentional populations express toward questions about whether or not what they do resembles religious practice and belief. Gordon Lynch's study of British club culture, a recent ethnographic contribution to this issue, found no verbal evidence in his research suggesting that clubbers saw themselves as engaged in any relationship with "an ultimate or absolute source either within or beyond themselves."¹⁰⁷ Lynch interprets this common silence as a possible suggestion that transformative vision terminates at boundaries of the self,¹⁰⁸ at least concerning the primarily social conditions of club culture. Lynch's research sample was small,

¹⁰⁶ See p. 119 (and pp. viii-ix, 21, 45, 124, 127, and 141) of Karl F. Morrison's *Conversion and Text: The Cases of Augustine of Hippo, Herman-Judah, and Constantine Tsatsos*, 1992. Other relevant conversion texts include Colin Starnes's *Augustine's Conversion: A Guide to the Argument of Confessions I-IX* (1990) and Robert J. O'Connell's *Images of Conversion in St. Augustine's Confessions* (1996).

¹⁰⁷ See pp. 179-81 of Lynch's *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (2005).

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

however, consisting of thirty-seven individuals between the ages of 16 and 23, divided evenly between genders but lacking a non-white ethnicity component.¹⁰⁹ We might add that clubbing, while certainly being a phenomenon of significant interest in the area of intentional socialization, can be seen as lacking a definitive media text: a central narrative object such as a book, movie, or television genre arguably more applicable to the presence of a numinous element. Nevertheless, the lack of appreciable data, in the form of responses articulated by individuals supporting felt religious connections, remains consistent with what I have found in my own research.

Lynch, however, also states the very intriguing proposition that clubbers, as members of intentional populations similar to participants in fandom, may remain silent on the religion question because they lack a discursive ability allowing them to describe meaning in religious terms.¹¹⁰ This seems quite probable, and its likelihood as a topic for future research resides in what inhibitions of expression might say in a context of overall fan silences. It is difficult, as I have found in my research, to extract reflective insights from fans on questions about meaning, and it is more difficult to have them qualify self-expressed meaning in religious terms. Less than five percent of the two hundred fifty-six fans interviewed for the present thesis believed their fandom was of a religious nature. The relevant corollary to this situation, moreover, is that the presence of verbal silences on meaning and religion

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 170-1.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 181.

are counterbalanced by *showings* or demonstrations of meaning. In other words, at the same time fans rather quickly dismiss the religion questions, they simultaneously spend large amounts of time providing thick descriptions of their fandom's overall importance to their lives. Descriptions of how their fandom began, how it fluctuates over time, and how it manifests itself in collecting fan artifacts, for instance, are easily qualified (and often quantified) by interviewed fans. A participant in my research who described himself as a Christian, and who is also a fan of the musical group U2, stated that his relationship with the group does not approximate his religious faith; yet, his ease in describing his ritualized U2 experiences while saying comparatively little about his religion was evaluated as strikingly significant.

At such times, researchers likely need to step away from the raw, un-theorized verbal content obtained from their respondents and into more of an analytical role that considers not only what respondents are saying but also how they are going about saying it. What do they most want to talk about; which topics lend themselves to narrative and descriptive fluidity; and how are those forms of articulation relevant to a critical evaluation of the fan as religious in nature? Such an approach seems fundamental to the argument that what we are witnesses to in the articulations of contemporary media consumers is indeed religious for reasons of its intensity: an intensity that would not reasonably exist if what was being described did not call forth some type of engagement with a realm beyond the finite boundaries of self. A platform for the study of the numinous, the ground of being,

absolute dependence, and a supernatural other, therefore, is an entirely reasonable approach to acknowledging what goes on in the *communitas* of intentional media consumers.

The mediated *communitas* and its existence within online environments, finally, also should be addressed here, as questions about new forms of religion facilitated by the Internet have become a key part of the overall conversation about media and religion. As will be seen in Chapter Six of this thesis, the behavior of online Harry Potter fans immediately following the 9/11 attacks on the United States resembled a community of religious adherents seeking forms of healing through public confession.¹¹¹ Whether or not healing was accomplished is an important concern here but perhaps not as important as the fact that fans had become corporate seekers, bringing their wounds to an online communal table in the hope of being healed. Being fans, and specifically fans of the entertaining Harry Potter series, their seeking took place in an online environment merging ritual exchanges with fun, but there was little to suggest that what they were doing was somehow less meaningful than what might have occurred in an offline environment.

Many sources exploring forms of religion on the Internet approach the subject by arguing that attempts to relocate sacred activities and communities to online environments appear to be effective.¹¹² Certainly, with declines reported in the

¹¹¹ See 6.4.5, "The Hope of Being Healed."

¹¹² See "Popular Religion and the World Wide Web: A Match Made in Cyber Heaven" (Christopher Helland); "Young People, Religious Identity, and the Internet" (Mia Lovheim); "Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community" (Lorne L. Dawson); "Reading and Praying Online: The Continuity of Religion Online and Online Religion in Internet Christianity"

practice of corporate religion in churches and other offline environments despite the sustained importance of religion to many people, religious consumers are increasingly relocating their spiritual activities to the Internet. But, more than numbers pertinent to the presence of a spiritual migration is needed as we consider what motivates people to be religious online and why online environments are so appealing to them. An engaging topic of creative thinking here can be thought of as “cybergnosis”: the “relocation of the sacred to the digital realm” resulting from “the desire to overcome the experiences of alienation, suffering, and impotence.”¹¹³

Cybergnosis combines the immaterial, nonphysical sense of the word cyber with cosmological aspects of ancient Gnosticism. Under Gnosticism, human beings are to be thought of as spiritual entities originally resident within a world of divine illumination. After having descended into the physical realms of a bodily and material environment, the human being longs to return to its native spiritual state of divine light. Escape is desired from an experience of deep alienation for the Gnostic, and escape exists in the seeking of salvation in a nonmaterial world of light and spirit. Where cyber enters this picture is through an affirmation of the role cyber technology may be seen to play in allowing human persons to enter a realm truer to their basic nature than the imprisoning boundaries of the physical world. “Whereas classical Gnosticism seeks salvation from the body and the material world, this

(Glenn Young); “‘This is My Church’: Seeing the Internet and Club Culture as Spiritual Spaces” (Heidi Campbell); all included in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (Dawson and Cowan, eds., 2004).

¹¹³ See pp. 82 of “‘Reality Sucks’: On Alienation and Cybergnosis” by Aupers and Houtman (*Concilium*, Vol. 1, 2005).

discourse of 'cybergnosis' embraces digital technology as promising salvation from real-life suffering and impotence and as enabling one to overcome humanity's state of alienation."¹¹⁴

Despite a radical sense within such a view, the image of Internet users as seekers of gnosis as a solution to suffering and alienation has persuasive qualities. Gnosis, a construct of spiritual endeavor, bears a consistency with the reality of people turning to online environments for spiritual fulfillment. Especially as technology improves and eases the access to such environments, people are able to make instant transitions from the material state of their lives to the immaterial state of online existence. Always in control of this transition, we can, at will, escape any condition of the material state. As with other forms of electronic media, with the pressing of a button we can leave a state of unhappiness for an online state of happiness. Human presences are instantly available to us, whether in a context of routine exchanges of information or one of corporate religious experience.

The concepts of suffering and alienation, moreover, are equally persuasive within the context of the uses and gratifications we apply to Internet use, in this case conditioned also by sought religious experience. Our use of the medium is intentional and motivated, but what exactly is our intent and what is it that motivates us? The joy or fun we experience within the medium might lead us away from the fact that, just as Aupers and Houtman have argued, the roots of our motivation exist in the suffering of alienation and, arguably, our inability to solve

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 84-5.

this problem outside of mediated cultural experience: our impotence.¹¹⁵ Not only is cybergnosis, therefore, consistent with spiritual migration to the Internet for the purpose of sought religious experiences; it is also consistent with fandom as an exercise of intentional socialization around texts, occurring in constant and instantly gratifying ways whether through actual channels or the virtual world within the Internet.

Ultimately, all of these issues find deep resonance in the issue of convergence and its conceptual importance to understanding modern mediated culture.

Acknowledging convergence as an erosion of traditional distinctions, not only with regard to specific media but also inclusive of fragmented audience habits and the forces motivating consumers toward the gratification of their desires,¹¹⁶ solidifies the realization that no place within media or how audiences got there can be ruled out as occupying a status of equality with traditional, accepted sources (and places) of meaning making. To think, therefore, that the Internet is not a suitable destination for spiritual migration, ritual seeking, and the satisfaction of deprivations, neglects this assumption at its own peril. Fandom or any contemporary topic with far reaching online applications must see the Internet as an important player in its processes and development within the contemporary world.

3.4 THESIS STATEMENT

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 82, 85, and 87.

¹¹⁶ Baran, *Mass Communication: Media Literacy and Culture*, 4th Edition (2006), pp. 20, 28-9.

I support theorizing fandom as non-conventional religion, pertinent to its own existence and relevant to intimations of a more pervasive cultural religion emergent within modernity. To the topic at hand, however, how does human suffering, or privation (variable states of deprivation), expressed in and through fandom, operate within a picture validating a fandom-as-religion argument?

Stated previously, a position holding that a valid suffering component exists within fandom does not require that fandom be theorized as non-conventional religion. It stands on its own and may be relevant to a number of textual and social contexts. The religion context, however, may be said to provide significant rationale for juxtaposing suffering which seeks a form of satisfaction in fandom with that which seeks forms of ultimate satisfaction in religious experience. Satisfactions may include comfort, escape, release, connection, identification, empowerment, or other possible reasons human beings engage in ritual experiences and activities; and fandom's ritual experiences, whether we see them as religious or not, must be seen as offering at least an approximation of what religion offers to human beings experiencing states of deprivation.

In Braun and McCutcheon's *Guide to the Study of Religion* (2000), Harvey W. White's essay, "Deprivation," articulates various roles deprivation may play in human seeking: in other words, how, why, and what human beings seek in and through religious experience. Constructing his view around Augustine's argument that what human deprivation seeks is the satisfaction of a transcendent other, White makes the following points: that deprivation has internal sources, that it can be

expressed as a form of alienation, that it seeks satisfactions while simultaneously avoiding pain, and that it is a real human need. While acknowledging, moreover, that Freud, Marx, and other sources of the social understanding of religion argued that “real deprivation” was a response to physical lacks such as material poverty, White balances these with Augustine’s position that real deprivation is more a matter to be satisfied by transcendence: a spiritual reality. We crave spiritually-oriented satisfactions because an emptiness of heart and soul rules the human condition. The emptiness does not go away voluntarily, so we seek relief from it through available means, including the consumption of cultural products we judge as possessing some sense of reliable meaning.

“[What] then do I seek...?” is Augustine’s question here, as acknowledged by White. “...I seek a happy life. I ...seek...that my soul may live...,” is the answer.¹¹⁷

In other words, after physical needs are met, remaining states of deprivation produce a human seeking for both the pleasures of “a happy life” and the fulfillment of a “soul” that is alive. We seek *gaudium* (pleasure), because pleasurable consumption makes us feel alive, engaged, and happy. However, *beatus* (fulfillment) is an even deeper satisfaction which resounds in the core of our being, where we suffer palpably from the peculiar anomie and privation of our time. We want to be fulfilled by feeling connected, understood, and empowered, and we will use the same means which provided our pleasure—consumption of cultural products and closely integrated social processes—to provide our deeper experiences

¹¹⁷ See “Deprivation” by White, p. 85, in Braun and McCutcheon.

of fulfillment. These are the required parameters of the present thesis, and it is in this location that I wish to place the intentional, socially consumptive behaviors that operate within fandom. The thesis statement of this PhD, therefore, is this: Fandom is a cultural practice that provides significant meaning to fans through their consumption of texts (the objects of fan devotion) and through social behaviors which accompany heightened textual consumption. This practice also functions as a means by which fans attempt to satisfy variable states of deprivation I have called privation. Fans do this by seeking rewards that alternate between pleasures and deeper satisfactions.

3.5 CONCLUSION

I will add, finally, that these satisfactions may be comprehended as at least similar to those offered by the supernatural belief element of religion. They are, at the very least, an approximation of them and are relevant therefore both to religion as experience and religion as belief. Relief of suffering in fandom, therefore, rests on both functional and substantive bases. Fans engage in practices, activities, and experiences, which possess elements of ritual sufficient at least for temporary relief. More permanent forms of relief, too, are possible as fandom is seen to occupy a position of strength in the media-religion discussion.

IV

METHODOLOGY



CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

A PLAN FOR SEEKING AND EVALUATING INSIGHTS FROM CULT AND NON-CULT FANS

4.1 AN ECLECTIC EMPIRICAL APPROACH

Since first reading William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* many years ago, I have been influenced by an eclectic, empirical approach to research. Such an approach values descriptive narratives provided by ethnographic interviews with individuals and places them in a reader's eclectic framework of literary, philosophical, and theological texts. The result is a research product rich in descriptive nuance and more narrative than research based purely on theory. Attention to the individual, moreover, is central to this approach, even to the point of establishing a continuing dialogue between the researcher and his or her sources. In this sense, what is offered through interpretation and analysis of data is never far removed from the elemental articulations of the research population. Individuals have a voice well worth listening to, and a chorus of many voices exerts a shaping effect reflecting a community's insights rather than merely those of a researcher working in isolation.

The desire to be eclectic in research is present in many published and unpublished studies of fandom. In a standard anthology, *Theorizing Fandom: Fans,*

Subculture, and Identity (1998), at least a dozen distinct methodological approaches to fandom exist, and quite often these approaches are combined. One study of coupon collection used content analysis of “letters, editorials, and other correspondence published in a national, subscription fan periodical titled *Refunding Makes Cents* (RMC) over a nine-month period,” then followed it up with comments acquired from fans.¹¹¹ Another approach featured surveys, interviews, correspondence, participant observation, and “randomly collected and assessed” material artifacts drawn from fandom of the *Dark Shadows* television soap opera.¹¹² Other methodologies included the following: collecting verbatim transcriptions of fan conversations from *Terra Nostra Underground*, an *apa* circulated to fans of *slash*, fan writing which fictionalizes homoerotic relationships between well-known characters such as Kirk/Spock of *Star Trek*; focus-group interviews with science fiction readers; a case study of Viewers for Quality Television, complete with group and individual interviews, analysis of internal documents, and observation of activities; a survey of comic book collectors to gain insights into curatorial habits of fans; and a content analysis of “mainstream press accounts” detailing habits of women fans of professional male wrestling.¹¹³

In his previously noted study of Bruce Springsteen fandom, Daniel Cavicchi chose an interview-based, case-study approach also making use of questionnaires.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Classen, in Harris and Alexander, pp.71-86.

¹¹² Ibid., Benshoff, pp.199-218.

¹¹³ Ibid., Chapters 2,8,3,4, and, 6, respectively.

¹¹⁴ Cavicchi, “Introduction: Studying Fandom,” especially pp. 15-18.

In phase one, Cavicchi interviewed friends, students, and colleagues whom he knew were Springsteen fans over a six-month period. In phase two, he placed ads in a fanzine seeking respondent participation in completing a standard questionnaire. He received nearly fifty completed questionnaires eventually serving as contacts for further interviews. In all, he interviewed “approximately one hundred fans and kept in frequent contact with about thirty-five” until the study was finished.¹¹⁵ The strengths and weaknesses of Cavicchi’s interviewing methods also bear mentioning here as he encountered fluctuations in data, which were the result of interviewing on-site or remotely. Face-to-face interviews provided detailed information resting partially on notations of body language, manners, and demeanor, while telephone interviews allowed fans to comment on music and artifacts from the security of their own surroundings. E-mail interviews allowed for long, considered responses from fans, but they also produced answers of questionable credibility and a “dropping out” option when interviewees became bored or tired. Regardless of technique, however, Cavicchi always sought conversational dialogue rather than formal structure in his interviews, for the purpose of staying true to fandom’s natural informality. “Fandom is not a bounded entity to be discovered and commented on...[but] a shared, ongoing experience,” he writes.¹¹⁶

Other approaches to fandom have included methods such as the textual criticism of fan writing, though these, too, supplement textual analysis with methods

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p.18.

inclusive of fandom's variety of activities. Indeed, studies of fan writing require contextualization that comes from interviewing, observing, participating, and other forms of ethnography. An especially competent eclectic approach in this regard is Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1992), which explores fanzine fiction by women *Star Trek* fans but enlarges the study through participant-observation. Recognizing that she needed to attach faces and bodies to fan cultural production, Bacon-Smith acquired mentors who brought her into fan communities, took her to conventions, and introduced her to key contacts within fan clubs. She learned the "relationship of spoken words to community actions," the "special symbolic dialect," the "codes" within women's *Star Trek* fanfics, and other language-related idiosyncrasies facilitating her understanding of *Star Trek* fandom's unique brand of pulp fan fiction.¹¹⁷

In all of these approaches the experimentation with a wide variety of original, creative methods is in evidence. Certainly, this owes to the fact that such studies possess many levels of activity playing out on the stages of both product and use, and therefore multiple methods seeking to understand texts and how they are socialized are warranted necessities. Insights provided by reader response theory have shown that meaning does not reside alone within the text but is more the product of activation of the text by readers. With fandom, even greater problems

¹¹⁷ Like eclectic approaches by Cavicchi, Doss, and Jenkins, Bacon-Smith's method allowed her to experience a sense of full immersion in cult fandom. She witnessed socialization of the *Star Trek* text both in the superficial interactivity of small fan groupings, and in production taking the form of fan fiction, which Bacon-Smith categorized based on thematic breakdown.

exist, the two most important being inter-textuality and the fact that the intensity of fan experiences varies and is operational on every invisible level between the planes of culture and cult. With fandom research still in its infancy, I argue that we benefit by retaining the broader approach addressing both of these problems. My own methodology, now offered, has emerged from this argument.

4.2 ACCOMMODATING BOTH CULTURE AND CULT

Noting an element of Tom Beaudoin's methodological approach—his argument that “interpretation which springs from...[the researcher's] autobiography, theological training, educational work...and the ‘text’ of [one's] own life” is important in media, culture, and theological research (which he calls “reclamation”)¹¹⁸—I adopted a methodology which was, first (though not most importantly), autobiographical. By this, I mean that I spent and continue to spend considerable time thinking about my own experiences as a fan, which I divide into four phases: childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and mature adulthood. I elaborate on these phases in Appendix B.

¹¹⁸ Beaudoin, p. 183. See his entire “Appendix: Notes on Method,” pp. 183-91, in which his “reclamation” goes beyond the mechanical objectivity of research. Of interpreting the texts of popular culture, for instance, Beaudoin asks, “Is the interpretation life-giving? That is, does it...deepen the religious experience?” Also, “Over time, do others find it a useful starting place to further theological interpretations of popular culture?” Finally, he warns about the “relativism” of interpreting popular culture in a way that makes all insights equally valid. “If all theological interpretations of popular culture were equally valid,” he argues, “none at all would be convincing, and we would be lost in a swirl of relativism. Therefore, it is necessary to sketch criteria to serve as an index of...‘authentic’ interpretation” (p.190).

As I have reflected autobiographically on fandom during the course of the present research, moreover, I have been mindful of comparisons between my fandom and that of the fans I have interviewed. How I have approached my own fan experiences, which are primarily non-cult (revolving around organized tastes and preferences), therefore, has become increasingly relevant as I seek to understand fan cultures. Serving, however, as a backdrop to the present study, my own experiences, it is strongly hoped, function not in leadership of the research but primarily as an echoing of it. The dangers of autobiographical research lie in the realm of bias as the temptation to view the experiences of others through one's own limited field of vision reduces external data by enclosing it in the researcher's own experiences. Where autobiography can be valuable is when it plays a supplementary role, backgrounding the central findings rather than leading them. I have tried to make this the case here, and for these reasons my own story is presented as an appendix.

Next, I sought to accommodate both the culture and the cult dimensions of fandom in my research method. I am here again using the terms *culture* and *cult* in an effort to approximate invisible external boundaries of fandom. Culture can be defined as the semi-fixed plane of organized tastes and preferences whereas cult may be seen the semi-fixed plane of extreme adherence and allegiance. All fan experiences occur somewhere between these planes of experience, and it follows that a thorough fandom methodology needs to address both ends of the continuum. I have attempted to accomplish this by devoting half of the research to understanding

how privation, my stated topic, may be seen to exist within fandom tilting toward the plane of culture. The other half seeks to understand how privation may be seen to exist in fandom ranging toward the plane of cult.¹¹⁹

4.2.1 QUESTIONNAIRE-ASSISTED INTERVIEWS

Researching non-cult fans involved the implementation of questionnaire-assisted interviews seeking information from individuals whose fan experiences were non-cult oriented. Prior to entering this phase of research, I had been reading as much as possible about fandom while simultaneously interviewing fans involved in the Harry Potter phenomenon. This initial pre-interviewing phase served as a pilot process helping me to establish specific guidelines to be incorporated into interviews with fans of varying products. It should be mentioned here, too, that in the recent execution of similar studies, forms of piloting and a protracted discovery process have been important ways of improving data collection as it becomes implemented. Adding new questions, subtracting ineffective questions, and improving the overall efficiency of the research process have led to the collection of more useable data pertaining to the specific goals of each study.¹²⁰ My own study has involved the implementation of two questionnaires, in this regard, and while the revised questionnaire has seemed to be an improvement over the original one, I was

¹¹⁹ Hills does not use the term *non-cult*. His division is between simply *fans* and *non-fans*.

¹²⁰ See pp. 237-45 in Lynn Schofield Clark's *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (2003) and p. 171 of Gordon Lynch's *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (2005). Clark discusses arriving at the key points of her research only after engaging in many conversations about method and topic, while Lynch discusses the refining of his interviewing process through pilot interviews.

able to offset problems with the original questionnaire during the data collection process. Concerning the pre-interviewing process among Harry Potter fans, which preceded implementation of both questionnaires, it led to the establishment of specific topics I wanted to explore through the questionnaire-assisted interviews, including when do people describe themselves as having become a fan of something, what do they do as a fan, what meaning do they say they receive from being a fan, and what religious implications might be seen to exist in their fandom? These questions framed the research into non-cult fans, and I sought a visible instrument from which to record and analyze data, rather than proceeding from a non-standardized interview format that might differ from one respondent to another.

There was also, of course, no way of knowing ahead of time whether respondents selected at random would be cult or non-cult fans, yet my belief was that a random survey of individuals would yield primarily non-cult fans: that is, people who described themselves as fans, yet whose experiences were characterized more by “organized tastes and preferences” than “extreme adherence and allegiance.” Certainly some of the 120 fans initially interviewed were closer to cult fandom than others were, but of those original 120 respondents, I encountered only a handful I would describe as cult fans. Nevertheless, as non-cult fans play an

equally important role in our understanding of fandom, I considered all responses from this population valuable to the study.¹²¹

I constructed the original questionnaire (see Appendix C) featuring a cover page with the words **ARE YOU A FAN?** printed in the visual center of the page, surrounded by twelve miscellaneous images: a pulp-fiction detective, an antique phonograph, a head shot of Frankenstein, four people playing volleyball, a pair of ballet dancers, a unicorn, a town crier, a candelabra, a computer monitor, a Spanish mission, an American flag, and a planet suspended in space. Inside the questionnaire were two short, single-spaced paragraphs (in capital letters) of introduction explaining the purposes of the research: to learn more about fans and the meaning they receive from their fandom.¹²² Following the introduction were eighteen open-ended questions, several which required extensive elaboration, with a short space beneath them for answers.¹²³ Because these were questionnaire-assisted interviews, I was always active in the process of data collection: actively persistent for the purposes of term-clarification and the recording of data.

These initial interviews were conducted among students at two campuses of higher learning in and near the Tampa Bay region of Florida, in close proximity to

¹²¹ Information gained from fans who exist in the realm of organized tastes and preferences is at least, if not more, valuable at this point because of its universality. Most people are non-cult fans of something, and while they may not reflect the intensities of cult fans, their similarities to them warrant exploration.

¹²² See Appendix C for the complete questionnaire.

¹²³ Open-ended questions similar to those in the partial questionnaire provided by Helen K. Black and Robert L. Rubinstein can produce significant useable data. See p. 13 in "Themes of Suffering in Later Life" (*The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 59, 2004).

my home in Clearwater, Florida. Ninety-one occurred at the University of Tampa, a secular public-charter university in downtown Tampa. Twenty-nine occurred at Southeastern College, a religious institution supported by the self-described charismatic and evangelical Assemblies of God denomination, in Lakeland, Florida. Though I did not consider a secular-religious cross-section of data essential to the study, I did have some interests in seeing if and how information gathered from the interviews might differ between the institutions.¹²⁴ Though it was equally unnecessary to acquire specifically-sought representation of gender and race, I did keep track of both components. The University of Tampa interviews included fifty-four female respondents, thirty-seven male respondents, and an estimated racial-ethnic breakdown including the following groups: sixty-seven Caucasian, fourteen Hispanic, eight African American, one Middle Eastern, and one Asian (Chinese). At Southeastern College these breakdowns included eleven female, eighteen male, and a racial-ethnic component of twenty three Caucasian, two African American, two Hispanic, and one Middle Eastern. Anonymity and the protection of individual identities have been accomplished through changing the names of all respondents in the reporting of data.

4.2.2 CHALLENGES OF THE ORIGINAL QUESTIONNAIRE

¹²⁴ Probably the biggest difference among respondents was that of ethnic background as the Hispanic and African-American respondents at the University of Tampa brought interesting cultural comments into the data. The influences of reggae music and Rastafarian culture, for instance, showed up in the fandom of some respondents who were originally from the Caribbean.

The actual execution of the initial interviews was both valuable and challenging. Beyond the logistics of seeking respondents who had the time and were willing to talk with me, the instrument itself required explanation. I had expected unfamiliarity with certain terms in the questionnaire (beginning with the main term, *fandom*), and questions 5 (about artifact collection), 11 (where the term *textual* was used), 12 (where *social* was used), and 13 (which combined these terms) necessitated term-definition as well as explaining how the terms applied to fandom. Where possible, I wanted to move beyond short responses, and this required significant amounts of time with respondents who often did not have accommodating schedules. Generally, however, many respondents found the topic of fandom interesting, and many were eager to talk.

Despite the narrow dimensions of the population (day-school university students who were fairly similar in age and socio-cultural orientation), a surprisingly wide range of cultural products—and little duplication—emerged from the interviews. Self-described fans of popular music products (reflecting the same medium but differing products) led the textual breakdown with sporting and television products following distantly behind. Fourteen other product categories were represented, too, though in significantly smaller numbers. The only product duplications existed in the music-related category: fans of popular musical artists

Nsync and Janet Jackson. Otherwise, each interviewee had a different story to tell about his or her particular set of organized tastes and preferences.¹²⁵

In the course of interviewing, once the challenge of explaining terms, concepts, and purposes was accomplished, several of the eighteen questions yielded data-intensive results valuable to the study. These included questions 4, 5, 8, 9, 14, and 16, which sought information about fan activities, artifact collections, surroundings affected by the respondent's fandom, unusual aspects about the fandom, and the important topics of meaning and emotional support coming from the fandom. I might also have had reason to expect that question 17—"Are there any 'deeper' aspects to your fandom whereby you are able to view it in religious or philosophical terms?"—to yield data intensive responses, but, in fact the opposite was true. More than one hundred of the respondents (including those at the religious institution) said that despite the relative importance their fandom exerted on their lives, there was nothing religious or philosophical about it. Whether or not respondents were able to equate the impact and importance of their fandom with an understanding of religious and philosophical impact seems very much a gray area which warrants examination in the future.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ As the roster indicates, there was a straying from media fandom in some of the results (sports, automobile, and other object-fandoms). However, most of the object-fandom respondents expressed a dependency on media components: sporting and automobile magazines, for instance, in the living out of their particular fandom. I chose not to disregard any of these.

¹²⁶ Clearly, respondents viewed religion as something different from their fan experiences, no matter how essential those experiences might have been to their lives. Many said the purpose of their fandom was entertainment, leisure, or escape, but little more. This, of course, aligns with what other researchers have found: that even many cult fans have an

Other issues should be taken into account here, too. As previously mentioned, the narrowness of the population proved heavily weighted toward popular music fandom. Moreover, despite the lack of specific product duplication shown by the results, we must view nearly half the information as relevant primarily to the internal dynamics of music fandom. These will be noted where it is believed they are most relevant to the various deprivation/satisfaction dynamics presented in Chapter Five. Also, the four deprivation/satisfaction dynamics themselves (dislocation/connectivity, animus/release, isolation/identification, and hunger/empowerment) will need to be understood in relation to the population's narrowness. Arguments could be made here, for instance, that university students are likely to feel dislocated and isolated merely because they are away from home, possibly for the first time. Or, anger among such a population might be as much a problem related to lingering adolescence as to anything else. Or again, hungers might be argued to be a standard condition of those who seek to better themselves through participation in higher education. In other words, to imply a sense of universality to the experience of deprivations and satisfactions in fandom, merely by drawing from the results of a narrow research population, is problematic. To this problem, however, it is noted that the sources of deprivation here are less important

aversion to describing their fandom in authentic religious terms. They do not see pervasive leisure interests as the equivalent of religious experience. As previously mentioned, some fan narratives tell a different story, but we have to accept that most fans are dissenters rather than confessors when confronted with the religion question.

to the present study than the processes by which people deal with their deprivations through fandom.

It should also be emphasized that approaching university students as a target population for advanced research has an extensive history due to their accessibility for scholars already working in higher education. While this has been discussed critically by researchers working outside the academy, who argue the benefits of collecting data in more “natural settings,”¹²⁷ the collection of data within an academic setting can produce effective results. Populations of university-aged young people have been seen as valuable because of their status as individuals in concentrated states of transition. Where levels of elevated social stress contribute to an understanding of how and why human beings are likely to make important life changes (such as in studies of religious conversion), the 19-21 age bracket has proved useful.¹²⁸ It allows the researcher to acquire glimpses into factors motivating people who migrate socially from conditions judged as unsatisfactory to those seen as of a more satisfactory nature.

This transitional state also lends itself to studies in which conditions of liminality are useful for understanding specific cultural choices made by individuals. Recognizing liminality as a decrease of intentional life structure on one level and an assertion of a corresponding organizational intensity on another level

¹²⁷ See p. 14 of Tamyra A. Pierce’s “Violence in the News: Attachment Styles as Moderators of Priming Effects” in the *Journal of Media Psychology*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Winter 2005.

¹²⁸ See pp. 187-189 of “Subjective Religiosity and Depression in the Transition to Adulthood” by A. Henry Eliassen, John Taylor, and Donald A. Lloyd (*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 44/2, 2005).

opens up many theoretical and methodological possibilities.¹²⁹ Here, social environments as incubators of structure or the lack of structure in an individual's life may be appropriated as of equal importance to structural factors emerging from within the individual's personality and cultural choices. With intentional organization being the important factor that it is in fandom, the study of university students according to liminal conditions and behavior is, therefore, a needed approach.

4.2.3 IMPLEMENTATION OF A REVISED QUESTIONNAIRE

Use of the original questionnaire, as mentioned, required significant efforts on my part in defining terms for the original 120 respondents. This was not, however, a significant problem either for the execution of interviews or the collection of data, as I had expected much effort to be expended in the interview environment. Nevertheless, some revisions of the original questionnaire were seen as potentially helpful to the research process. These revisions, coupled with an altered approach to seeking respondents, did seem to make the entire research process go more smoothly, though the results of the revised questionnaire conformed closely to those provided by the original.

¹²⁹ In Edward Croft Dutton's "Crop-tops, Hipsters, and Liminality: Fashion and Differentiation in Two Evangelical Student Groups" (*Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. IX, Spring 2005), Dutton argues that university students respond to the conditions of liminal academic environments not by "anti-structure" (see p. 13) but rather by assertions of *communitas* and re-assertions of greater structure. The object of his study was fashion as expressed among evangelical students in distinct liminal environments within two universities.

The revised questionnaire was easier to read, understand, and respond to without extensive assistance provided by the interviewer. Some assistance still was required, though a number of the 136 new respondents were able to fill out the questionnaire without any help. Instrumental and content changes included the following (see Appendix C): a new font was chosen to improve readability; shorter paragraphs were used in the introduction, so respondents could better identify introductory concepts; answer lines were provided to facilitate ease of writing; questions were shortened, except for 1, 11, and 12, allowing for an easier grasp of material; questions 11 and 12 included term definitions, so the words “text” and “social” could be understood better in the context of fandom; the term “curatorial consumption” was eliminated from question 5 for better understanding of collecting in fandom; the term “roles” was replaced by the phrase “how and why” in question 10, so respondents could more easily answer the question about fandom and the media; the word “deeper” was eliminated from question 17 in the event it could be understood as a value judgment regarding religious implications of fandom; and question 18 was eliminated entirely as it proved superfluous in execution of the original questionnaire.

The original cover sheet featuring miscellaneous images was also discarded for reasons of potential leading effects, though none had been detected among the original respondents. The most significant change in implementing the revised questionnaire, however, involved the recruitment of respondents. Incorporating a method used by Bushman, Baumeister, and Stack focusing on undergraduate

students enrolled in introductory courses the authors were teaching,¹³⁰ I recruited volunteers from introductory media courses I was teaching at Crown College in Minnesota, during the 2004 academic year, and Azusa Pacific University in California during the 2005 academic year. After touching briefly on the subject of fandom in these courses, I asked for volunteers to respond to the revised questionnaire. No credit was offered in exchange for student participation, though many students willingly volunteered out of personal interest in their own fandom.¹³¹ A total of 136 revised questionnaires were received from the two institutions, 73 from Crown College and 63 from Azusa Pacific University, with a gender breakdown of 84 women and 52 men.¹³² No racial/ethnic breakdown was accomplished. In most cases, follow-up interviews were requested and executed after questionnaires were received, and anonymity in the reporting of results was guaranteed.

Having an improved questionnaire plus knowing something about fandom expedited the research process among the new respondents. Though, again, no significant changes were detected in responses, other than an incorporation of some newer media products not reflected in the original questionnaire implemented

¹³⁰ See pp. 6-7 in "Catharsis, Aggression, and Persuasive Influence: Self-Fulfilling or Self-Defeating Prophecies?" by Brad J. Bushman, Roy F. Baumeister, and Angela D. Stack (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 76, No. 3, 1999); and also pp. 726-8 in "Does Venting Anger Feed or Extinguish the Flame? Catharsis, Rumination, Distraction, Anger, and Aggressive Responding" by Brad J. Bushman (*Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 28, No. 6, June 2002). The authors recruited students enrolled in introductory psychology courses to test the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of catharsis for releasing emotional stress.

¹³¹ Bushman, Baumeister, and Stack offered extra credit to their respondents.

¹³² A test run of the revised questionnaire was also performed among 21 students from an introductory film studies class during Fall 2004.

during 2001-02. In terms of the deprivation categories, respondents were again divided subjectively according to how they responded to questions about meaning in their fandom. This breakdown included 35 dislocation/connectivity respondents, 14 animus/release respondents, 11 isolation/identification respondents, and 76 hunger/empowerment respondents. Also, similar to findings acquired from the original questionnaire-assisted interviews, some respondents showed ample overt evidence of significant deprivational comments while others expressed evidences of deprivation to a lesser degree.

4.3 PROBING THE HARRY POTTER FAN CULT

The second phase of accommodating the poles of fan experience involved an exploration of cult fandom: that is, fandom which is more a form of extreme adherence and allegiance than merely the expression of organized tastes and preferences pertinent to non-cult fans. For insights into cult fandom, I chose to probe a sample of the online, interactive fan cult of the mass-marketed Harry Potter novels by Edinburgh author, J.K. Rowling, supplementing this method with on-site observations of physical Harry Potter fan gatherings and the reading of Harry Potter fan fiction.¹³³ Regarding these latter two items, I stress the word supplemental as they function only in augmentation of the online method, which is central.

¹³³ Preece and Maloney-Krichmar have emphasized the need for innovation and creativity in current online research methodologies. See pp. 2-3 of "Online Communities: Design, Theory, and Practice" by Jenny Preece and Diane Maloney-Krichmar, in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(4), Article 1, 2005.

Also, as with the research into non-cult fandom, results have been both valuable and challenging, and a number of additional issues concerning research into Internet fan populations and, indeed, the Internet itself, need to be addressed here.

4.3.1 THE MEDIUM REMAINS THE MESSAGE

Nancy Baym, Matt Hills, and Henry Jenkins, have each mentioned benefits and pitfalls of internet fan research. Baym has noted that relational dynamics between researchers (or ethnographic “lurkers,” in cyber lingo) and posters (in chat rooms or on message boards) have yet to be “systematically explained” in the context of effective primary research techniques. If a poster, for instance, thinks that a purposeful lurker is monitoring what he or she says, will this exert inhibitive pressures and thereby preclude otherwise naturally unfolding fan interactivity? If, on the other hand, the lurker remains silent, never divulging his or her presence, will this non-intrusive method—sans interviewing—produce enough data for reliable ethnographic research?¹³⁴ Jenkins argues that such a “lack of direct...intervention” on the researcher’s part is valuable to fandom research, yet assimilating coherent patterns and structures from “the endless flow of information” is indeed a problem. Online fan interactivity is without beginning or end—a ceaseless 24/7 operation—

¹³⁴ In any case, lurking is acknowledged as a useful, accepted method of online research. Ridings and Gefen see it as “a way for an individual to observe and learn from a group without the group even knowing that the individual is present.” See pp. 11-12 of “Virtual Community Attraction: Why People Hang Out Online” by Catherine M. Ridings and David Gefen, in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(1), Article 4, November 2004.

and while some online services attempt to provide organization and definition to the borderless interactive cultures they facilitate, the purely non-intrusive researcher faces informational diffusion which may be too chaotic to assimilate effectively.

Such problems have led Hills to argue, therefore, that, “online fandoms cannot merely be viewed as a version or reflection of ‘offline’ fandoms.” Conditions are too different, and the quality of results obtained from online environments cannot be expected to duplicate those obtained in physical fan settings.¹³⁵

I would add that the medium remains the message here, and we need to find online methods of research that increasingly take into account fandoms and other intentional communities existing almost exclusively online, as does the Harry Potter fan cult.¹³⁶ We must see the internet for what it is now, certainly, and for what it may continue to be in the foreseeable future: borderless, decentralized, ad hoc, even anarchic by design. It persists in deconstructing the meanings of expression, privacy, and responsibility and remains the territory of social identity experimentation, in which users increasingly recreate and manipulate who they are and who they want to be. The old represent themselves as the young, gender portrays itself as the other, and in many cases personal authenticity is as much in

¹³⁵ Hills, pp. 172-82.

¹³⁶ To date, this is the case with Harry Potter fandom. With conventions planned and rumored, however, HP fandom will exhibit a greater offline presence in the future. To date, it is primarily online, with its offline manifestations occurring in the form of retail marketing efforts, public library happenings, and events which coincide with the latest book and movie releases. Thus, even though we can speak of a Harry Potter fan cult, it is not yet a mature physical fan cult like Star Wars, Star Trek, or other durable fandoms.

question as the posted messages themselves.¹³⁷ Yet, the online personas we come to know through research become more important research-wise than the offline persons who create them, a persistent fact necessitating methods of seeking in a medium where true identity competes with fabricated identity.¹³⁸

4.3.2 REQUIREMENT OF SEMI-MANAGED SPACE

Accepting both caution and challenge as valid, I approached researching the online Harry Potter fan cult by seeking a fragment of it which operated in a semi-managed space. It can be argued to the contrary that a completely unmanaged space, free of imposed order and guidelines, would be a desired condition for many types of fandom research. Yet, how much this rule should be applied to fandom research in online environments is what is in question here. Fandom which occurs in physical environments operates under imposed guidelines of the fan club, the con, or whatever particular social grouping is containing the socialization of textual consumption. These are not pure 24/7 environments. They are meeting places with timed engagements, designated locations, and at least semi-ordered activities.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Baran, pp. 65-108.

¹³⁸ Paccagnella visualizes a medium fostering "the lack of ethnographic context" and a "misunderstanding" of basic "communication codes." See pp. 4-5 of "Getting the Seats of Your Pants Dirty: Strategies for Ethnographic Research on Virtual Communities" by Luciano Paccagnella, in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 3(1), June 1997.

¹³⁹ See Part IV: "Social Interactions," in Joe Sanders's collection of edited essays, *Science Fiction Fandom* (1994). Three essays, "Fan Clubs: an Example," "The Science Fiction Convention Scene," and "Science Fiction Conventions: Behind the Scenes" reveal social parameters of science fiction fandom's physical environments. Ordered activities include such contained events as the masquerade, in which costumed fans participate in a staged theatrical environment which has involved up to two years of preparation.

They are, moreover, environments in which some forms of decorum, taste, and agreed-upon ethics prevail. Why, then, should the online fandom environment not include at least some of these guidelines? In short, I am arguing here that researching online fandom in a semi-managed space is more like researching fandom in any physical environment. Whereas, researching online fandom in a completely unmanaged space allows the medium too much power in dictating subcultural shape (or the lack of it) and outcome. Online fandom, therefore, emerges as less like fandom and more like interactive cyberculture.¹⁴⁰

Seeking such authenticity in the online Harry Potter fan cult, I engaged in nonparticipatory observation accompanied by online interviews of cult fans belonging to *Talk About Harry Potter*, one of many Harry Potter news groups in the America Online internet service (which imposes interactivity guidelines for the purpose of social decorum, especially regarding profanity and the sexual content of messages).¹⁴¹

From June 2001-May 2002 (and coincident with my research into non-cult fandom using the original questionnaire), I monitored discussion threads posted by

¹⁴⁰ Hills expresses concern that “no *a-priori* meaningful or internally coherent corpus can be identified: one can only extract artificially bounded sets of information (such as my own focus here on a temporarily fixed corpus of postings) which even then may remain virtually unmanageable in terms of the sheer weight of communications traffic” (p.174). I argue that if a sense of internal coherence is possible in the online environment, it will have to be extracted from some form of partially-contained space.

¹⁴¹ See Jesse Kornbluth’s *Inside AOL*, “Harry Potter Online and in Print” (September 2000) which imposes miscellaneous guidelines: “safety rules,” no “rude or obscene language,” no posting of “[physical] addresses and phone numbers,” no arguments “to meet or to talk to anyone ‘offline,’” and other miscellaneous restrictions concerning the posting of personal information.

approximately thirty regular posters, which included an estimated 3-1 ratio of adult-adolescent fans (assuming age credibility).¹⁴² The fact that both general age groups posted daily and in semi-peaceful coexistence with each other initially attracted me to this particular group of fans. Occasionally, a new young poster who did not match *Talk's*... interactive mood—which ranged from serious and inquisitive to mildly-raucus and flippant (and was occasionally squelched by AOL monitors)—was redirected elsewhere, though to no specific fan location.

Clear religious preferences were also evident among the members of *Talk*.... Self-declared Christian, Jewish, Wiccan, agnostic, and atheistic posters all maintained a regular presence and dialogue about Harry Potter from their various perspectives. Racial and ethnic presences, on the other hand, were not evident, though some in the group were international AOL users.

There were, in addition, distinctive personalities germane to group communication theory. These included the presence of sages, apprentices, passives, aggressives, and clarifiers, as well as the four personality types: sanguines, melancholics, choleric, and phlegmatics.¹⁴³ Gender-breakdown, moreover, appeared to be more than fifty percent female, though some evidence of gender misrepresentation was detected and confirmed in the course of research. As with

¹⁴² AOL neither encourages nor discourages inter-age discussions, though they do take place as *Talk* suggests. Ratios are very much tilted, though, to one age group or the other.

¹⁴³ These, too, must be approached with caution as we do not yet know how greatly online communication influences or advances human personality or group behavior. Does it expand, contract, or in other ways transform the complex of characteristics which distinguish persons? Baran argues, "The potential exists for the online expansion of individual personality, just as it exists for the online denial of who and what we really are" (p.94).

the reported findings gathered from non-cult respondents, the anonymity of online respondents was accomplished through changing the pseudonyms of each individual.¹⁴⁴

4.3.3 EXAMINING DISCUSSION THREADS

The method here, as mentioned, involved the unobtrusive observation of fan-produced discussion threads: miscellaneous topics posted to evoke interactivity. Such threads involved anywhere from two to three user responses to hundreds of them. Occasionally the threads stayed on topic, but often they drifted toward related but different topics or into new areas altogether. For instance, the beginning of a thread entitled “Painful Death” was posted on Thursday, 27 December 2001, by Bosshogg. It read: “Ms. Rowling has said in an interview that writing one death scene in particular will be painful for her. Which character do you think she’s talking about?” Bosshogg’s question began a thread that grew to over three hundred user responses, though only fifty-eight stayed on the original topic. In other words, a pattern in which textual socialization commonly became purely social interactivity was observed often.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Paccagnella argues that online personas deserve the same privacies given to offline individuals. “Changing not only real names, but also aliases or pseudonyms (where used) proves the respect of the researchers for the social reality of cyberspace,” he states. See p. 7 of “Getting the Seat of Your Pants Dirty: Strategies for Ethnographic Research on Virtual Communities” by Luciano Paccagnella, in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 3(1), June 1997.

¹⁴⁵ This is an echo of research that has shown there can be a sense of social drift in fandom, in which fans depart from the text, both in short-term and long-term interactivity. This example is short-term, but in Sanders’s *Science Fiction Fandom* one contributor writes, “An

4.3.4 ONLINE INTERVIEWS

Beyond the monitoring of threads, to which I did not contribute, I regularly emailed posters who seemed to have something to say which I thought might be relevant to my research.¹⁴⁶ My approach included an introduction of myself and a brief explanation of the research I was performing at the University of Edinburgh. Then, I would mention one comment the poster had made on a single thread, and would he or she be willing to elaborate on it for me? Often, this was a one-time exchange of information, while at other times an internet-interview commenced which included multiple exchanges. On 15 June 2001, for instance, Love15 posted a short message accompanied by a postscript enclosed in quotation marks: "In the absence of angels, in the presence of fear, people acting like angels begin to appear. And they do not have halos and they do not have wings. It's everyday people who come through by doing miraculous things." I e-mailed the poster to ask where the quote came from and what did it mean? Love15 responded that it was from the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which the poster liked to quote from because she (assuming legitimate gender representation) had "lost two uncles to the [AIDS] epidemic."

interest in science fiction is usually required in order to contact fandom in the first place, but it's not an absolute necessity for remaining in [it].... There are fans who no longer read science fiction at all, or who seldom read it, but who remain in fandom because of their friends and social life" (p. 14). The issue of drift raises the questions, if text recedes in power over time, then what social forces hold the fan community together, and how are they related to the now de-centralized text?

¹⁴⁶ Robinson also used this approach. See p. 4 of "Debating the Events of September 11th: Discursive and Interactional Dynamics in Three Online Fora" by Laura Robinson, in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(4), Article 4, 2005.

Four more exchanges resulted over a period of five days in which Love15 wrote at length about her losses and the losses experienced by various characters in the Harry Potter books.

It should be mentioned here that because this period of online research coincided with the events of September 11, 2001, I continued to monitor relevant threads during this time of social suffering and sensitivity generated by the terrorist attacks on the United States.¹⁴⁷ Somewhat to my surprise, *Talk...* did not exhibit more than the usual number of daily threads, but many users who continued to post weeks after 9/11 did so in such a way as to incorporate the tragic events into their reading and discussion of Harry Potter. On 4 October, for instance, JohnandKelly posted the thread, "Hey Everybody." The message stated, "Hi you guys. It seems that last night I went to sleep and it was Sept. 11 and this morning I woke up and it is Oct. 4th.... It shouldn't surprise anyone here that I am taking some comfort in rereading POA [book 3: *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*] for the umpteenth time." Consistent with method, I e-mailed the poster to ask how "comfort" was obtained by rereading the Harry Potter book. Then three additional exchanges centering on escapist readings of Harry Potter occurred over the next seven days.

4.3.5 JUSTIFYING THE APPROACH

¹⁴⁷ Robinson's research, which also coincided with 9/11, similarly focused on interactivity generated by the event. Her purpose was to examine political discussions in an online environment. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

Despite the noted cautions expressed toward online research methods into fandom, I was willing to err on the side of justifying a somewhat experimental technique. In only one sure case was I able to document that a dominant poster on *Talk*...who had been presenting *himself* as a man named Cyrus, actually proved to be a woman who believed that she would be taken less seriously if she revealed her gender identity. GenuineT, however, emerged as a valued data source I have chosen, admittedly under some doubt, not to disregard. Her frequent postings on the board, and her many answers to my questions, reflect consistency even amid her deliberate misrepresentations.¹⁴⁸ Possibly, one way of addressing the problem of gender misrepresentation, moreover, is to examine response patterns over a protracted period of time, as I did. If patterns demonstrate discernible modes of consistency—emotional, psychological, or otherwise—rather than sudden fluctuations which smack of overt disingenuousness, then they should be held open as possessing a degree of reliability.

Jesse Kornbluth, editorial director at America Online, has raised concerns about the instabilities of online interactivity. Yet, he argues in “Harry Potter Online and in Print” (2000) that fans belonging to the AOL Harry Potter groups have their own ways of policing their activities so that poster-authenticity is maintained. The fact that the majority of fans are passionate readers and discussers of the books

¹⁴⁸ It should be added that negative intent is not to be assumed by a poster’s misrepresentation. The pressures not to reveal personal information online can be seen as a natural sanctioning of misrepresentation and a requirement of online communication. It is possible that many computer users do it because they see it as the right thing, not the wrong thing, to do in this mediated environment.

means, he states, that they tend to notice fakery and pretense rather quickly. Showing disrespect for book content is the first way to “annoy” the group, he states; saying you are someone whom obviously you are not, is the second. Kornbluth quotes a fan as saying, “The worst is when you say something like ‘I’m J.K. Rowling’s second cousin and here’s the next book’s plot.’”¹⁴⁹ I am not quite as optimistic here as Kornbluth, but I am willing to risk some degree of error in the promise that some valuable data is capable of being collected in an otherwise unstable interactive environment.

4.3.6 PHYSICAL FAN GATHERINGS

I offer a final word here about two sets of supplemental research activities.

First, to integrate an element of physical presence into the presentation of the online research, I continue to visit public events for fans of Harry Potter as they have occurred over the past six years. These have included parties held at local bookstores to celebrate publication of the latest Harry Potter novel; the opening days of the Harry Potter movie releases; and a retailer’s Harry Potter exhibit, designed to attract young people to an American department store during the Christmas season.¹⁵⁰ The most recent of these public engagements was *The Witching Hour*, an international symposium for fans and scholars in Salem, Massachusetts during

¹⁴⁹ Kornbluth, p. 4.

¹⁵⁰ This last event I was unable to visit in-person. I asked a family member to attend, in my stead, Dayton’s Holiday Auditorium Show 2000: Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone (December 2000, Minneapolis) and conducted an interview afterwards.

October 2005. There, I interviewed Nancee Lee Allen, a social worker who uses the Harry Potter books in her work with children of sexual abuse.

Another public event in which I did formally participate as a researcher was a Harry Potter Halloween party (held two weeks after Halloween) sponsored by the Largo Public Library in Largo, Florida.¹⁵¹ I photographed this gathering, in which fans came dressed as their favorite character, and spoke with a number of fans and facilitators of the event. In the following days I also arranged an in-person interview with the librarian who organized the party. Still, the information gathered from this event functions as supplemental data to that obtained online.

4.3.7 FAN FICTION

The greater supplemental component here involved the collection of Harry Potter fan fiction, posted also in online environments.

Research into fan fiction has been a minor staple of fandom enquiry. Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1992) drew largely upon fan fiction produced by women within physical *Star Trek* fan clubs. Especially applicable to the present research is Bacon-Smith's exploration of a genre she calls *hurt-comfort*, in which women fan writers produce stories about [primarily male] victims of painful circumstances who receive comfort within the narrative product. Hurt-comfort fanfics help writers understand sources of

¹⁵¹ This event, on 11 November 2001, was primarily a fan gathering but also featured a de-facto sub-theme incorporating the origins and uses of magic.

suffering, the idea of comfort, the practice of empathy, the differences between physical and emotional suffering, and the eradication of hurtful behavior, Bacon-Smith argues. Often, it is about reconstructing the hero, who suffers in the original text, and reordering his suffering in a way that allows the fan a closer identification based on her own experience with pain and its relief.¹⁵² Certainly some of these themes—and their possible outcomes—exist in Harry Potter fan fiction, too, which I attempt to integrate into the discussion.

I collected many online fanfics from America Online users. However, because better and more specialized examples existed in other internet locations, I also stepped away from AOL for this search. Locations such as *fictionally.org*, *schnoogle.com*, *astronomytower.org*, *riddikulus.org*, and *thedarkarts.org* featured Harry Potter fanfics in genre categories including romance, humor, angst, and novel-length works. Included on many of these sites were helpful fanfic writing guidelines, approaches to researching fan fiction, and how to avoid negative impressions which alienate a fan writer's audience.¹⁵³

Similar to the online method used with AOL's *Talk About Harry Potter* news group, I noted fan fiction seeming to be relevant to the research and performed e-mail interviews with the authors. Many of these involved young writers who had

¹⁵² Bacon-Smith, pp. 277-9. "All hurt-comfort fiction tries to express pain and suffering so that the reader can share the experience directly, both of the sufferer and of the comforter," Bacon-Smith writes. "Suffering, made unreal by its perpetrators, is remade in [fan] fiction."

¹⁵³ See "A Guided Tour of the Fandom," "Researching Fiction," "How to Make a Good Impression," "Mary Sueism (and How to Avoid It)," and "Harry Potter and Slash," all collected at *fictionally.org*.

presented stories of rage and violence, such as on July 29, 2001, when Cuddly117 posted a fanfic in which Harry Potter commits suicide by plunging a knife into his chest (releasing evil spirits from the fatal wound). Immediately prior to the suicide, the author had written, "...if it could all end, all the suffering, all the pain, than (sic.) it would be worth it." By e-mail I asked the author what the story meant and where the idea for it had originated. Alicia, the author, said that she (again, assuming gender credibility) both read and wrote about Harry Potter to "take my mind off of things." She talked about forgetting "my worries and troubles" especially when she was watching her grandmother get "sicker and sicker" and eventually die. The "books helped me cope with my loss," she said.

As with the *Talk...* postings and interviews, the problems of discerning credibility and genuine meaning in such fan responses must be met with caution. This is even more the case when one extracts material from something as little-understood as fan fiction. How much of it can be reliably comprehended as autobiographical, and how much is actually the imaginative reconstruction of digested narrative components? Yet here again, noting combinations and consistencies between posted material and the poster's own thoughts arising from the interview situation would seem to render analysis worth the stated risks.

4.4 CONCLUSION

Despite the stated cautions I have applied to each phase of the research, the findings support my thesis of privation in fandom. This is not to say, however, that

all or even most of the fan comments are of a spectacular nature. Indeed, much of the data reported in the following two chapters possesses an effaced quality in which recorded comments seem fairly basic. In my interviews, online and in-person, I may have been able to dig more deeply into responses for the purpose of acquiring greater substance.¹⁵⁴ My goal, however, has not been the acquisition of highly-charged comments. I have, instead, been more interested in a uniform consistency establishing informational equivalency within the body of research. This, I have to remind myself, is rudimentary data, and any foundational body of research is likely to rest on basic, yet consistent findings. Certainly, a time is coming to dig further beneath the surfaces, but now the establishment of a reliable base for theorizing privation in fandom is what is most needed.

¹⁵⁴ For a picture of dramatized privation in fandom, one needs only to consult the actual dramatizations of fandom existing in popular literature and film. These stories of fans, whether cult or non-cult, are about lost, separated, and isolated individuals who exploit their fandom to relieve their suffering. Often they are exaggerations of the elements of privation existing in all fans, but their purpose of articulating extreme suffering is evident. (See Appendix A, "Misery Factors.")

V

**PRIVATION IN NON-CULT
FANDOM:
A MULTI-TEXTUAL APPROACH**
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CHAPTER FIVE

PRIVATION IN NON-CULT FANDOM: A MULTI-TEXTUAL APPROACH

5.1 INTRODUCTION

I begin this first chapter of reported findings by restating my thesis: Fandom is a cultural practice that provides significant meaning to fans through their consumption of texts (the objects of fan devotion) and through social behaviors which accompany heightened textual consumption. The practice also functions as a means by which fans attempt to satisfy variable states of deprivation I have called privation. Fans do this by seeking rewards that alternate between pleasures and deeper satisfactions.

In seeking support of this thesis, I will first consider results from 120 questionnaire-assisted interviews executed over a twelve-month period. The emphasis in this collection of findings is on non-cult fandom: fan practices and behaviors whose location is nearer the plane of organized tastes and preferences than that of extreme adherence and allegiance.¹⁴⁴ The fandoms themselves are multi-

¹⁴⁴ This is a judgment call by the researcher. While some of the fans mentioned here do incorporate elements of cult fandom, the judgment has been that most do not and are therefore located closer to culture than cult for the purposes of comparison (see Chapter Four for a review of these terms).

textual, representing many objects of devotion (with popular music fan cultures serving as the dominant voice).¹⁴⁵

In addition, I have grouped findings into four contrasting spheres of experience. I see these as deprivational relationships, which I express as dislocation/connectivity, animus/release, isolation/identification, and hunger/empowerment. This is an attempt at organization, moreover, visualizing the research findings as inclusive of specific deprivations and their accompanying satisfactions. From this point forward, I will refer to these simply as *dynamics*. The first to be considered here is the dislocation/connectivity dynamic which emerged consistently throughout the twelve-month period.

5.2 DISLOCATION/CONNECTIVITY

I note the presence of social dislocation which was evident in approximately twenty-five percent of the people interviewed. Here, twenty-seven respondents used some aspect of their fandom to connect or reconnect themselves to family and childhood, cultural roots, and lost or threatened social bonds. The desire for family and childhood connectivity emerged as the most prominent of these

¹⁴⁵ Justification of a multi-textual method stems from the desire for a truer picture of suffering contexts than that offered by a single case study. Establishing the four dynamics of suffering in fandom, as represented in this chapter, emerged from this multi-textual comparison. The case study portion of the methodology which occupies the following chapter argues that while the same four dynamics may be seen in a single fandom, it is likely that one dynamic will emerge as dominant. Other dynamics, moreover, will be recessed or marginal, depending on the textual and social dynamics at work within a particular fandom.

dislocation/connectivity dynamics, with cultural roots connectivity and the recovery of social bonds (i.e. friendship) being expressed less frequently.¹⁴⁶

A breakdown of miscellaneous themes here included the recovery of holiday family times through a television fandom, the use of period-music fandom to reconstruct a lost father-daughter bond, the enjoyment of male pop stars to facilitate mother-daughter bonding, dealing with geographical dislocation through reggae music fandom, and the use of a purely curatorial fandom as a response to the fear of lost social arrangements and friends. Miscellaneous cultural products included movies marketed to children, two television series, nine popular music sources, five sources of collectible objects, and four sports-team fandoms. Again, the broad product focus here, which allowed more than media fandoms into the mix, was justified by the thematic narrowness of the entire project: how fans suffer deprivations, and how they use their fandom in the employment of satisfactions.

Presented as mini-case studies, the following fans expressed a dislocation/connectivity dynamic specifically related to family and childhood.¹⁴⁷

5.2.1 RECONNECTING WITH SOURCES OF SECURITY

Ashley, a Canadian student at the University of Tampa, described herself as a fan of children's movies. She also possesses fan interests in products ranging from popular music to a Canadian sports team to the consumption of "psychological

¹⁴⁶ Exact figures included 20 family-childhood, 5 cultural roots, and 2 social bonds respondents.

¹⁴⁷ Gender breakdown in dislocation—connectivity included 20 female, 7 male.

thrillers.” But her fan devotion to children’s movies such as *The Lion King* and *Shrek* best fit the definition and activities of fandom presented to her by the research questionnaire. That is to say she was able to see clearly-defined social and textual dimensions of her juvenile movie fandom, which included locating its beginnings, noting its activities, approximating both time and money commitments to its maintenance, recalling its curatorial dimensions, and speculating on its meaning and relevance to her life.

Ashley recalled that her parents had used children’s movies as “a cheap form of babysitting” when she was a child. Even though they maintained a background presence during viewing times, the image dream world that came from the movies was experienced in solitary conditions. Thus, a genuine textual experience, related to but also independent of social linkages, existed for Ashley as a child. She “relished each movie for different reasons,” she said, recalling her identification with characters in some films while simply enjoying the songs and music in others. She immersed herself in their stories, and when they were finished she could talk about them with whichever parent had been present at the time. “I gained my love for these movies from my family,” she noted.

Years later, Ashley says that she sees “every children’s movie that is released.” She has collected “ninety-percent” of the movies she enjoyed as a child

and still watches them for an estimated 8-10 hours in some weeks.¹⁴⁸ She has named three pets after characters from *Winnie the Pooh*, *The Lion King*, and *The Never Ending Story*, and the curatorial dimension of her fandom includes a collection of soundtracks, stuffed animals of her favorite characters, movie posters, gift books, figurines, bedding, picture frames, and coloring books, all of which she estimates has cost her between \$1,500 and \$2,000 (though that's "probably not a large enough [estimated] amount," she stated).¹⁴⁹ She has decorated her room so that one "would actually assume a child lives in it and not a university student," she said. Admitting, also, to unusual activities that she would do only as a fan, she said that periodically she acts out "the spaghetti scene" from the movie *Lady and the Tramp* with her cat, Tigger. This involves placing one end of a noodle in her mouth and the other end in her cat's mouth. Slowly, the two come together, and Ashley kisses Tigger's nose. "This one-time occurrence turned into a routine," she adds, "and when I make spaghetti I try to recreate the scene with her."

Clues about where meaning resides within Ashley's fandom were scattered among her responses to my questions.¹⁵⁰ The first emanated from the question, *Describe any curatorial consumption (artifact collection) your fandom entails, and what do*

¹⁴⁸ Her exact words were, "I spend probably an estimated 8 to 10 hours a week watching these movies, 10 hours playing the CDs [soundtracks] while doing other tasks, and maybe an hour or so a week discussing them on the internet or with friends."

¹⁴⁹ Her estimate was based on these numbers: \$400 for movies in video (20 x \$20), \$100 for CDs (5 x \$20), \$200 on "bedding," \$500-\$600 on "other memorabilia," \$225 for "a night at the *Lion King* play," and \$60 "or so a year on movies in the theater," for a total of \$1,585.

¹⁵⁰ The response pattern is noted here to show how material was gathered from the interviews. As is evident with this fan, data was taken from answers to a number of questions.

you as a fan derive from this experience? After listing her collectibles, which she described at length, she said, “I get many things from this experience, such as entertainment, [and] I get to share it with the people I care for—my nieces and nephews. Children’s movies have a way of lightening up your day or at least taking your mind off the more serious issues that plague your mind.” She also spoke of memory-association in the context of her collections, saying, “Another thing I get...[are] the memories that I link them with. Each [item] reminds me of an event in my life that I value as significant.” Then, in response to the question seeking information about how fandom can affect a fan’s personal surroundings, Ashley said, “I like surrounding myself with this memorabilia because it makes me feel young and reminds me of my family home. It brings a sense of security.” She said she used her fandom “as a source of relieving stresses, and that it affected her “psychologically and emotionally.” “[Beyond] my family and friends, it is the most significant part of my life,” she stated.

The web of meaning here is, first of all, inseparably textual and social. Ashley is at once engaged by the text of her fandom, but this meaning immediately incorporates social dimensions as she says, “I get to share it with the people I care for.” She receives and responds at precisely the same moment. Within this reception-response dynamic, we also note the pleasures of the textual experience (“Children’s movies have a way of lightening up your day”) as well as more profound implication of escape (“Children’s movies...[take] your mind off the more serious issues that plague your mind”). She enjoys, and she escapes. Then, when

she speaks of her memory-associations and about retaining her youth in the psychological “security” of her “family home,” we are justified in noting her dislocation, benign though it may well be at this point but dislocation nonetheless. Ashley is dislocated from sources of security she has known, and she reconnects herself to those sources through her fandom. The entertainment product she enjoyed as a child in the proximity of her parents now serves as a means of rejoining that favorable psychological environment from her past. Ashley’s meaning pattern, therefore, functions as a dynamic entity of steps and movements which range from the experience of pleasure to the need for escape, and finally, to the accomplishment or satisfaction of connectivity.

5.2.2 FREEZING THE MEMORY OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

A similar pattern of meaning was articulated by Jennifer, who described herself as a fan of *Precious Moments* figurines.

Jennifer listed products ranging from nature posters to Harry Potter as relevant to her own organized tastes and preferences, but she said that the *Precious Moments* collectible culture aligned best with fandom as defined by the questionnaire.¹⁵¹ She referred to this culture as a “genre” primarily of small figurines

¹⁵¹ The goal of asking respondents to list media tastes and preferences was so that I would be able to determine which taste and preference seemed to be stronger than the others and hence a legitimate fan activity as defined by the questionnaire. The list here included Precious Moments, Indian artifacts and culture, Harry Potter, Volleyball culture, holiday Barbie dolls, nature posters, Tommy Hilfiger (clothes designer), Ralph Lauren (clothes designer), and designer shoes.

but including larger dolls, stuffed animals, Bibles, calendars, and address books, and she said that “everything has a message behind it whether it is religiously inspirational, sentimental, or just thoughtful.”

Origination occurred when Jennifer was nine years old. “Initially I began collecting [them] because my father would give my mother and I one each Christmas, symbolizing that particular year for us,” she said. “[He] came to the product when browsing through a gift shop back home and thought [the figurines] would make sentimental gifts we would treasure. I guess you could say that it is a family thing.” She maintained throughout the interview that this fan activity provided a way for her to protect the sanctity of family relationships, freezing them in meaningful moments as time threatened to compromise the bonds. “My love for this collection will always be there,” she said, even as “people come and go.”

Jennifer stressed that meaning derived from the *Precious Moments* culture comes more from what the product represented to her than from the product itself. She regularly displays, holds, and examines the figurines, she said, but the “love of family, tradition, beliefs, and who I am as a person” are the “specific messages” that dominate her fandom. She also stated, however, that the significance of the objects changes in a way she described as in facilitation of “emotional development,” suggesting that meaning may reside more than she acknowledges in the objects themselves. She said,

As I grow older I discover the expanding emotions that encompass my collection. They are not what I first acknowledged them to be—pretty little ceramic pieces—but

they are representations of my childhood and life. I think as we grow in our number of years our mind develops accordingly accommodating emotional gains.... The Precious Moments collection is an example of this emotional development. Also, coming to the realization that my mom and dad are not everlasting makes this collection even more precious to me.

Certainly, representation is part of the meaning pattern here, but is it representation or reception that changes over time? If reception is what changes, then it would seem that meaning emanates to a large extent from the experience of the figurines themselves. Things represented by objects in fandom do not change because they are fixed in idealized, objectified conditions such as memory (as is evident here); reception of the objects themselves does change because of the receiver's mutable subjectivity. The meaning of the "tear-dropped eyes" and "expressionless faces" of the figurines, as noted by Jennifer, can be received through the eyes of wonder at one stage in a person's life and through the eyes of sorrow, for instance, at another stage.¹⁵² Regardless of the precise locus of meaning, however, it is clear that the essence of the figurines projects itself into Jennifer's sense of dislocated emotions by reconnecting them to thoughts and memories of her parents. Her statement—"the realization that my mom and dad are not everlasting"—articulates an awareness of not being able to hold onto one's parents while being able to hold onto the *Precious Moments* figurines and all that they may mean. Their

¹⁵² This point is emphasized here to bring awareness to the argument that there is a complexity to the process of connecting to someone or something through fandom. Collected artifacts, for instance, do function as reminders, but they are more than that. Their meaning lies at least partially in themselves, though this meaning also serves the connecting/reconnecting process between a fan and to whomever he/she is establishing connections.

meaning reconnects her, and the deprivation is at least partially satisfied. This was a familiar theme in this section of interviews.

5.2.3 ATTEMPTED RESTORATION OF FAMILIAL BONDS

Linda, who described herself as a fan of popular music from the 1980's, said that her fandom has grown over time after originating in the relationship between herself and her father when she was a child. She "sings and dances" to it "because of how it relates to my dad," she said. "On certain songs, I can hear my dad sing to them [like] he did when I was growing up." Her favorite place to exercise her fandom is in her car, which again revives "the bond with my father. When I was young, me and my dad went for car rides and he would play music. Now, when I am in my car and playing the same music, it brings me back to that time in my life when things were simple and I was carefree and innocently happy."

Similar briefly-stated examples of familial bonding facilitated by fan interests should be mentioned before we proceed to a larger discussion about fandom as a means by which fans reconnect with family imperfection. Here, eleven fandoms connected individual fans to "family" (one case), "parents" (one case), "mother" (two cases), "father" (four cases), "mother and aunt" (one case), "sister" (one case), and "uncle" (one case). Fan interests included three popular music fandoms (bands Pink Floyd and Nsync, and performer Elvis Presley), five spectator-sport fandoms (professional wrestling, the Baltimore Orioles and New York Yankees baseball

teams, and the New York Knicks and Los Angeles Lakers basketball teams), and three curatorial fandoms (dolphin figurines, horse figurines, and model car collectibles).

Fans of the musical products spoke of intergenerational bonding experiences facilitated by shared musical preferences. “The personal meaning is in the fact that my parents and I have something in common that we can bond with,” said Michael, a fan of musical group Pink Floyd. Another fan, Jamie, spoke of taking part, with her mother, in “the music, the guys, and even fan fiction” from the fan culture surrounding the band, Nsync. She stated, “Being away at college and still having Nsync makes me feel close to my mom.” An Elvis Presley fan, Kristin, spoke of an Elvis “tradition” she shares with her mother and aunt, and also how the “sharing of Elvis makes me feel good and holds a lot of memories for me.”

The sports fans were more narrative in their comments, recalling specific times and places they shared fan experiences with a family member. Julia, a fan of professional wrestling, recalled a time when she attended an event with her father, and he dressed up as her favorite wrestler. She still attends local wrestling- culture events and says of herself and her father: “I just sort of followed in his footsteps.” Another fan, Mick, spoke of long bus trips he and his father took to New York Yankees baseball games when he was a child. Metaphorically, he described those experiences as “a far-off land that was set aside for male bonding.” He can return to “that land,” he said, only by watching Yankees baseball on television and by retaining his fan loyalty to the team.

The fans of collectible products were similarly narrative in their responses, recalling precise ages, times, and places that coincided with when they began collecting. A mother-son bond was created for Miguel when he was “five years old,” this fan stated. That was when his mother began purchasing model cars for him, a collection he has retained over the years. “It’s something I feel pride in and makes me happy by looking at my collection everyday. It has both sentimental and passion value for me [and] is because of my mother,” he added. Another collections fan, Kristy, dated her collection of dolphin figurines to “family trips and memories in which my parents showed me their love for the ocean. We will always have the bond created at the ocean with [real] dolphins.”

Points of agreement existed in the responses from each of these fans, one of the more pronounced ones being the belief held by each respondent that their fan experiences resisted comprehension by those outside of their fan culture. The experiences themselves, and the ways they facilitated alternative connections to valued family relationships, were seen as important by each fan. “It’s like a connection that outsiders cannot understand,” said David, of how his Los Angeles Lakers fandom brought him close, again and again, to his uncle. In this way, the fandom operated as a valued, personal protector of lived family relationships. It was something special to the fan and unique, in his or her mind, from how valued relationships might be maintained among other people and in other relational contexts.

5.2.4 RECONNECTING WITH FAMILY IMPERFECTION

Two television fandoms facilitating familial bonds also warrant consideration here because buried in both is a state of deprivation which is satisfied through connectivity to family dysfunction and imperfection. In short, these two fans use their fandom to connect themselves to the imperfections in their own families, thereby acquiring a kind of approval for who they are and how their families operate. Both fans said that their television shows gave them an assurance that their families were okay, and that they didn't need to be ashamed or embarrassed by the way they live their lives.

Karen, for instance, described herself as “a dedicated fan” of *The Simpsons* adult cartoon, broadcast now for more than a decade. Karen discovered *The Simpsons* on her own when she was nine years old. She had been channel-surfing on one of her family's television sets. “I noticed one of the funny yellow characters saying words such as ‘dude’ and ‘cool,’ the popular phrases of the time period,” she said. “I tuned into the show and was thrilled by what I saw. Humorous characters, jokes about [school] principals, and a mischievous little boy that was always getting into trouble and yelling phrases such as ‘eat my shorts.’” Fairly soon thereafter Karen said that “the mass media had gotten to all the students.” The young people in her school were talking about the show, and the merchandise—t-shirts, notebooks, folders, stickers, etc.—also started to appear. Her mother would not allow her to purchase the items, thinking that “a fad” was not worth spending the

money on. "She underestimated how long the show would continue to capture people's attention," Karen said.

When Karen entered middle school, she engaged in sports and other school commitments, and her interest in *The Simpsons* waned. But when she turned sixteen, it came alive again. Her after-school job ended in time for her "to drive home, plop on the couch, and watch an hour of [the show]." She was beginning to see that what had appealed to her most about *The Simpsons* was how it held up a mirror to her own family life. Parental roles, family communication dynamics, and sibling rivalries as depicted on the show were interchangeable with those of her own family. She noted especially the triangle of dynamics consisting of Homer Simpson's "lovable laziness," Marge Simpson's pained but humorous submissiveness, and Bart Simpson's contained rebelliousness, and how they matched the three-pronged dynamics of her family. She even saw parallels between Homer's and her father's profession:

My father builds power plants, and Homer works at a nuclear power plant. As soon as my father comes home he sits himself on the couch and watches television for hours. Marge is a housewife that very rarely voices her own opinion. She strives to make others happy and puts her feelings aside. My mother is exactly the same way. My brother is currently serving a one-week detention for talking back to his principal. When I view this show I see my family, but with a much [needed] comical twist.

In other words, Karen needed a mediated product which would allow her to see her own family and its flaws, and to be able to laugh at them. She didn't have

this in her life until *The Simpsons* came along, she says, and it is what made her a long-term fan.

It is worth noting a few of Karen's fan rituals which accompany the actual viewing of a *Simpsons* episode.¹⁵³ Monday through Friday, during the late afternoon hours, she begins to anticipate the six o'clock hour in which she will gather with a small group of fans to watch the show. She makes sure she is dressed "in a comfortable pair of sweatpants" and "blankets and pillows needed to be the utmost comfortable" are placed in the viewing area. Well before the broadcast, she puts her television on channel 4 (UPN), turns up the volume "a few notches," and makes sure she has "something to drink near me so I have no reason to get up once the show starts."

At 6pm the television is on and "will stay on for two back-to-back episodes," she said. As soon as the theme song begins, her anticipation increases. "What episode will it be, will I see something new that is in it this time, [and] will I pick up any hilarious phrases from it?" she wonders. She and her friends have developed "strict rules" for actual viewing: "no talking until the commercial [break] unless it is show related," and everyone has to listen intently for the "many little jokes, crazy signs, and hidden messages that are piled into every episode." They do this, "so we don't miss a single thing," she adds. Every line is scrutinized. "Every joke,

¹⁵³ This serves a goal of current fandom research, which is to let the fans themselves speak as much as possible. Some have lamented analysis and interpretation which drowns out the voices of fans themselves. See Harris and Alexander in *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity* on the problem of "rarely heard voices" (p. 5).

statement, and message contributes to the experience,” and Karen becomes relaxed as soon as she hears Homer begin to speak. “No matter what type of mood I have been put in,” she said, “all it will take is a few of Homer’s dumbfounded comments and I will soon be put into a state of relaxation.” The voice and narrative elements transports her back to her own home, she said, where family imperfection is not a thing to be feared or despised, but rather enjoyed and celebrated with friends.¹⁵⁴

5.2.5 “GOING HOME” TO AN ENVIRONMENT OF CELEBRATED IMPERFECTIONS

Another fan, Rachel, uses the text of the television show, *Gilmore Girls*, as a means of connecting herself to images of “normal” physical appearance as visualized within a family context. In short, her fandom is based on the consumption and socialization of a text which does not idealize the feminine body, thereby allowing Rachel to reconnect with the imperfections in physical appearance among the women in her own family. Imperfection becomes not only acceptable but also a thing to celebrate with these same family members via an entertainment product.

She was introduced to *Gilmore Girls* by an aunt. Rachel said that she “became an instant fan,” and that she in turn drew her mother and sister into the show, which

¹⁵⁴ We might think of this as a deprivation of accepted imperfection, whereby the fan requires a media text and the social contacts gathered around it to confront previously unacceptable conditions and behaviors and become accepting of them. The social realism of the text, moreover, coupled with the group’s approval of it, produces a suitable environment in which satisfactions can occur.

eventually became the regular activity the four women share. Every week after the show, they engaged each other in conversations about manners, modes of dress, confronting and running away from problems, and most of all “normalcy” of bodily appearance. In addition, Rachel and her family are from a small town in rural Wisconsin, and now that she is living in Florida she uses *Gilmore Girls* as “an excuse” to phone home. “I call home after every show and discuss it as well,” she said. “We [all] talk about the jokes, the characters, and the usual endearing portions of the plot.” In one episode, Rachel found herself so engaged by the “non-trendy” clothing Loreli, one of the main characters, was wearing that she went out to a local discount department store to try and piece together a similar outfit. “The show takes random pieces of clothes and throws them together to create a very funky look,” she said.

This “funky look” is actually one which reflects and symbolizes imperfection of appearance for Rachel and her family. The clothing, for instance, that she was so attracted to in the one episode was attractive because it represented a departure from perfections in attire and image fostered by the mass media, Rachel stated. Her self-perception tells her that she is not that kind of person—perfect—and neither are her family members, but they need to see that the way they look can be objectified as normalcy on the small screen and then appreciated in real life. She stated,

Physical looks are not important on the show considering the variety of body types presented in it. Even Loreli and Rori aren't too skinny or look like stereotypical actresses. I find that to be such a relief and even a comfort in our society where so much seems to be measured by appearance. I love the

normalcy of the show. It presents normal people, all shapes and sizes, and doesn't make them perfect. They make mistakes and deal with them instead of everything just working out somehow like in many other television shows.

But the connectivity goes deeper than imperfection of physical appearance.

The fact that Rachel "connects" with the character Loreli also is based on her attraction to mistakes the character has made in life and how she has overcome them. "I admire how far the character of Loreli has come in her life," she said. "She had a child at sixteen and lived in a potting shed [outside] of an inn where she worked after she left her parent's house. After all that, she now runs that inn, her daughter is very well brought up and they are best friends, she has her own house, and she interacts with her parents again." In this context, Rachel recalled another episode, which she describes as "the most endearing one," in which Loreli asked her parents for financial assistance to send her illegitimate daughter to a private school. Her mother agreed to help with the tuition, "but under one condition," Rachel said: "Once a week Loreli and [her daughter] Rori had to go to their house for dinner." The price and benefit were that they had to come together after being apart.

Rachel's fandom seems very much centered in the need to satisfy a deprivation by reconnecting herself with family members, which she accomplishes through a mediated product that not only facilitates her own connectivity but presents narrative models which demonstrate how to do it. She uses the show to go home: home in this case being an environment of celebrated imperfections and melodramatic graces uniquely shared by the members of *her* home, which is also the

intentional social component of her fandom. “I love talking about the show with [family],” she said. “I tried discussing it once with some of my friends who have never seen the show before. They just nodded and smiled. When talking about something that I’m a fan of, I really want feedback. I get it from my mom, aunt, and sister. I am proud to be a fan of what is, in my opinion, a good quality form of entertainment.”

5.2.6 RECONNECTING WITH CULTURAL ROOTS

To this point in articulating findings, I have centered on fans who use their fandom to connect or reconnect specifically with family. Though other themes (release, identification, empowerment) have also been present in the responses of these fans, it was my judgment that the dominant theme coming from the interviews was the satisfaction of deprivation through family connectivity facilitated by non-cult fandom. Indeed, the presence of family-based deprivation seems a large factor in fandom, as I have increasingly recognized. The social dimension of this connectivity is more evident than the textual one, and why certain texts facilitate connection (or reconnection) seems a relevant area to explore in the future. Also, how responses are made to family deprivation in non-cult versus cult fandom warrants examination. Is it simply a matter of degree that differentiates response patterns, or are other factors present? I feel strongly that “fandom and family” as a research topic deserves much future attention, and it will be amplified by the discussion of attachment processes in Chapter Seven.

I move now to a smaller number of fans who expressed a theme of connectivity to cultural roots.

Because Florida integrates large numbers of immigrants from Central and South America and the Caribbean islands into the environment of higher education, a number of my interviews at both the University of Tampa and Southeastern College entered the fan worlds of immigrant students. While only a small portion of these respondents said that their organized tastes and preferences reconnected them to their cultural heritage, the few who did emphasize this theme spoke of overcoming fears, dealing with death, and solidifying bonds of pride and togetherness through being fans of ethnocultural products.¹⁵⁵ Four respondents accomplished this through music fandom; one did so through sports fandom.

Monica, a fan of Mexican pop group *Mercurio*, spoke of reconnecting with friends she left behind in Mexico when she became a student in the United States. “They [*Mercurio*] connect me to my group,” she said. When she returns to Mexico on school breaks and holidays, she is able to ease herself back into dormant relationships through shared interests in *Mercurio*’s music. “When I go to Mexico, I talk with my friends and we go to concerts. We talk about what we read in certain magazines. We collect things together,” she added. Then, when she relocates herself once again in Tampa, she becomes a solitary fan but with the intent of reconnecting again to her culture. She states, “I do this alone now. No one knows

¹⁵⁵ These were primarily products of popular music and sports which originated in non-U.S. ethnic cultures.

[*Mercurio*] here, but I enjoy listening to their music and watching them on Univision [Spanish-language cable television]. They make me feel like I'm back in Mexico. They bring great memories to me."

In this instance, the entertainment product serves as an ethnocultural agent which renews and solidifies culturally-defined friendship bonds at home and keeps those bonds active while the fan is living in the nonnative culture. The product, or text, serves as the connector, a facilitation device which may actually be more potent than the telephone, for instance, because it functions as a living neutral agent transcending mere technology by offering consumable fulfillment of something which to the fan is real and vibrant; more than simply a channel.¹⁵⁶ This textual fulfillment is then shared emotionally and psychologically with friends from the homeland, and a vibrant type of cultural communication is created. Fandom as a means of satisfying an ethnocultural deprivation is evident here.

5.2.7 LOST SOCIETAL COHESIVENESS

Another fan, Zandra, uses dance hall music to carry her back to her native Jamaica and to bring Jamaica to Florida. "I am extremely proud of my culture," she said, "so I have always been a fan of dance hall music."

¹⁵⁶ This contrast is made here out of a desire to interpret the fan's experience. However, the fan herself alluded to the heightened communication which takes place when she and her "group" discuss the object of their fandom. "I go to concerts, read, and talk with my friends about [*Mercurio*] over the telephone," she said, acknowledging that without their connecting text the phone conversations would not be as meaningful or might not exist at all. "Without [*Mercurio*] the group, we wouldn't [have that much to talk about]."

Zandra's fandom consists of more than an estimated \$1,000 per year she spends on parties, concerts, memorabilia, and recordings, all with a dance hall theme as it is represented in Tampa Bay's cultural environment, she said. She may consume this product for up to "forty hours a week" in the United States "but probably more in Jamaica." Her activities include online interactivity with other dance hall fans, and she is especially interested in an egalitarian aspect of the dance hall fan culture. "Dance hall in my country unites people of all classes," she stated. "To me, this is important and brings me a lot of personal meaning. To know that we can unite and come together" is a sustaining element. She said that her fandom increased once she had settled into her life in Florida because she was alone, absent from the cohesiveness of Jamaican society. She felt that she "could survive without the music itself," but it was much more of a challenge to function happily without it in a community that wasn't closely knit. "When I came here to the U.S., dance hall filled [that] void, so I'm a stronger fan now."¹⁵⁷

Levy said that the lyrics in dance hall music "are not extremely uplifting or helpful in that sense," and thus lyrical encouragement is not the element which sustains her. It is, rather, the presence of Caribbean life-realism which reconnects her to the Jamaican culture from which she is now absent.

¹⁵⁷ The premise that fan activities are not survival mechanisms, but rather voluntary sustaining pleasures, was a frequently repeated theme in the interviews. As would seem to be clear here, however, is the fan's suggestion that survival does play a role in what she described as a "filled void." Her fan culture may not function as the sole source of survival, but it is in some way a component of survival. It is enlisted as an aid, at least.

5.2.8 “THE CULTURE I REPRESENT”

Something similar, though even more potent perhaps, exists in ethnocultural deprivation which is satisfied through connectivity fostered by reggae music fandom. Kathryn, from the Cayman Islands, spoke of being a fan of many genres of reggae: slow and fast reggae, modern reggae, and the classic form represented by the Caribbean musical icon, Bob Marley. “Reggae has always been a part of my life,” she said. “Sunday afternoons at the beach [on Grand Cayman Island], Bob Marley was always playing.” Transplanted to another culture, she listens to reggae “every day,” collects artifacts, participates in internet chat with reggae fans, and allows reggae culture to provide ethnoculturally-conditioned self-esteem. “Reggae represents where I’m from,” she said. “If I hear reggae in a club, I think to myself, this is my music not just because I like it but because it connects me with who I am and the culture I represent. It reminds me of home.” Kathryn’s statement “the culture I represent” reveals a sense of personal ambassadorship she feels as a transplant existing in nonnative conditions, a source of ethnocultural pride she both retains and exercises through her fandom.¹⁵⁸

5.2.9 RESTORING SPIRITUAL SUPPORT IN A NONNATIVE CULTURE

Another reggae fan, Irmalee, spoke of a spiritually-conditioned fan experience nurtured by religious elements of reggae. Irmalee, a respondent who

¹⁵⁸ This sense of “ambassadorship,” moreover, reveals that the fan is reconnected to her culture in two ways: it takes her back home but also solidifies her as a representative of “back home” within the culture to which she has been transplanted.

said her experiences as a fan were “almost” essential to her life and well-being, has incorporated the Rastafarian religious component of Bob Marley’s music into her fandom. She described herself as “a believer in the *Rasta* lifestyle” without choosing “to practice the faith,” which she stated was a combination of belief in *Jah* (God) and the promise that *Rastas* will one day return to Ethiopia (heaven).

Irmalee, who developed an ethnocultural attachment to Marley’s music while growing up on St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands, said that her experience of being a fan became more intense as a result of family tragedy. “I had two deaths in my family,” she said. “Because of this, I would stay in my room at home and turn on the stereo and play my reggae CDs. I played Bob Marley and listened carefully to the lyrics of the songs I heard. I realized what Marley’s music is about. His music focuses on uplifting the deprived.” Then, after she relocated to Florida, her fandom became as much a source of encouragement for her as it was now a way to integrate that encouragement into her cultural pride and the exercise of what she described as her “true religion.” She “burned candles from home,” wore a Bob Marley necklace made from mahogany native to the islands, and wrapped her hair in African cloth, as Rastafarian women do, even as she returned to reading the Bible, Rasta-style.

Irmalee said,

Listening to [Marley] has led me to reading the Bible.
Everyday, I set time aside to read the Bible. If I feel troubled,
there are special verses that I read. Also, I take about fifteen or
twenty minutes out of my day to meditate. When I meditate, I
usually burn incense or burn candles in a quiet room.
Listening to the music helps me to concentrate.

This obvious integration of Marley's music, meditation, and Bible reading have formed a potent source of spiritual support for Irmalee, especially as she functions in the nonnative culture. The satisfaction of "deprivation" (a term she volunteered) occurs when she lets the music lead her into a zone of emotional security made up of ethnocultural pride and the relief of emotional suffering produced by family tragedy. The Rastafarian context of the music, with its "message of black self-empowerment" which seeks to lift Rastas "out of the darkest depression that the descendants of African slaves have ever lived in," merges with a Marley-inspired confidence which tells her that she, too, can rise above her circumstances. She stated,

I feel that for the past six months I have been fighting a war within myself. I cannot accept the fact that my grandfather has passed away. He has been a father, advisor, and a buddy to me. After he died, I began to focus all of my energy into other things that I wasn't familiar with. I turned down three jobs and didn't go to summer school. I felt like I needed to do more than what I was doing. So I turned my life toward Bob Marley and the life that he lived. I purchased books about the lifestyle. I think I found some peace within myself.

Irmalee's fandom reinforces the idea of fandom being a form of nonconventional religion. When she says, "I turned my life toward Bob Marley and the life that he lived," is she not expressing a type of conversion experience? She clearly differentiates between her fandom (which is made up of potent functions) and what she sees as her "true religion" (which involves Bible reading and, we infer, belief in a transcendent deity). Yet, the ritualistic intensity of fandom here certainly places it in the realm of religious experience. All this being true, the more focused

lens through which I interpret this fan's perspective, is that which frames a physically, emotionally, and psychologically dislocated individual who seeks to satisfy her particular deprivation through an experience of ethnocultural connectivity. She survives not by consuming and socializing a text which leads her away from her cultural roots, but one which leads her back to them. In this way, her fandom emerges, along with the others which draw force from ethnocultural deprivation, as an activity mostly about going home and relocating oneself in familiar conditions suitable for the relief of suffering.¹⁵⁹

5.2.10 THE PRESENCE OF REAL AND THREATENED LOSSES

I note the sense of loss which lies buried in the dislocation/connectivity dynamics evident in these interviews. Indeed, losses—of family relationships, ethnocultural security, and other sources of social stability—dominate the thoughts of these respondents. Two not mentioned here include fans appearing to use their fandom not as a means of recovering past losses but rather in the anticipation of future losses: they savor their fan activities because they see them as able to contain the existence of social relationships which may be threatened. Emily, a fan of the popular music group *Nsync*, so strongly combines her fandom with the threatened loss of her social network that she notes, “I’m going to wish that I still had a ton of

¹⁵⁹ The word “mostly” is used in an awareness that other deprivations are at work here. The Bob Marley component of Irmalee’s reggae fandom possesses isolation-identification components whereby fan-object identification exists. But, arguably, the ethnocultural element is the strongest, or leading, deprivation in all of these fans. This concept of *leading* and *secondary* deprivations will be explored in Chapter Six.

friends that I could hang out with” once the *Nsync* bond is lost. She posts concert ticket stubs and concert photographs of herself with her friends to celebrate the bond she fears will disappear at some point.¹⁶⁰

The theme of threatened losses appeared, lastly here, in a curatorial fandom expressed by Lyndsay, who collects and displays “bar paraphernalia” as a means of preserving a bar-hopping lifestyle she says is the most important social dimension of her life. Matchbooks, bottles, signs, posters, and t-shirts freeze bar-related social interactions in her mind and provide a basis for “the stories that [she and her friends] can tell” about this lifestyle. “Good times and good friends mean a lot to me, and I thrive on memorabilia that reminds me of places we’ve been to and the stories that we can tell from being there,” she said. When these “good friends” gather at her place of residence, the items on display serve as reminders especially of shared laughter. Lyndsay believes that “the past creates the present, and nothing should ever be forgotten or taken for granted.” Her preservation of both past and present, moreover, is maintained through collecting and displaying, but it is the future she is more interested in when she says, “I feel that it is important to preserve the past with things that I can look at and instantly remember a good time, or a night that I learned something or grew in some way. I will probably keep my [bar

¹⁶⁰ Again, context is everything here. The university student away from home and meaningful social connections rules Emily’s thoughts. After stating that her fandom began when friends introduced her to *Nsync*, she provides ample support to the idea that her experiences as a fan reconnect her to those friends. “I think it is a social meaning that I find in being a fan,” she said. “When I slowly became a fan, I [became] one of the group, and we could do *Nsync*-related activities together. We had a common bond.”

memorabilia] collection forever, because right now I am having the time of my life and I never want to forget that.”¹⁶¹ She fears an impending loss of social bonds and uses her curatorial fandom as a form of resistance to that loss.

The caution here, as mentioned in Chapter Four, about all losses and dislocations expressed by these respondents stems from the fact that members of the population—university students—are likely to experience these conditions merely by being separated from familiar social and cultural environments, possibly for the first time. As also stated, cause is less of a concern here than how members of the population seek to satisfy their deprivation, and they seem to do this, at least in part, through fandom. By saying this, furthermore, I do not mean to de-emphasize either cause or losses and dislocations. Evidence of such privation is important, regardless of what causes it and in whom it exists. Indeed, to the sufferers themselves, variable states of deprivation are always real, always felt, and always of concern. In research, they should be approached with equal seriousness and validation. Any devaluation of suffering should be resisted.

¹⁶¹ As with the *Precious Moments* figurines fan, Jennifer, Lyndsay believes her collectibles function primarily (or only) as a signifier of pleasant social memories. Her case may be more persuasive, however, due to a perceived lack of aesthetic value in the bar items she collects. Do matchbooks, for instance, possess enough of an aesthetic to facilitate meaning in and of themselves rather than in what they represent? Arguably, they do not, though this collection still is about more than representation. Several times Lyndsay spoke about how her collectibles are displayed in her apartment and how much she enjoys looking at the physical appearance of her matchbooks, bottles, posters, etc. “I take great pride in them,” she stated. “I don’t like people using my matches to light things, and I get upset when my [bottles] get broken or damaged.” These statements reflect more than representative meaning: they articulate an existence of meaning of invested in the artifacts themselves. True to fandom, moreover, they reflect the premise that textual and social meanings are both intense and virtually inseparable.

5.3 ANIMUS/RELEASE

A less-represented and more-problematic deprivation, which I describe as animus/release, also showed up in interviews. Twelve fans of varying cultural products exhibited a clear sense that they use their fandom as a form of intense catharsis: releasing or purging themselves of hostilities and, to a degree, enjoying whatever pain might be associated with a dynamic characterized by animus satisfied through release. Animus, defined here as a governing attitude or predisposition toward anger, is arguably a deprivation of peaceful inner sanctum; release may be seen as a form of deliverance or discharge from this deprivation.

The range of organized tastes and preferences expressed within this section of interviews included body modification, heavy metal and death metal music, an interactive computer game, a televised soap opera, a recreational sport of pseudo-violence, two mediated participatory sports, a mediated spectator sport, and a fandom of purely curatorial consumption. Themes from these fan experiences included celebration and enjoyment of pain, enjoyment of anger, release of aggression, control and domination of one's own world, playing with vengeance and violence, escape from torturous life experience, and escape from depression.

5.3.1 FANDOM AND VIOLENT MASCULINE CULTURE

I begin with the sporting-related fandoms, not because they provided the most striking examples of animus/release but because they align with an element of

recent sports-fandom studies which seeks insights into patterns of violent masculine culture, hooliganism, and anger in sports spectatorship. Garry Robson's *'No One Likes Us, We Don't Care: The Myth and Reality of Millwall Fandom* (2000), for instance, has sought to open a window on the social sources of a well-known—even mythical—example of British football hooliganism.¹⁶² Collective experiences of “embittered injustice” and “a defensive awareness of outside opinion” inform a cult fandom whose deep privation is well-expressed in verses from its fan-songs:

*Palace, Palace, who the f--- are Palace?
 Who the f---ing hell are you?
 Ooh aah Eric Cantona
 You're just a bunch of wankers
 You're sh-- and you know you are*

*In your Liverpool slums
 I would rather be a Paki than a Scouse
 Does the social know you're here?
 Sign on, sign on
 Sing when you're stealin'
 Oh Merseyside is full of sh--*

*F--- 'em all,
 F--- 'em all
 United, West Ham, Liverpool,
 'Cos we are the Millwall and we are the best,
 We are the Millwall so F--- ALL THE REST*

Images here of collective and profane anger, competitive violence, and racially-inspired hatred seem evident, though it should be mentioned that the

¹⁶² The term “mythical” is accurate as Robson discusses the many associations Millwall evokes in Great Britain. “It functions as a condensed symbol, widely and indiscriminately used to express ideas and feelings about an entire sphere of activity and experience beyond...its original meaning” (p. 19).

extreme adherence and allegiance of a cult fandom such as Millwall-*dom* is more likely to express an extreme vernacular of animus than would the organized tastes and preferences represented within my own interviews. Often, only a phrase such as “I am able to release a bunch of aggression,” spoken in a context of anger or resentment, is all that is expressed. Yet, taken together, both contexts and comments must be interpreted for what they are: the micro-expressed potentials of macro enunciations.¹⁶³ What is heard from fans within non-cult fandoms, in other words, articulates in limited scope the animus which would find more extreme forms of expression in the linguistics of cult fandom.

Shaun, a fan located somewhere between non-cult and cult dimensions of professional televised wrestling fandom, said, “Being a fan of [TV] wrestling is crucial to my life because when I [am] depressed, it is an escape. It helps me release tension and just be happy when watching it.” Through the World Wrestling Federation’s regularly broadcast shows, *Raw* and *Smackdown*, his favorite viewer activity is to see what “the real person,” contained within the “character” of the wrestler, is like. “I look for parts [of the broadcast] when the person behind the wrestler comes out during the show,” he said. In other words, he is interested in

¹⁶³ Another aspect to the present study is that suffering in fandom—indeed, the range of experiences in fandom—should be considered in a context of “potentials”: that is, things and conditions which exist in possibility; which can be thought of as possessing development leading to different states of actuality. Fandom, by its nature, is dynamic rather than static, whereby its standard behavioral process (which I have defined as the intentional socialization of textual consumption) is fluid and capable of progression. To visualize marginal fans as capable of progressing into extreme fans (and vice-versa) is reasonable and accurate. There is no barrier existing between the planes of culture and cult. See Appendix A, “Misery Factors.”

seeing if the pseudo-hostilities acted out by the wrestler-actor in the televised ring match the personality of the character out of the televised ring. Shaun, moreover, is thinking of his own character and where it releases its hostilities. Without his own ring and audience, he has only the televised ones which frame his visualization of released animus, and it seems to work fairly well. He said,

[TV] wrestling has personal meaning because I turn to it as an escape, it is a place that is safe and fun. I have gotten so into it that I have thought about becoming a professional wrestler. Learning about the people behind the personas has made me want to be a part of the show. I get goose bumps when I think of what it would be like to step out from behind the curtain to 15,000 fans screaming while the entrance music is playing.

This “place that is safe and fun” is another way of describing a location, or space, the fan can enter to release animus. No one is seriously threatened, and the fan can shout, stomp his feet, clench his fists, fantasize about being in the ring, or otherwise express himself physically in any number of ways. “The storylines are good, but I really enjoy the physical aspect of the wrestling, the moves and the flow of the match itself,” said Shaun. He takes in a narrative drama of released hostilities, and releases his own depression-driven hostilities in the process.

Similar instances of animus/release were expressed by fans of mediated cultures surrounding the participatory sports of rollerblading, skateboarding, and paintball (a pseudo-combat game involving air rifles that shoot balls of paint). Each fan here stated that both the sport and supportive marketing cultures (magazines, videos, collectibles) facilitated release from variable pressures of life. Relevant

statements included the following: "I love the sport [culture] of paintball because it's a form of release. One can get vengeance through [it]. It's addictive" (Antonio).

"Now, if I have a bad day, I know that it's just a bad day, and I just think about the next time I'm gonna go out [rollerblading] and don't worry about it. [Blading culture] is my stress reliever. I am able to release a bunch of aggression" (Steve).

"When I was younger all I had to do was worry about skateboarding. Then I had to get a job, then a girlfriend, school became harder and more important. All these things are good, but they take a lot [out of me]. My board [culture] never lets me down, it's always there when I need it" (John).

5.3.2 COMPROMISED INNER SANCTUM

Detectable in each of these comments is an implied deprivation of peaceful inner sanctum, a response characterized by physical aggression, and a form of relief facilitated by each individual's fandom. Against criticism that I may be reaching too far by asserting that lacks and absences of inviolate sanctum serve as the foundation of such examples of animus, I would ask how else might the sources of this form of deprivation be characterized? Basic losses and dislocations, as previously noted, beg questions of fundamental loneliness and separation, while alienations and hungers, which express themselves in fandom, beg different questions which will be discussed in the pages ahead. But, what questions do animus and its resulting projection of hostilities beg if they do not indeed arise out of conditions in which peace is not present? An adolescent turns up the volume on the stereo to tarmac

levels at least partially as a concrete physical act designed to blot out the contents of chaotic mind, a mind whose peaceful sanctum has been compromised. Animus, as presented here, functions in a similar way, arguably possessing adolescent components, yet existing also as a reasonable potential of greater forms and experiences of compromised sanctum.

Pris, for instance, described herself as a fan of heavy metal and death metal music, above fan interests in horror movies, Stephen King novels, and vampire literature.¹⁶⁴

Pris had acquired a taste for metal music when she was fourteen. "My best friend's dad listened to it, and it took off from there," she said. She began to collect the market artifacts and recorded music of *Ozzy Osbourne* and, later, that of the group *Slayer* which remains her favorite of the genre. She collects *Slayer* memorabilia consisting of band-member autographs, concert tickets, posters, and automobile bumper stickers, which she displays because "it reminds me of what great people they are and how they inspire me."

Pris said that "much of my day is consumed by [the] music. I can study and do almost anything while listening to it." She sports "lip rings" and wears black clothing because she "feels comfortable" in the death symbolism of black, and she believes that "the people who like death metal keep the industry up." While she attends concerts, "the adrenaline in your body" sometimes becomes hard to control,

¹⁶⁴ She mentioned the variable consumption dynamics of viewing (horror movies), reading (King novels), and listening (to metal music), but she stressed participation as what sets her music consumption apart from the other fan interests. She listens and participates.

and at such times she releases frustrations by entering the physical environment of “a *mosh* pit” which becomes “almost like a high for me. To see Dimebag Darrel from [the group] *Pantera* wail away on his guitar, it makes my blood run through my body. The rush is great.”

Meaning, for Pris, emanates from these facilitations of release. She stated,

Metal music helps me get out my frustrations; its fast beat of the music gets my blood pumping and makes me feel good. Some of the music talks about things I can relate to like getting pissed off. It is important to show your passion with other fans. But mainly it's the music. I like the way it sounds and the anger it relieves. The life that comes with it – the parties and the tailgating [outside concert halls] – definitely make it fun.

Relief *from* anger, release *of* frustrations, and the collective demonstration of *passion* provide the mesh of meaning which offers Pris an interval of time when animus becomes suspended. She acquires temporary release. She also stated that were this music fandom not able to function as an animus/release mechanism for her, she would need to find other ways of releasing aggressive behaviors. “I think I would go nuts without [it],” she said. “I have a very small tolerance [level]. If I had no [metal culture] I would go crazy and be an evil person.”¹⁶⁵

5.3.3 REWARDS EXISTING ON THE OTHER SIDE OF RELEASE

¹⁶⁵ The element that keeps this “evil” from occurring is the intentional social component of Pris’s fandom. It functions as a governor on the engine of her textual consumption, keeping her from spiraling out of normative fan experiences. Even when the engine is revved to extremes, the social component *unreels* it as textual energies subside into normative behavior. Pris stated, “When you go out to a concert and you see all the metal heads, and there I am with lip rings, and calico hair, they get a kick out of it. Sometimes we end up talking or hanging out. You make friends and they love the same music as you.”

This cathartic dependency on fandom, and the thought that an absence of facilitated catharsis in the life of a fan would require that animus be released through alternative means, was a common theme in this section of interviews. Rewards existing on the other side of release, in other words, were deemed significant enough to warrant expressions of concern that were the agent of release not there to produce satisfactions (whatever those might be), the fan would simply not experience the satisfactions. Two fans of various musical products, for instance, stated that sleep was the satisfaction, or one of them, which operated on the other side of release. “I cannot sleep without...” and “I don’t know if I could fall asleep...” were the comments of fans who used the textual experience of their fandom as a provision of deep rest.¹⁶⁶ (Here again is a clue to animus/release deprivation: it is rooted in compromised inner sanctum – a lack of operational rest conditions.)

Pris, who said she would “go crazy and be an evil person” without her metal music fan culture, also offered a possible intimation that some form of violent or destructive behavior might result from unreleased animus. Here, as stated previously, fandom can be seen as a control mechanism, whereby the fan is provided with a safe outlet for hostilities. He or she can act out frustrations in conditions which preclude *real* harms. The reward is safety for oneself and possibly

¹⁶⁶ Susan, a fan of various contemporary Christian music artists, said that consuming this product “relaxes” and “soothes” her, facilitating sleep (from hearing “the words of Jesus” put into music). Melinda, a jazz fan, linked her listening experiences to feeling at peace with herself, thereby facilitating sleep.

others, too, according to the fan.¹⁶⁷ Similarly, Orpha, who described herself as a fan of computer animation and specifically *The Sims* computer game, said that playing the game facilitated a release keeping her from acting out aggressions, which might be directed toward real people. The game [allows] you to manipulate [people's] lives," said Rivera. "One time I started to kill my Sims [simulated people] on purpose just to see the reaper come. When I'm playing *The Sims*, I feel like whatever I do is okay and there's no one to tell me that it's not okay. It's like your own world with your own rules."¹⁶⁸

Still another animus/release respondent, Cheryl, who described herself as a fan of the American soap opera *General Hospital*, has gone so far as to abuse the television to release hostilities. She said, "There was a scene with two actors who I wanted to get together. I thought for sure that they would. When they ended [their relationship instead], I was so angry I picked up a shoe and threw it at the TV. It missed and knocked over the fish tank." We might question Cheryl's comment until we realize that such responses are conditioned as much by the emotional frame of mind she brings to her text as they are precipitated by the actual program content. Needing to release her frustrations, she enters the mediated fictional world of her chosen text. That world may fail to provide the precise storyline she requires, to

¹⁶⁷ Recent research, however, on the effects of catharsis as an effective or ineffective release mechanism make this a debatable point to be discussed in Chapter Seven.

¹⁶⁸ What appears as a text-only experience here is also intentionally social. Orpha spoke of sharing the *Sims* experience with other players through competitions related to killing off simulated people. "I love to talk to people about *The Sims*," she said. "A lot of things I do with the game others are doing also."

which she can respond with an expression of relatively safe physical aggression: throwing an object. Without this outlet, she is left with the frustrations of her “real world” to which it is more difficult to respond without causing harms. She said,

I watch General Hospital as an escape. By the end of my day, I have had it with the real world. Hundreds of things could have gone wrong with my life in one day. It is a huge release to come home and watch rich people in nice clothes have perfect lives, granted their lives aren’t always perfect, but we all know that they will be eventually. And if they aren’t perfect it’s usually because of some random problem that I would never face in real life and that is okay. It’s not reality, it’s fake and it’s fun.

Cheryl’s “fake and fun” world is also a real world that facilitates release.

Without it, her aggressions would be placed elsewhere. Over the years, her experience of animus/release facilitated by this fandom has nurtured what she called “a love-hate” relationship with the soap. “There are times that I swear I will never watch again. But there I am every day, sitting on my couch with that same feeling of delight. No matter how frustrated I get, I always seem to come back. I might curse and throw shoes at the TV all day long, but the bottom line is I love to hate it.” I argue that Cheryl loves it because she *can* hate it—even as she can hate those “hundreds of things that could have gone wrong” with her life—in conditions which allow forms of release to occur which do not seriously threaten her or anyone else.

5.3.4 CELEBRATING PAIN

This love-hate relationship between fan and object, as noted by Cheryl, strongly reflects an enjoyment of release dynamics as represented even in a small

collection of interviews that reveal the presence of animus/release. Love-hate can be translated here to mean *loves to hate*. The fan loves the release he or she is experiencing through contained negative behaviors. The use of pain, contained aggression, and pseudo violence as variable forms of release becomes something to be enjoyed, even celebrated, as physical responses to states of animus are made.

The best example of this in the present interviews is an individual, Desta, who described herself as a fan of body-modification culture. Desta said that she releases herself from the presence of unmanaged and irrational fears “through body piercing, tattoos, scarification, implants, pain play and cutting.” Her “B.M. subculture,” as she called this fandom, has its own celebrities, collectibles, and conventions, all of which “celebrate” the coming together of people who “modify their bodies” to express their individuality. “It’s about uniting people in their uniqueness,” she stated.

During her entry year of high school, Desta visited a small café in New York City which employed a waiter who had pierced his tongue. She began to research body modification and the following year wrote a research paper about it for an English class. Then, she said, “I officially became a member of B.M. [by] piercing my left hand.” Body modification continues to be “an important part of my life.”

Desta has had many parts of her body pierced and tattooed. She attended several “tattoo expos” to meet other fans. She subscribes to *Skin & Ink* and *Tattoo, Inc.* magazines, collects “unique body jewelry,” and keeps a camera nearby to photograph “people’s B.M.” which produces photos and poses she then displays on

the walls of her apartment. The screen-saver on her computer is a picture of a tongue ring, and she belongs to a body modification chat room on the Internet. Her automobile features body-modification bumper stickers, her favorite offering this statement: "TATTOOS ARE FOREVER, LIFE IS NOT. SO GET A TATOO BEFORE YOU ROT."

In being questioned about unusual activities within her fandom, Desta said, "Piercing and poking your body for fun is pretty unusual in itself, isn't it?" More than expressing the obvious, however, is the reward she receives from observing the experience of physical pain as it is administered to people being tattooed, pierced, or cut. "I watch people participate in B.M.," she said. "I enjoy it. I observe other people's pain, people I don't know, and am fascinated. I could spend every day at a shop, watching people get inked or pierced. The strangest thing is that [these people] are okay with that and afterwards we feel a kind of connection—we are connected in our B.M."

Pain observed—and pain received—are celebrated by Desta because they provide a form of release from fear, she acknowledged. She has many fears, and they produce anger when they cannot be faced or overcome. Body-modification culture provides an opportunity to prove to herself that she can meet the administration of pain head-on and that she can get through it, thereby releasing herself from fear. The tattoos, piercings, and marks on her body allow others to see her accomplishment, and she in turn receives encouragement from seeing other body-modification fans who have achieved victory over pain. She stated,

When I was little, I was terrified of pain. I was the little girl who screamed at the thought of [receiving] a shot. I felt like a baby. But as I got older and matured, I got into B.M. and discovered I could take the pain. I could be tough. My piercing, my tattoos, they display my strength. My meaning comes from pushing myself and proving myself. Seeing how far I can go. This summer, I tattooed the right side of my foot. That place is one of the most painful places in the body to tattoo. I lasted through an hour-long session without shedding a tear. I've never been so proud of myself. When you get a tattoo or a piercing, the pain and the adrenaline give you this incredible rush. [Afterwards,] they are like [having] my personal badges of courage.

Again, this celebration of pain seems to lie somewhere near the heart of an animus/release dynamic in fandom. The sense of compromised inner sanctum craves release that can be expressed and experienced physically, causing the very tactile sensation of even pierced and pigmented flesh to be savored. Pain is savored, hate is something to enjoy, and many forms of aggression are seen as rewards by fans whose motivations lie submerged in animus requiring release.

The largest unknown factor here likely concerns the relationship between lost inner sanctum and the physical ways of dealing with it through cultural products. It would seem unlikely that the aggressive behaviors exhibited by these fans represent the only way compromised inner sanctum is dealt with in fandom. Why some fans release and others seek different satisfactions may owe to personality traits or other variables. Considering such variables is a warranted approach to animus/release in future research.

5.4 ISOLATION/IDENTIFICATION

I now turn to a dynamic I refer to as isolation/identification. Here, aloneness seeks the satisfaction of an understanding presence. Aloneness may be seen as *loneliness*, though some fans within this dynamic do not appear to think of themselves as lonely: they see themselves merely as alone, and they accept this condition with emotional neutrality rather than negativity. They do need, however, the understanding presence of identification, whether it reaches them in the form of product or producer.

Mike, a student at the University of Tampa, described himself as a loner identified with by a mediated product of objectified aloneness. His friendships on this university campus, and throughout his life, have been few. He grew up as an only child and this social orientation gave him a solitary nature, he believes, in which aloneness is simply an accepted condition. He doesn't go out of his way to cultivate friendships, though he doesn't consciously avoid them, either. Thus, when he, as a sixteen-year-old high school student, met an older college student who shared some of Mike's interests, the two became friends.

The college student was majoring in film, and he introduced a genre of films Mike refers to as "noir," which offered an unfamiliar kind of storytelling and quickly captivated Mike. "[The friend] exposed me to a lot of movies, dropped certain names of writers and directors, and I took over from there," he said.

Better than any form of media Mike had previously experienced, noir offered a narrative product that effectively explored the psyches of isolated individuals. "It got inside characters' heads, especially [their] dark corners," he said. The films,

directors, characters, settings, cinematography, and music spoke to Mike's own personal sense of isolation, to the point that this uniquely tailored product evoked addictive viewing habits from him. "I would consider myself addicted," he said. "I read [the actual] screenplays and reenact the films in my head. I also get the soundtracks, so I can somewhat live the film [over and over]."

Mike views the directors of noir films as the chief storytellers, and this interests him. He likes to watch a film two or three times, locking the story "firmly" in his head, before "stepping back" to research the director's life "for the little details that make each director what they are." His personal favorites are David Lynch, the Cohen brothers, Fritz Lang, and Jim Thompson. Each possesses an ability to understand the depths of human isolation and to portray those "dark areas" on a visual tapestry of comedy, tragedy, and mystery, Mike believes.

5.4.1 ALONENESS AS A DEPRIVATION OF DEEP SOCIAL ENGAGEMENTS

But, it is the aloneness of the characters that makes the largest impact on him. "Most characters in a noir story are alone," Mike explained. "I, too, tend to be alone, as an only child, an outcast, the guy who sits in the dark corner and observes."¹⁶⁹ If a story parallels your life, sometimes it provides insight. Plus, it lets you know you're not the only one who feels this way. I'm pulled toward the lone dark figure because

¹⁶⁹ The idea that fan cultures attract *only* children is not new. As Joe Sanders reports in *Science Fiction Fandom* (1994), at least one early quantitative study advanced findings which showed that only children and children who were first in the birth order of multi-child families existed in large numbers within science fiction fandom. Reasons for this demographic have been inconclusive.

that's how I see myself for the most part. I even like to watch the movies with maybe one other person in a dark, quiet room."

Mike's experience as a noir fan appears to be driven by an existence of isolation and an accompanying need for identification. He, along with nineteen other respondents, expressed evidence of what I refer to as an extremely problematic isolation/identification dynamic in fandom.

Isolation may be defined here as a deprivation of deep social engagements which act upon a person's awareness of who they believe they are at a core human level. Identification, the process of creating and sustaining feelings of psychological correlation between entities, may be seen as a satisfaction of this deprivation. When Mike states above that "you know you're not the only one who feels this way," he is articulating his awareness of a psychological correlation that exists between who he believes he truly is at his core and what he believes noir has to offer him at that level. It understands his solitary orientation. It empathizes with his inclination to live on the periphery of life activities ("the guy who sits in the dark corner and observes"). It knows his aloneness, and he believes that he knows the aloneness of noir's culture of characters and creators, which establishes a crucial premise of isolation/identification: it is reciprocal. When fans say that they identify with a certain text or object, they are also saying that it identifies with them.

5.4.2 RECIPROCAL IDENTIFICATION

This process of reciprocation, which amounts to a constant routine of psychological correlation between fan and object, helps to explain why many fans believe they truly know—and are known—by the objects and texts of their fandom, whether those are product creations (such as characters in popular media texts) or real people (authors, sporting figures, actors, musicians, and all manner of celebrities). Here, of the twenty interviewed fans who showed evidence of isolation/identification, fourteen were fans of real people while six—including Mike—expressed organized tastes and preferences for product creations. This, too, is problematic because of the difficulty in discerning whether a real person is related to on that level by the fan, or whether the fan has transferred the reception and meaning of the real person to that of a product creation. One fan, for instance, described herself as a devotee of the actress Audrey Hepburn, but was her devotion expressed more toward Hepburn the person or Hepburn the character of many classic films? This was and always is difficult to determine with accuracy and reliability.

Despite such problems, however, it is clear that some fans experience authentic isolation/identification in their fandom, and in this way they receive satisfaction of a basic deprivation.

Carla described herself as a fan of the popular vocalist, Mary J. Blige. She became a fan of the singer originally out of an aesthetic attraction to Blige's "sultry voice," which Carla interpreted as reflective of the wisdom and life experiences of a seasoned African-American woman. "I just like the way she sounded," Carla said.

An African-American woman herself, and a mature student who at twenty-seven reenrolled in a university degree program, Carla sees herself as having taken a rough road through a life characterized by many obstacles. Most of these emanate from an out-of-wedlock pregnancy she experienced eight years previous to our interview and the difficulties associated with raising a daughter alone. She has never been able to get on a career track because of her parental responsibilities, she said, and the succession of menial jobs she works has failed to provide enough money and adequate time for scholastic pursuits. She was finally able to enroll in a university program when her grandparents offered temporarily to raise her daughter in another state. "I have had a lot of pain," she said.

"Some" media habits and "all" of her devotion to Mary J. Blige, moreover, have risen out of Carla's rocky life experiences. Any sustained interests here, she said, have to include a feeling that whatever she is watching or listening to identifies with what she has gone through herself. Of her Blige fandom, she said, "When I hear her on the radio, I respond as if she is one of my own sisters singing. It doesn't matter where I am or what I am doing, I receive instant gratification when I hear her voice. I have fantasized about her being my close friend and being just like me. I know one day I am going to meet her." In ten years of following her as a fan, Carla believes that Blige "has had to overcome many obstacles, being a black woman." She said that she "hears it in her voice," and as "any fan of Mary J. knows, her music is her bio. I can feel her pain. I know when she is hurting."

Carla had attended a concert alone¹⁷⁰ for her birthday shortly before our interview and came away with several observations. She said,

[Blige] has been essential to my growth as a woman. I love her honesty. She has not tried to [make a pretense of] where she is in her growth and development of self. All Mary J. knows is to be up front, admit her faults, and move on. I love that Mary J. can change a concert into more than just mere music. Her concerts become like the balm in Gilead they talk about in the Bible, a healer that soothes the broken-hearted soul. At the concert, I truly felt like she ministered to me personally and I felt free to release some pain over some similar situations that both she and I had experienced. I cried during the concert, and I wasn't the only one. When I hear her sing, she reminds me that we are connected spiritually.

Reciprocation of shared identity and suffering surface in Carla's comments here. Arguably, she sees the object of her fandom both as a reflection of herself and as a self that reaches out and ultimately merges with her in a context of fantasized friendship, familial bonding, and human similarity. Mary J. Blige becomes sibling, bosom friend, and spiritual companion because she is "a black woman" who "has had to overcome many obstacles" just as Carla perceives herself. She "ministers" directly to Carla as a healer, allowing her to shed her own pain over "similar situations" that both fan and object experienced. But one-way receptive identification is incomplete here as Carla, the fan, makes it clear that she too needs to identify with Blige, the object. She, in other words, needs to experience an intentionally social identification in which she becomes as much the healer as the

¹⁷⁰ Experiencing the object of fandom alone received greater emphasis among this group of fans. Carla also stated, "If I am at a club and they play [Blige's] music, I always get up and dance. Her voice commands me to dance and I don't care if I'm the only one on the dance floor. I close my eyes and let her voice penetrate my soul. I, oddly enough, get offended if someone tries to dance with me when her record is on. I feel like they are trying to cut in."

healed, the one who can diagnose the object's suffering and assume a comforter's role.¹⁷¹ Her comment, "I know one day I am going to meet her," acknowledges a hope and belief that face-to-face reciprocation will take place at some point, too.

5.4.3 IDENTIFICATION WITH REAL PEOPLE OR PRODUCT CREATIONS?

Other examples of isolation/identification, in which reciprocation was expressed between fans and objects who are real people (as opposed to production creations), included mutual identification based on a number of shared life components: growth stages, relationship dynamics, and self-esteem issues, to name just three of these. Colleen, a fan of pop star Britney Spears, sees herself and the object of her fandom as sharing a passage of life between girlhood and womanhood. "We are the same age and going through a lot of the same emotions right now," she said.¹⁷² "For example, her songs 'I'm not a girl, [and] Not yet a Woman' and 'Overprotected.' I can really understand what she's singing about." Stephen, a fan of the musical group *Blink 182*, spoke of the "vulgar" lyrical content of the band's songs about issues such as "divorce and suicide" which identify with his own frustrations about such social issues he himself has experienced.¹⁷³ Also, the

¹⁷¹ She alone is willing to assume such a role, in her own mind. "If no one in the world liked Mary J., I would," Carla stated. "I do not base my love and admiration for her on what everyone else thinks of her."

¹⁷² The identification here specifically emphasizes growth that is simultaneous. Neither fan nor object leads or follows; they navigate life together, at the same pace. "It's like we are growing up together, so we are always on the same level and going through very similar things," Colleen stated.

¹⁷³ Of the origins of his fandom, he mentioned identification which existed on several levels. He said, "The way my life was going, I felt like I had a connection with *Blink 182*. They were

“complications of life” such as “falling in love with your best friend” are topics with which he can identify. “They [the band members] help me realize that I’m not the only one that went through that problem in a relationship.” Hannah, a fan of actress Audrey Hepburn, spoke of how her image of Hepburn, which she acquired from biographical sources, identifies with her in the area of self-esteem. “She was [a] nobody with low self-esteem, and she [succeeded] by just being herself and not trying to be famous and beautiful,” Hannah said. “That is my dream.”

Each of these fans seems to experience isolation/identification with real people. As previously noted, however, the real-person-as-object is a problematic distinction as fans transfer meaning they receive from the authentic person to the product creation enacted by that person. Is it, moreover, a person or a character (for instance) who is identifying with the fan? This is difficult to say with accuracy as transference occurs in alternative repetition in the fan’s experience of meaning.

Amit, for instance, who described himself as a fan of comedian Jerry Seinfeld, stated, “I am a fan of nearly everything he represents—humor, honesty, cleanliness [of personal hygiene], and class.” Amit identified with Seinfeld the person by noting that both collect *Superman* artifacts. “Since I idolize Jerry, who is a huge Superman collector, I collect Superman action figures and toys,” he said. “In some way, collecting these toys makes me feel closer to the off-stage character of Jerry.” Here, he is referring to Seinfeld the real person, whom he knows from biographical

doing songs about divorce, suicide, school, and family. Some of the songs just seemed to fit very well with what was going on.”

sources. The bulk of his identification, however, comes from fan interaction with Seinfeld the character, mediated by the *Seinfeld* television sitcom now in reruns. Amit's reciprocal identification occurs especially in two areas, he said: in the pickiness he injects into his dating relationships and in his tendency to be sarcastic. These are the points at which Seinfeld identifies the most *with* (and is identified with the most by) Amit the fan. Of the dating idiosyncrasy he shares with the character, he said, "Unfortunately, like Jerry, I always find some quirky fault in the women I date. For instance, [one of Jerry's dates] ate peas one at a time instead of scooping them. He found this vexing. [Likewise,] I found it vexing when one of my dates always ordered a cherry coke at every single meal."

Stronger reciprocation takes place when Amit acknowledges his need for identification with the Seinfeld character who in turn identifies with his tendencies to be overly critical in all of his relationships. "I am a sarcastic and sometimes a biting person," he said. "I don't fear communicating to people how I feel about them. I have suffered in many relationships because I was critical of people and their personal habits. Jerry Seinfeld [understands this phenomenon], and I adore how he triumphs over it with great skill and humor."¹⁷⁴

Little differentiation appears to exist between Amit's reciprocal identification with Seinfeld the person and that of Seinfeld the character. They seem, in essence, to

¹⁷⁴ One episode of Amit's text featured an especially funny Seinfeld saying, "You know I hate everybody." Amit said he finds statements like these to be reflective of real "problems treated with laughter." [Identification] here is based on speaking one's true feelings "with great skill," he stated.

be inseparable, despite the fact that Amit knows the object of his fandom presents itself to him primarily as a mediated, fictional product creation. "I become awestruck," he said, whenever that presentation occurs. "[Seinfeld's] face and voice as [they are] captured in print or on television is so unique and recognizable, my interest always increases." Power resides in the mediated product, and certainly reciprocation still takes place. Identification is, therefore, not dependent on the fan's belief that the object is real. As a product creation it identifies with him (or her) as authentically as would a real human source, perhaps more so.

Several other fans also spoke of reciprocal identification occurring exclusively between themselves and various product creations. Blen, for instance, who described herself as a fan of *The Golden Girls*, a television show in re-runs about four aging women, said that more than other media products this particular show identifies with her fear of growing old. "Since I am scared to death of growing old, it is comforting to know that even old ladies can have fun and maintain long-lasting friendships." Michelle, a fan of *Beverly Hills 90210*, a teen-marketed television show, said that mutual identification emerged from a cast of characters with personal problems that are not easily solved. "As I started relating to the show it seemed like some of [the characters'] problems were taken from my life," she said. "I was able to connect with the show on a different level. Not all of the problems had perfect solutions, and it made me realize that I needed to take responsibility for me and my actions." Here, despite the fact that two entirely different age groups are

represented by the fan texts, identification still occurs based on the particular emotional and psychological needs of the fans.

We can add perceived physical shortcomings to the isolation/identification dynamic, too. Another fan, Erica, described herself as devoted to the *Star Wars* series of films because of the attention it pays to characters who are diminutive in stature. Short characters of many types are depicted, she said, which has facilitated reciprocal identification for Erica who also is short. “I can apply stuff from the [series] to my every day life,” she stated. “If I’m bummed about being short, then I’ll remember [a theme in the series]: “Size matters not.”

5.4.4 IDENTIFICATION WITH THE NONHUMAN FANTASTIC

Though under-represented in the present interviews, identification based on such physical characteristics reveals an important area of isolation/identification in which the product creation may be a more powerful identifying factor than the real person: especially creations which are overtly nonhuman and fantasy-oriented. Fantastic characters may be any size, shape, or physical appearance, allowing themselves to be received, and used, by a fan in ways the real-person-as object cannot be used as readily. A character perceived as unbeautiful in physical appearance, for example, can function as an identifying agent for the fan who views himself or herself as having imperfections in physical appearance. An example of this in the present interviews is a fan, Jessica, whose *Beauty and the Beast* fandom

centers on identification she reciprocates based on what she perceives as physical appearance that is less than beautiful.

Jessica, who became a fan of *Beauty and the Beast* from watching the movie version of the story seven years prior to our interview, said she still watches it on video most Sundays at 4pm. The strength of identification she experiences in this habitual way functions not as an unwinding from the previous week but rather as a preparation for the week to come. She possesses *Beast*-themed stuffed dolls, ornaments, a tea set, towels, figurines, a comforter, and drinking glasses, which surround her when she is at home, but viewing the movie before each new seven-day period, she stated, “will make the [coming] week worthwhile.”

She identifies herself especially with the character, *Belle*. Like Belle, Jessica wears a ribbon in her hair that matches whatever clothing she is wearing “because in the movie Belle does the same thing.” Her room is painted yellow, which is the color of Belle’s dress. She “catches” herself “trying to become Belle,” whom she sees as “fundamental to my well-being. [Belle] gives me direction and helps me to make decisions,” she said. Reciprocal identification here is based on the image of Belle as an ordinary-looking character and in her ability to succeed in life despite her looks. Jessica stated,

We have similar personality traits and don’t judge others by their looks. Her life ends up with a happy ending and a prince charming. I desire the same thing. I want the happy ending and fairy tale romance. I base a lot of my choices by what Belle would do. I think it’s my subconscious way of knowing that looks aren’t everything and the underdog does win. In some ways I feel neglected or like an underdog at times. The

movie proves to me that everything will turn out all right in the end.

As one of the few non-cult fans who stated that their fandom was crucial to their well-being, Jessica emphasized that the identification she both gives to and receives from *Beauty and the Beast* culture sustains her through increasing turbulence in her life. “As I get older,” she said, “my life becomes more chaotic and stressful. This movie and Belle are my escape from reality. If I didn’t have this escape I would go crazy with all the stress in my life.” Identification here thus transcends the act of satisfying the fan’s isolation, becoming a point of empowerment which allows the fan to navigate rough waters through life (to be explored in the following section).

5.4.5 TEXT AND TEXT ALONE?

As noted, isolation/identification is problematic for reasons such as the difficulty of determining exactly which consumptive element is providing reciprocal identification for the fan. Is it a real person, a product creation, or a synthesis of the two? Arguably, all are possibilities.

A greater problem concerns the questions raised about fandom’s intentional social component as we encounter fans who appear to satisfy their isolation in a one-on-one relationship with the object, or text, of their fandom. One of the striking elements among this group of fans was the stated or implied belief that textual fulfillment was enough to sustain their fan activities. Mike stated that ultimately his noir fandom consisted “of watching and reading, the intake of an idea.” Carla

attends Mary J. Blige concerts alone. Jessica said of her *Beauty and the Beast* fandom, “I don’t necessarily need [a] social experience because I have friends outside my [fandom].” These and other fans mentioned here appear to operate primarily on a spontaneous socialization of their texts, seemingly not requiring the active and intentional socialization associated with normative fandom. Yet, nowhere is the suggestion that these fans aren’t normative in their actions and experiences. This problematic set of dynamics necessitates that isolation/identification receive further study, especially as regards relationships between private consumptive habits and the point at which the intentional sharing of isolation/identification may be seen to exist among fans.

5.5 HUNGER/EMPOWERMENT

I turn now to a well-represented fourth deprivation and its accompanying satisfaction, which I have referred to as hunger/empowerment.

Hunger may be defined here as a craving for the nourishment of a variable social aesthetic which provides strengths for the consumer of texts in fandom. The provision of these strengths, empowerment, occurs across a wide stage of emotional, psychological, and spiritual hungers that fans articulate often and persuasively. Even in a small population like the present one, an attempt to divide the hungers into requisite categories needed to be made as so many explicit and implicit cravings were expressed. The most naturally-ordered of these categories included the

following: 1) empowerment through romantic fantasy, 2) aesthetic, psychological, and spiritual empowerment, and 3) empowerment of life situation.

5.5.1 EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ROMANTIC FANTASY

The first category, and least represented of the three, featured primarily female fans of male musical groups and performers.¹⁷⁵ Hungers included explicit cravings for sexual intimacy, male tenderness, durable male-female relationships, alleviation of pain from broken male-female relationships, and other gender-relevant issues. Two of these fans, Jolly and Kimberly, described themselves (in separate interviews) as dedicated followers of the popular all-male vocal band, *The Backstreet Boys*. Each located the origination of their fandom in a falling-in-love experience, though for different reasons. Kimberly said that she needed but was not finding men who possessed “a positive outlook on life and love.” Jolly said that she had been at a stage in her life when she needed to move beyond physical attraction in her relationships with men. Judging the members of the band as “ugly” helped her to appreciate the male voice and persona minus physical attractiveness, she stated.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Six fans expressed hunger/empowerment through romantic fantasy as a leading deprivation.

¹⁷⁶ She also said she wanted to be *known* as a person who looks beyond physical attractiveness. Her exact words were, “I fell in love with them before I knew what they looked like, and when I did see them I thought they were ugly. Everyone that knows me well, knows I love them for their music. They respect that.”

Both Kimberly and Jolly had hungered for specific qualities of maleness that transcended the perceptions of maleness with which they were most familiar in their daily life experiences. Each spoke of being empowered by the stage personas, musical texts, and surrounding fan cultures of *The Backstreet Boys*, specifically with reference to gender. “They are men making music I always happen to love,” Jolly said. “They represent the real side of a young [male] music group. They have lives. They have been arrested, put into rehabilitation, and are married. They aren’t a typical boy band.”

A temptation may exist here to dismiss romantic fantasy as a legitimate hunger requiring the satisfaction of empowerment. However, as we see with Kimberly and Jolly, very legitimate cravings loom in the background, beyond the initial romantic fantasies of falling in love, and empowerment functions as an accurately descriptive term for appreciating these satisfactions. Two other interviewed fans held enduring fantasies about eventually marrying or cohabitating with the male objects of their fandom. “I believe that the lead singer of [the band] *Imx* and I are meant to be together,” said Jocelyn. “I know that we will never be together but I do believe that we are supposed to be.” The belief in a destiny, or a providential element, exists here, regardless of Jocelyn’s acknowledgment that her fantasy is merely a fantasy. She is, nevertheless, empowered by the experience. Dana, who described herself as a fan of rock musician Dave Matthews, said, “It is a huge escape from reality that Dave will come knock on my door and ask me to run away with him. Sometimes [he] makes me feel like a little girl again in middle

school [without] responsibilities. I still get butterflies in my stomach when I hear Dave's voice, as if he's singing those lyrics just for me." Here, Dana's hunger for the social aesthetic provided by the voice, lyrics, and persona of her male object empowers her through transformation: from experience to innocence, from a woman of responsibilities to a child free of such life pressures.

Still another fan, April, described herself as empowered by "a sense of spirituality" exhibited by the object of her fandom, singer Rickey Martin. April spoke at some length about an absence of what she interpreted as "spirituality" among the male members of her extended Italian American family. Her illustration of this was a recent wedding in which all the men in her family, including the groom and the wedding party, went through the entire ceremony inebriated from alcohol. Not that she herself is a particularly spiritual person, she said, but what she derives from being a fan of Rickey Martin is the "energizing experience" of "a handsome, charismatic man" who is about more than self-indulgence. She said,

Rickey Martin is a very spiritual person. He talks about how he is determined mentally and spiritually to not let Hollywood change him. He meditates daily to help keep his mind focused and free from all the static of fame. I truly respect that. I am not a very spiritual person [myself], but I can relate to meditating in order to clear your mind from pain and discomfort.

Here, as with other fans, we note that April's romantic fantasy is backgrounded by something other than more and increased infatuation. What she interprets as a presence of genuine spiritual content in her male object satisfies her perceived deprivation of spirituality in the men with whom she interacts daily. The

social aesthetic provided by the object, moreover, functions as a satisfaction of the hunger to see males as more than negligent of spiritual values.¹⁷⁷

This theme of spiritually (or morally) endowed men appeared elsewhere in the interviews, though in other forms, too. One fan's romantic fantasy with a rap musician revealed a hunger for a social aesthetic whose meaning reflected what she interpreted as a genuine respect for women. Racquida, who described herself as a fan of the rap musician of L.L. Cool J, had become a fan because this particular musician offered an artistic portrayal of male tenderness. After a succession of failed relationships with men whom she believes disrespected her, she began to investigate this figure who hailed from her own Brooklyn, New York neighborhood. She even "dressed exactly like him from head to toe" for a concert, thinking he would notice her. He did not notice her there, but Racquida believes that he does in his music as he presents what she sees as a portrait of admiration for women that she finds therapeutic. About this satisfied hunger which has improved her self-esteem, she said,

What attracts me to him is the fact that he respects women. He is not like other rappers that disrespect women. Instead, he uplifts them. He says that we are queens and every man is our loyal servant. When I was depressed because every guy I ever loved hurt me, his music made me feel better and boosted my confidence about myself. That gives me momentum to move on, and it makes me happy.

Empowerment here, too, exists beyond infatuation, falling in love, or whatever other initial stages of romantic fantasy experience might exist. Racquida's

¹⁷⁷ Males with moral and spiritual endowments appear to be the object of hungers throughout the romantic fantasy deprivation.

comments about boosted confidence and life momentum articulate a clear outcome obtained from her particular fan culture. The disrespect she believes she has known in unmediated life, moreover, constitutes a deprivation satisfied by a mediated fan text which in turn empowers her to prevail over depression.

5.5.2 NON-ROMANTIC AESTHETIC, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT

Hungers for aesthetic, psychological, and spiritual empowerment—not possessing elements of romantic fantasy—were also expressed by a number of fans. Here, cravings for visually-constructed pleasures, self-understanding, moral teaching, wholesomeness, and spiritual heroism, for instance, were articulated by fans of a textual diversity including Disney culture, the author J.R.R. Tolkein, the artist Salvador Dali, and numerous other objects of devotion.

Jen, who described herself as a fan of Salvador Dali, said that she had become a fan of his six years prior to our interview when a friend displayed a print of a Dali work. She was moved by it without knowing why, and she began to collect her own Dali prints which she now sees as therapeutic. “It’s not a daily thing, but at least once a month I use Dali as therapy,” she said. She hopes eventually to devote an entire room in her house to the prints she has collected, and she foresees this space as “my thinking room.”

Jen sees herself as trapped in an unimaginative world of well-defined objects and spaces she finds oppressive in their familiarity. She described herself as

“conservative,” as one who tries to fit into social and cultural environments rather than being “different” or “original.” Her clothing, the way she instinctively arranges her surroundings, and her patterns of interactivity in social settings reflect what she characterized as a life lived without “imagination.” She said,

I dress conservatively, which is in opposition to what Dali’s paintings project. His works promote originality and difference, and yet I attempt to blend in. [Now, regarding personal surroundings] I cannot stand for anything to be square [anymore]. Furniture, pictures, posters, must all have an angle to them. This relates to Dali’s works. He can make an elephant have legs that are ten feet high and out of proportion to the body. Everything has to be tilted in some direction [too]. I guess you can say that Dali has helped me create [a more imaginative world].

Jen is acknowledging a presence of aesthetic empowerment here. She has used what she perceives as Dali’s aesthetics of color, shape and spatial anomalies as a means of providing a more creative vision for herself and how she arranges her life. Her deprivation consists of not knowing how to effect desired changes which would bring her to what she sees as a more desirable aesthetically-defined existence; experiencing Dali, in both solitary and social conditions (she participates in discussions with other Dali fans) functions in at least partial satisfaction of this deprivation.¹⁷⁸

Other examples of aesthetic empowerment included fan cultures surrounding organized tastes and preferences for Broadway musicals, the puppeteer Jim Henson,

¹⁷⁸ By this, I do not mean to suggest that this fan’s hunger is for a practical outcome provided simply and neatly by the object. What is at work here, I argue, is a quality of inspiration the fan receives which may allow her to effect appropriate charges which lead to a more satisfied life.

the mediated culture of Britain's royal family, and Disney. Empowerment in each of these fandoms was constructed wholly or mostly on aesthetic values: the attractive appearance of the dramatic stage as an empowerment related to one fan's attempt to deal with stage fright,¹⁷⁹ the physical appearance of Henson's Muppets as incorporating images of "wholesomeness" for another fan,¹⁸⁰ and the self-assured composure of a photographed Prince William after his mother's death and its role as an image of perseverance for still another fan.¹⁸¹ Received and socialized aesthetic components are driving forces behind these satisfied deprivations. How such images and scenarios function from their point of reception to the point at which they become motivating agents is a complex subject, of course. Here, we know only that fans articulate particular hungers which they satisfy through their use of products with aesthetic qualities.

Two Disney fans, interviewed separately, spoke at length about experiencing empowerment from both mediated and unmediated Disney culture. Lynn, who described herself as a fan of "anything Disney," was actually more of a fan of the physical, unmediated aesthetics of Disney World, located nearby in the heart of central Florida's theme park culture. "Disney World really is the happiest place on

¹⁷⁹ A fan of Broadway musicals, Justin stated, "I become more and more excited to get the chance to be up on one of those stages [without the corresponding] 'stresses' of performance anxiety."

¹⁸⁰ Henson fan, Amanda, stated that the "wholesomeness" of her fandom counters her "worries."

¹⁸¹ "I actually feel good about things," stated this fan, Holly, when thinking about how composed Prince William appeared in pictures "when Princess Diana died in August of 1997."

earth,” she said. “I think I would live there if I could.” Her regular visits to Disney World’s Magic Kingdom, where Lynn can experience Disney’s classic cartoon themes and characters first-hand, function as a reinforcement of her natural inclination to be “optimistic,” she said. This optimism becomes eroded periodically, she added, and that is when she hungers for a return to the “happy faces and things” of Disney World: to reempower herself. She stated,

I’ve always been an optimistic person, always wanting to believe there is good in the world. My mom calls me a dreamer, always wanting to believe in fairy tales. I guess that’s why I’m so drawn to Disney. I like to believe that good always beats out evil and everyone lives happily ever after. I guess it’s my way of dealing with disappointment in my life.

The way another fan, Christine, approached the meaning she derives from her Disney fandom, centered also on a perception of mediated scenes and objects which she expressed in terms of the temporary suspension of belief which produces happy feelings. “Disney for me is about recognizing magic that can come from suspending belief in a world with so many disasters and bad things. It is a helpful way to [relieve] distress and find enjoyment.”

5.5.3 AESTHETIC DIMENSIONS OF CELEBRITIES

It is argued here that instances of hunger/empowerment in fandom construct satisfactions by integrating aesthetic components of fan objects into hungers which may be emotional, psychological, and even spiritual. Some fans seeking strengths, moreover, appropriate aesthetic dimensions of celebrities, as one instance, in such a

way that the fan's perception of the object transcends previously-discussed identification components. Undoubtedly, identification plays a role here, but a more complicated satisfaction emanates from an idealization of the object which is only one part identification. The more persuasive component is a social aesthetic which empowers the fan in the precise area of his or her hunger.

Jonathan, for instance, who described himself as a fan of the movie star Harrison Ford, was certain that he was a Ford fan but, though a seemingly articulate person, was hardly able to express why.¹⁸² The only point of identification he saw between himself and his perception of Ford came from his understanding of Ford's struggles "to get where he is today." Jonathan, a student of acting, said he related to that struggle, but that was only a small part of why he was a fan. "I admire who he is," he said. "There is something about him, something I can't quite put my finger on. He handles himself in a strong but cool [and] nonchalant way." Other comments reflected Jonathan's perception of Ford's face, voice, and "amazing things he can do in front of a camera," though he was not specific about any of these elements. What he was specific about was the nature of his hunger: a craving for inspiration. "It really is [about] inspiration," he said of his fandom.

Inspiration, or otherwise stated simply as strength, was another relevant topic among these fans defined by hunger/empowerment. Acquiring the strength to follow dreams, achieve ambitions, or merely to survive in lives and circumstances

¹⁸² The inability to put the meaning of fandom into words was common among the interviews. Silences, as mentioned in Chapters One and Seven, are a factor. Even fans who had much to say seemed at times to fall silent when approaching the subject of meaning.

judged as difficult, were hungers expressed often and with a degree of passion.

Chris, who hungers for a lifestyle which involves a career in marine science set among oceanic trappings, acknowledged that he may never realize those goals, but he can approximate them through the *Parrothead* culture surrounding the popular musician Jimmy Buffett. This fan culture, which celebrates Buffett's vivid musical portrayal of a bawdy beachcombing lifestyle, functions as stress relief for Chris, but its primary role is that of a deep hunger for goal-fulfillment. He stated,

I follow Jimmy Buffett. His music not only soothes and relaxes me, but it also depicts the lifestyle I desire. I studied marine biology in the hopes that I could someday have a laid-back easy lifestyle on a beach somewhere with my own sailboat and amphibious plane. Maybe it is more the lifestyle I am a fan of than Jimmy Buffett himself, but he embodies that lifestyle and that dream. I'm attracted to his music because he sings about things I want to experience.

This craving for "things I want to experience" is an obvious hunger, but it is transcendent of the reciprocal identification noted earlier. It may be said that Chris identifies with the object, but his attention moves from the object to the "lifestyle" and finally to the dream he has for his own life. The empowerment is, therefore, based on achieving goals through Chris's idealization of the object and what it represents.

Another participant in musical celebrity fan culture, Katy, described herself as "a huge fan of [the performer] Madonna." As with Chris and Jonathan, however, empowerment resides more in Madonna's symbolic representation of an ideal than in reciprocal identification between fan and object. Again, identification exists in the

margins ("I feel like I really know her," Katy said), but it is Katy's idealization of Madonna specifically as a portrait of strength that drives meaning. "I love everything about Madonna, especially how strong she is," Katy said. For over a decade, that portrait of strength has empowered her during experiences of moodiness, depression, and ruptured relationships. What is also notable about this strength is how it spans a spectrum of emotions for Katy. It meets her, in other words, where she is at emotionally. She emphasized, "When I am sad I listen to Madonna. When I am angry I listen to Madonna. When I am happy I listen to Madonna. I search for that one line that describes how I am feeling." This range of emotional responses attests to fandom's interchangeability of "pleasures and deeper satisfactions," as expressed in my thesis statement. Certainly one reason why the suffering component often seems submerged is because it shares the stage of meaning with pleasures. As Katy states, sadness, anger, and happiness are fused together in her fan experience of Madonna.

5.5.4 SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT

Hungers that appear in fandom can be seen as multi-emotional, I will add here, as are their satisfactions through empowerment. There is, in other words, a comprehensiveness to the deprivation/satisfaction dynamic as fans (some, at least) articulate that the meaning they receive and socialize as a result of their hungers resides at more than one level, even making itself known on a spiritual plane or "the level of soul" as one fan stated. Terms such as lifting, suspending, and elevating, as

used by some fans to locate the apogee of their meaning, do not guarantee an operational presence of spiritual satisfaction, but they do open a door onto the now-familiar discussion of spirituality (or religiosity) in fandom. Another caution here, as is notably represented in the present research, stems from the question of whether or not fans are already spiritually-inclined before they articulate spiritually-sounding comments about their fandom. Is an existent spirituality, in other words, a precondition for couching the acknowledgment of meaning in spiritual terms?

This seems possible as respondents from the overtly religious location (Southeastern College) were more inclined to express their responses in spiritual terms than were respondents from the overtly secular location (University of Tampa).¹⁸³ Consider the following comments about meaning that comes from being a fan of *Star Wars* as offered by an SEC respondent versus that of UT respondent:

<u>UT Respondent</u>	<u>SEC Respondent</u>
"I get personal meaning from Star Wars in two ways. First, watching the movies always reminds me of home, my mom, and family. Second, it sometimes speaks to me. I can apply stuff from the movie to my everyday life. If I'm bummed about being short, then I'll remember "size matters not." If I've been more clumsy than usual well, Jar Jar was clumsy and he was made a general." (Erica)	"I feel the spiritual connection in the struggle for good and evil. The Jedi knights almost take on an angelic presence while the evil Siths become the demons. Like I said before it helps me to believe more in heaven. I struggle so much with believing in [a literal] heaven and hell and all the spiritual beings that go along with that. The digitally created images [of Star Wars] help." (Laura)

¹⁸³ There were a number of exceptions to the pattern, however, as some fans in the secular location were devoutly religious and some in the religious location responded to my questions without specific faith referents.

Despite a range of variables which justify criticism of this oversimplified comparison, it is offered here to illustrate how easy it is for a spiritually predisposed fan to articulate his or her meaning in spiritual terms. The fan's spiritual orientation is already established (not to mention the fact that it is fed by the existent subculture to which she belongs), and hunger/empowerment is expressed from this sub-cultural orientation. Nevertheless, spirituality is the carrier of empowerment for this fan as she uses her chosen text to satisfy a hunger she possesses. She craves visualization of faith components which are invisible, and *Star Wars* provides the means of accomplishing this.

More than half of the twenty-nine Southeastern College respondents described their empowerment in spiritual terms.¹⁸⁴ The culture surrounding *The Lord of the Rings* "taps into my imagination and stirs my soul," said Rachel Ann, who described herself as a fan of J.R.R. Tolkien and his books. She said that she had tried to read Tolkien's *The Hobbit* as a young girl, but it wasn't until the recent movie version of *The Lord of the Rings* began to be advertised that she experienced a tweaking of latent curiosity in Tolkien. She saw the movie in 2001, then returned to the same theatre for four additional viewings before purchasing the soundtrack plus new editions of *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Silmarillion*, and *Unfinished Tales* by Tolkien. She was just beginning to collect newly marketed action figures of LOTR characters, keeps a journal of her favorite quotes from the books, and has begun to participate in online chat about Tolkien. At the time of our

¹⁸⁴ The rhetoric of seventeen fans was overtly religious.

interview, she said about her anticipation of *The Two Towers* sequel to the first film: “As of today, the countdown is 233 days, 9 hours, and 10 minutes until *Two Towers* comes out.”

For Rachel Ann, this particular fan culture is in alignment with her Christian faith, she said. It doesn’t detract from her core beliefs but rather supplements and amplifies them. She possesses a hunger to see biblical truths played out in coexistent imaginative sources because creatively crafted characters, scenes, and themes such as Tolkein’s exert an empathetic effect on her as a person struggling with spiritual issues. She said,

They have so much to say if you allow yourself to get past the science fiction, elves, and fairies bit. There are some really sage proverbs in the stories. For example, one of my favorite quotes is when Lady Galadriel addresses Frodo and tells him, ‘Even the smallest person can change the course of the future.’ I love that. That is so true. One person truly can make a difference. There are so many quotes or statements that the characters say [that make me] stop and think, that’s me, that’s where I’m at.

As to root causes of why Rachel Ann hungers for supplemental empathies existing outside what she sees as her core religious experience, these would need to be settled in other discourses.¹⁸⁵ Here, we can see only that fandom satisfies a deprivation not addressed—in her mind—by that faith experience. Hers is a form of hunger/empowerment conditioned by adjunct external components whose meaning she describes as “soul-stirring”.

¹⁸⁵ I will, however, attempt to shed additional light by adapting aspects of sensitivity theory to the problem of root causes—to be discussed in Chapter Seven.

Similarly, Ken, who labeled himself as “a true fan” of the iconic rock group *U2*, emphasized that meaning for him amounts to “a spiritual experience” which possesses a “depth” and a “center” he craves but does not acquire from other sources, musical or otherwise. Like Rachel Ann, he acknowledged a supplemental effect his fan experience exerted on his faith experience, though he went even farther in stating that one does not detract from the other. “I do regard U2 as a spiritual experience, but I grasp onto things bigger than a band for my well-being in life,” he said. “I hold them dear to my heart, but not too dear to never let them go if I had to.”

Other comments made by Ken, however, render his spiritual playing field more level, whereby his fan experiences arguably satisfy hungers with equal or even greater satiability than his faith experiences. The origins of his *U2* fandom bear similarities to the quasi-conversion experiences of Bruce Springsteen fans as documented by Daniel Cavicchi.¹⁸⁶ Ken’s fandom originated in a life-changing moment, he said, when he first heard the song “Pride” from the album *The Unforgettable Fire*. The following days were filled with intense curiosity which drove him to purchase, collect, and savor items from the fan culture: albums, posters, even the brand of sunglasses worn by Bono, the lead singer. While waiting with other fans all night for tickets to a concert, he described himself as connected with total strangers in a soul-oriented atmosphere. He said,

¹⁸⁶ These included a changed attitude toward life, empowerment when thinking about the object, a sudden energized feeling from the conversion experience, and others. (See Chapter Three.)

[Fans] connect with a soulful atmosphere that is created by U2's music. I believe that music is very spiritual anyway, but certain kinds of music and certain musicians raise the bar to the soul level. U2 does that. They literally transport me to a quiet place in my mind, a centering place, where everything comes into focus and all that is distracting just falls to the side. Listening to their music brings me to something that I desperately want every moment of my life: reality in perspective. It centers me.

If Ken's fan culture transports him to a quiet, centering place where illumination appears and distraction disappears, as he clearly states, it is not inappropriate to question how his conventional religious experience does a better job of this. His "desperate" spiritual hunger for what he calls "reality in perspective" persuasively argues for an empowerment which satisfies his deprivation at a spiritual level. His fandom makes his soul strong.¹⁸⁷

5.5.6 EMPOWERMENT OF LIFE SITUATION

A final hunger/empowerment dynamic observed in the interviews involved what I refer to as empowerment of life situation. Seven fans expressed satisfactions which were judged in the research-organization process as anomalies: they did not fit other categories, and all incorporated some kind of hunger for empowerment related to lifestyle.¹⁸⁸ Included here were fans who craved the following

¹⁸⁷ As is evident here, the discussion about hungers for spiritual empowerment lead us back to the well-rehearsed questions relevant to considering fandom as non-conventional religion. Moreover, since the discussion here centers on suffering (expressed as deprivations requiring satisfactions), we can see that fandom-as-religion is actually a component of suffering-in-fandom and vice-versa. Each conclusive discussion proves the existence of the other.

¹⁸⁸ Seven were overt examples. Another ten showed lesser evidences.

satisfactions: stability to counter an excessively mobile lifestyle, an antidote to lifestyle insecurity, a desire for control over one's life and fate, escape to an alternative lifestyle, and a permanent unchangeable quality of lifestyle symbolized by sensory experience. The experiences of three fans bearing similarities to each other are offered here.

Cindy, who described herself as a fan of the Japanese cartoon character, *Hello Kitty*, stated that this fan experience has functioned as a form of stability for her during frequent relocations as part of a military family. In Hawaii, where she lived as a child amid Japanese culture surrounding Pearl Harbor, she was given a *Hello Kitty* set of hygienic items for bathroom use. The *Hello Kitty* image became important to her after the family left Hawaii and was posted in many locations throughout the world. Cindy collected new items where possible in each new location, eventually allowing her interest to evolve into a sophisticated fan culture of collectibles, mediated products, and interactivity with other *Hello Kitty* fans via the internet. Maintaining her fandom became a way of satisfying a hunger she possessed for emotional constancy and a stationary lifestyle. She said,

I guess as a child who would move every three to four years and would have to start fresh again when it came to making friends, I honestly began to view *Hello Kitty* as a friend to me. The one object that was stationary with me, traveled with me, and grew with me was *Hello Kitty*. The personal meaning that it holds is hard to describe except that as something to hold and comfort me *Hello Kitty* was there for me when others were not.

Melanie, who described herself as a fan of *Sailor Moon* (also a Japanese cartoon), said that being a fan of this product has assisted her in the production of self-confidence, which she sees herself struggling to maintain as a young woman seeking to live independently. Upon entering high school, she said, a friend had noticed she was having problems and thought she might benefit by investigating *Sailor Moon*, which is televised as a broadcast about a teenage girl “whose job is to save the world from evil villains.” In the years since her initial viewing, Melanie said that her self-confidence continues to be assisted by her fan experiences (artifact collection, fan fiction writing, and viewing the cartoon with other fans). “You learn the values of friendship while watching the show,” she said. “You also learn how to love and believe in yourself. It sends a great message to anyone who watches the show and has made me a stronger, more confident person than what I was before I started watching the show.” Melanie finds herself projecting the personalities of people she knows onto the characters in *Sailor Moon*, and by inserting herself into the narrative she is able to visualize how she would interact confidently. “I wouldn’t have the self-confidence or the ability to cope or the positive outlook on life without experiencing *Sailor Moon*,” she said.

Lyndsay Mae, who described herself as a fan of astrology media, said that this fan interest provides her with an “entertaining and unusual” way to imagine that she has “some control over my fate.” Her fandom originated in middle school, she said, when she wrote a research paper on her astrological sign, Capricorn. She felt motivated by evaluating herself according to the traits of her character and

personality she believes are unique to Capricorns, and she began to read her daily horoscope in her local newspaper. She then collected zodiac jewelry and astrological calendars, decorated her surroundings with Capricorn art, and began to tack “my happy horoscopes” on a bulletin board which she consults for encouragement. She evaluates her dating relationships by how her sign aligns with that of the other person, and of the potential for lasting relationships measured by sign harmony, she said, “If it says we mesh well together, I am optimistic. If not, I convince myself it won’t work out.” Lyndsay Mae now participates in internet astrology culture which gives assurance that “I know I am not alone.” She sees herself as engaged with “thousands of people” who believe there is an “entertaining way to define the future.” She added, “I realize it is the excitement of the feeling of foresight and some control over things I know I can’t control. On days I feel sad, my horoscope gives me hope that someone or something will brighten my day. I feel like my horoscope is written especially for me.”

Each of these fans expressed anomalous forms of hunger/empowerment. Certainly elements of aesthetic, psychological, and spiritual empowerment (even romantic components, as in the role astrology plays in Lindsay Mae’s relationships) co-mingle in the fan experiences here, but outcomes seem most appreciable in terms of lifestyle empowerment. Life insecurity prevails within the deprivation, and the “control over things I know I can’t control,” as emphasized by Lyndsay Mae, expresses an internal empowering facilitated by all three fan cultures. While this lifestyle component might be seen as an anomaly compared to previous forms of

hunger/empowerment, however, it is not fundamentally different from the underlying premise of this deprivation and its accompanying satisfaction: fans here use their fandom to address hungers they possess, and in doing so they experience appreciable empowerment.

5.6 CONCLUSION

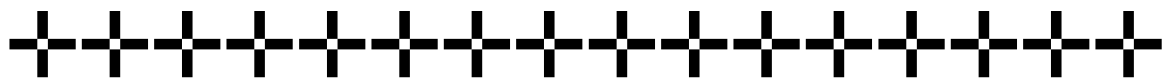
The seeking of connection, release, identification, and empowerment is in evidence within the sample of non-cult fans reported here. The dislocation, animus, isolation, and hungers motivating such seeking are also in evidence, and their documented existence contributes to supporting my thesis of privation in fandom. Where fan comments have been vivid, this emerging portrait of deprivations and satisfactions is unmistakably clear. Yet, even among respondents who expressed themselves in a less-articulate manner, the implicit notion that voids and absences lie beneath fandom is present. Indeed, these silent fans may in time generate greater interest than the expressive voices if we can learn how to interpret comments that seem incomplete, even incoherent.

Few comments from this collection of non-cult fans are overwhelmingly dramatic, it is acknowledged. As mentioned at the end of Chapter Four, my purpose here has been to establish informational equivalency within the body of research rather than seeking extraordinary findings. I believe that greater intensities of experience exist within some, perhaps many, of these fans, and I recognize a need for future interviewing that plumbs greater depths of fan experience. Of importance

here, I argue, is the placement of basic fan comments and experiences into the four categories expressing deprivation/satisfaction dynamics. Despite significant overlap, the four dynamics emerged naturally and unforced from the data, and I am settled on them as an established point from which further enquiries can be made. Each dynamic, in addition, requires further theoretical grounding, which will be accomplished in the Chapter Seven discussion. Prior to this, however, a more expansive case study of the isolation/identification dynamic, as it characterizes the cult fandom surrounding the Harry Potter books, is offered in Chapter Six.

VI

**PRIVATION IN CULT FANDOM:
A CASE STUDY APPROACH**



CHAPTER SIX

PRIVATION IN CULT FANDOM: A CASE STUDY APPROACH

6.1 INTRODUCTION

I move now from an analysis of privation in multi-textual fandom to considering how dynamics of privation established in *Chapter Five* might be seen to play out in a single fan culture. Dynamics here should be taken in the singular to mean dynamic with the advance of an argument which holds that a lead deprivation (in other words, a single deprivation/satisfaction dynamic) can be thought of occupying the center of experience in fan cultures while other deprivations are present in the background.¹⁸⁷ Indeed, fans organized by the four dynamics in *Chapter Five* were done so by what were interpreted as lead or dominant deprivations, though most of the fans exhibited more than one form of deprivation. I remain

¹⁸⁷ The focus here, however, is on the primary deprivation only, not the secondary ones. Further research is needed to show why one form of deprivation leads other forms and how they relate to each other in specific fan cultures. Starting points might include seeking answers to the following questions: 1) why dislocation/connectivity seems primary in curatorial fandoms while hunger/empowerment is secondary, 2) why animus/release seems primary, and isolation/identification secondary, in participatory sport and music fandoms, 3) why isolation/identification seems to lead all other deprivations in fandoms inclusive of both a mythically-presented suffering celebrity and a suffering text (the problem here), and 4) why hunger/empowerment seems to lead other forms of deprivation in fan cultures built around an especially dense aesthetic product.

consistent, moreover, with the privation thesis: that an existence of variable states of deprivation is to be noted in all fan cultures.

My lone case in this chapter is that of the Harry Potter fan cult: the fan culture characterized by extreme adherence and allegiance which has emerged from socialized consumption of the mass-marketed book series by Edinburgh author, J.K. Rowling.¹⁸⁸ I argue that while an echoing of all four deprivations is represented within this fandom, the lead deprivation (and its accompanying satisfaction) is that of isolation/identification, the third dynamic. Fans experience psychological correlation between themselves and a multilateral object of devotion consisting of an author who functions as a suffering celebrity (or nurturer) and a media culture (books, books made into movies, and an extensive journalistic meta-narrative) which functions as a suffering popular text. How Harry Potter fans acquire and exercise deep social engagements based on who they believe they are at a core human level is of interest here. Where it has been possible to learn something of this problem, resulting insights are offered on three levels: identification *with* a suffering nurturer, identification *of* a suffering text, and identification *within* a suffering fan culture. Also included here are brief narrative vignettes which imbue the case study with an observational component but, more importantly, to avoid excluding an undeveloped yet emerging material component of the Harry Potter fandom.

¹⁸⁸ As was true with fans placed closer to the plane of organized tastes and preferences, this distinction is a debatable one. I base it on the perceived intensity of online interactivity among the Harry Potter fans observed and interviewed for this section. Making a clear distinction between cult and non-cult fans, moreover, remains problematic.

I begin with one such vignette.¹⁸⁹

6.1.1 “IT WAS GREAT TO SEE THEM READING...”

15 November 2001. Largo Public Library, Largo, Florida. In celebration of the Harry Potter books—and the release of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone, the film—staff members of the Largo Public Library have inaugurated their first Harry Potter party. To the delight of Carol Cortright, the library assistant who organized the event, somewhere between fifty-five and seventy fans (8-15 years old), plus a few parents, are in attendance. “Parents are admitted only if accompanied by a wizard,” Cortright says. Most of the children have dressed up as characters: Harry Potter himself, his friends Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, a few Albus Dumbledores, (headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry), and one large Hagrid (the loveable giant).

Lights in the large rectangular conference room have been dimmed for the event. Candles float suspended above three long banquet tables, and party-goers are feasting on treats ranging from ghost dip to eye-of-newt kabobs to peanut butter eyeballs. There is plenty of “butter beer” with which to wash everything down, too. Other tables feature the owl Hedwig in a cage, as well as numerous skulls, ravens, spiders, black cauldrons, brooms, wands, wizard hats, and mirrors covered in cobwebs. Out on the periphery of the room hang

¹⁸⁹ This event is reconstructed from personal observation and two interviews with Carol Cortright. I also interviewed Theresa Blackwell, a correspondent for the *St. Petersburg Times*, who published a report of the event on 17 November 2001, and whose article corroborates what is reported here.

wall posters from the U.S. Library of Congress which, Cortright (known tonight as Madame Zora, professor of enchanted parties) says, "tell the story of 'real magic,'" a subtheme of the party. "The Community of Magic," "Séance Magic and Escapology," "Psychical Research and Mental Magic," and "Magicians as Mentors," are a few of these posters showing these Harry Potter fans a different picture of magic than that existing in J.K. Rowling's imaginary world.

Participatory events follow the feast, and all activities are interactive.

Doug Scull of nearby St. Petersburg, who describes himself as "a squirmicologist," introduces several live creatures: an albino Burmese python, a tarantula named Matilda, a millipede, a giant scorpion. "Can anyone define squirmish?" Scull asks the crowd. "You need to know how to define squirmish if you're going to grow up to be a squirmicologist." Members of the audience shout, "Disgusting." "Jumpy." "Gross." "When you see animals like this, don't think they're disgusting," Scull says. "They are the way they are for a reason. Did you know that some animals will eat their babies because they know when one is not fit for life?" "Creepy," says an audience member. Volunteers are invited to the stage to have the python draped around their shoulders.

Next, Madame Zora (Cortright) takes the stage to lead a Harry Potter trivia contest. She asks questions: "Who is the Grand Sorcerer?" "What kind of creatures run Gringott's Wizarding Bank in Diagon Alley?" "Harry must catch the train to school on which platform at King's Cross Station?" "What's the name of the ghost that haunts Slytherin?" "How many players are on a Quiddich Team?" Four possible answers exist for each

question, though these fans do not need them. Correct answers are offered before the questions are finished being asked. "They're too easy," states a costumed Hermione Granger.

Finally, audience members are invited to the front to read favorite passages from any Harry Potter book. Many do this flawlessly, some reciting long sections, others acting out parts as though auditioning for a dramatic role. Bonnie Peters, the collection management librarian, remarks afterwards that it is good to see children, especially boys, reading. "It was great to see them reading their hearts out tonight," she said. "I think the fun and adventure really appeals to them." This emphasis on reading emerges as the final theme of the party, reinforced by a parting gift which all participants receive: a stainless steel Hogwarts commemorative bookmark.

By many indications, the Largo Public Library threw a successful Harry Potter party on that November evening in Florida. The props Cortright and her crew painstakingly produced ornamented the gathering appropriately by creating a mood that seemed consistent with J.K. Rowling's imagined world. Costumes, foods, exotic animals, magic, and an interactive celebratory ambiance, worked for the event as was clear when the young fans streamed out happily into the night. The real Harry Potter fan party, however, lies elsewhere.

6.1.2 THE ONLINE HARRY POTTER CULT

This fandom, apart from its loose, embryonic network of physical fan gatherings (like those arranged by libraries, bookstores, and other private, civic, and

commercial bodies), is primarily an online cult in which fans nurture extreme adherence and allegiance to the maintenance of their interests. As of this writing, the cult has been in existence for less than a decade. Its infancy, however, should not conceal the fact that increasingly intense and sophisticated forms of interactivity lie at the center of its operation as a fan culture. Harry Potter fans read voraciously, then log onto the internet to socialize their textual consumption with an often feverish intentionality. The minutest detailed dissections of plots, characters, themes, settings, textual flaws, relevant news, and biographical speculations about J.K. Rowling are a part of this fever, as are the voluminous postings of fan fiction, fan graphics, and fan musings which stray from any consistent topic.

Because publication of the first Harry Potter books coincided with increasing numbers of internet users during the middle and late 1990s, these two parallel strains of mass communication phenomena became intertwined, fusing into an arguably new breed of fandom defined purely by nonphysical interactivity. Whereas existing fan cultures with mature physical dimensions which had evolved over decades (such as that surrounding *Star Trek*, as an instance) had to adapt themselves to online culture, the Harry Potter fandom began ready-adapted. It emerged almost exclusively as a fandom of mediated conversation, and it must be comprehended through a contained monitoring of this conversation. The likelihood that it will continue to develop greater material dimensions such as conventions and physically-constructed fan clubs certainly is likely, yet even then this new breed of

fan activity will require that we seek to understand a nonmaterial fandom forced to adapt to material conditions rather than vice-versa.

Within the mediated conversation, moreover, fans reveal themselves through posted messages. These messages may be long or brief, sincere or insincere, intelligent or stupid, adult or juvenile. They may be offered by internet users who work hard at concealing their identity, or those who try hard to acknowledge, with honesty, who they are and why they are Harry Potter fans. They seek connectivity and release in a myriad of ways, and their hungers exist as a borderless mesh of resilient, collective appetites, whose satisfaction may lie in consuming someone's thoughts or having one's own thoughts consumed; or, likely, some combination of each.

Separating the fandom from the merely online internet culture, furthermore, requires a diligence which is rewarded by an existence of patterns which emerge slowly, in shadows, silhouettes, and ultimately pictures which are anything but clear and in focus. One fan is lonely, another is angry. One is lonely and angry. One group of fans hungers, another group is nostalgic. Still another seems best measured by loss, at least during that particular 24/7. But all the fans all the time exhibit variable states of deprivation which they likely do not acknowledge or comprehend because their accelerated fan culture affords limited space for reflection amid the random bits of exchanged information. Comprehension, in this case, lies arguably outside the interactive environment as loneliness, anger, isolation, and hunger are

weighted against each other until some collection of risky conclusions can be addressed.

6.1.3 UNILATERAL ISOLATION

The risk taken here acknowledges that what lies beneath the Harry Potter fan culture is a unilateral condition of isolation which craves comprehensive forms of identification. I am saying here that isolation/identification is not the only well-represented deprivation in the Harry Potter fandom, but it functions, I argue, as a primary or preeminent deprivation.¹⁹⁰

Isolation, I recall from Chapter Five, was defined as a deprivation of deep social engagements acting upon a person's awareness of who they believe they are at a core human level. The phrase "who they believe they are" is instructive in that it recognizes the fan's belief in the existence of a private self which can be engaged by an external understanding self. Identification, the process of creating and sustaining feelings of psychological correlation between entities, becomes a bringing together of these two selves in reciprocal, empathic, and even compassionate linkage. Fans feel as if the object of their fandom not only knows them but cares about them, and importantly, the fan reciprocates. He or she feels they know and care about the object, whether it is a real person, a product creation, or a combination of the two. I

¹⁹⁰ I proceed cautiously here because evidence of dislocation/connectivity, animus/release, and hunger/empowerment were also noted. Also, it is possible that my selected fan population expressed one form of deprivation whereas another population might conceivably express another primary form.

noted the existence of this reciprocal process in fans of products from noir culture, popular music, cinema, television, and multimedia.

In the Harry Potter fan cult these dynamics emerge as even more complex because they involve reciprocal identification occurring on multiple levels (with each level possessing its own varied elements): fan to author (author being a maker, celebrity, and sufferer), fan to text (text being characters, hero, and suffering media form), and fan to fan (fan being co-dependent, co-sufferer, and co-pilgrim). At random moments of online interactivity many or all of these elements come together as a dynamic network of reciprocal identifying forces, which I further argue, provide chosen satisfactions to fans deprived of feeling known. They create and perpetuate a sustaining known-ness (a state of feeling known), thereby defining a greater part of this fan culture as a prototypical isolation/identification fandom.

6.2 IDENTIFICATION WITH A SUFFERING NURTURER

I begin my support of this argument by recognizing the perceived role author J.K. Rowling, whom I describe as a *suffering nurturer*, plays in the establishment of an identifying environment in which Harry Potter fans exist. She is comprehended, certainly, as a real person but also as a mythically appropriated creator who has had to suffer obstacles which allow her special identifying access into the worlds of both her characters and her fans.¹⁹¹ She is a suffering celebrity, moreover, who has made

¹⁹¹ In her essay, "Apprentice Wizards Welcome: Fan Communities and the Culture of Harry Potter" (see pp. 343-64 in *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*,

a beloved fictional world for her readers, and despite the fact that she has become rich, domestically settled, and thereby transcendent of her famous bad patch (to be discussed), her fans hold a broad but very real remembrance that she was forged in the flames of conflict. She, above others, can relate because she has been there, wherever there might be.

Her fans find relevant ways of integrating her into their discussions, many which center on how she might feel about topics inclusive of suffering, death, and dying. In doing so, they demonstrate their recognition of her role as an authority on important matters. They look up to her, choosing to believe that she possesses a wisdom beyond their own in deciding when a character should suffer and die, for instance. They choose also to believe that she will suffer herself when such decisions have to be made. This amounts to a kind of moral endowment granted by fans to an object of their fandom in whom they hold generous amounts of trust. Indeed, fans trust J.K. Rowling to make correct decisions, based on what they see as her possession of genuine intelligence, moral goodness, compassion, or whatever additional endowments of character her fans choose to grant. Were she to violate this trust, moreover, shock waves would ripple through the fan culture with unpredictable results.¹⁹² To this point, major breaches of trust have not happened,

2002), Rebecca Sutherland Borah also sees the fandom as partially rooted in Rowling's "almost mythical" status (p. 350). The "legendary" quality of her story as a deprived mother defying odds to create a literary career popularized her within the Harry Potter fan culture and eventually led to the American publisher Scholastic's decision to purchase the rights to book one of the series (p. 351).

¹⁹² Fans revolting against their chosen celebrities because of perceived violations of trust are nothing new, of course. Some fans of cultural icon, Bob Dylan, for instance, were said to have deserted him permanently for changing from an acoustic to an electric musician in the

and the relationship between Rowling and her fans possesses qualities of a honeymoon: she is celebrated and esteemed by them as a trustworthy companion who is in the process of creating a mutually satisfying fictional world.

6.2.1 THE ARBITER OF "PAINFUL DEATH"

At 6:42 pm on 27 December 2001, for instance, Bosshogg posted a message entitled "Painful Death" on *Talk About Harry Potter*. "Ms. Rowling," he wrote, "has said in an interview that writing one death scene in particular will be painful to her. Which character do you think she's talking about?"

A regular on the board, Bosshogg had taken a few days off over the Christmas holidays, but now he (assuming the male gender for pronoun referencing) was back in his role of insight seeker. He wanted to know how the others were seeing Rowling's predicament, and how all of them would feel when the "painful" removal of one character had been accomplished. His "money," he said, was on Hagrid being eliminated from the continuing narrative, and he thought that Rowling might be seeing it this way, too. He stated,

There's something buffoonish about Hagrid, but he's also just plain old good folk. In short, he remains an innocent. He's also downright unlucky (abandoned by his mother, framed by Tom Riddle, imprisoned with the dementors) and Rowling has given us plenty of warning that he's got blind spots. I have a

1960s. Major revolts have yet to occur, however, between Rowling and her fans. Possibly the closest she has to come to a perceived breach happened when she sold commercial rights to Warner Brothers, allowing the books to be made into movies along with the release of contained merchandising. One fan, PWM64, said in an interview (22 July 2001) that she resented this "blatant commercialization of all things Potter" but quickly added that she blamed Warner Brothers more than J.K. Rowling.

real soft spot for Hagrid and I think it's because Rowling does too—she wrote him that way. So it seems to me that his death would be the most wrenching.

Bosshogg also allowed that the elimination of other characters—Dumbledore, the headmaster; Ron or Hermione, Harry's friends; Fred or George, the Weasley twins; James and Lily, Harry's parents—might fulfill Rowling's plan, and he presented his concerns about each of these. Of the twins, for instance, he said, "I like the Weasley twins enormously and I worry that having a pair of them makes one of them seem expendable. Imagine a lone surviving twin. Plenty of pain there, though maybe in the aftermath as much as in the dying itself." And of Harry's parents, "Granted, they're dead already. But a flashback of some sort, recalling their fear and sacrifice, might really jerk the tears (especially from an author who is a parent)."

Unlike posted messages which evoked limited responses during that particular holiday season, Bosshogg's question initiated a thread that grew to over three hundred user responses within four days, of which fifty-eight stayed on topic. Regular members of *Talk...* weighed in on topics ranging from feared losses of favorite characters to mature and immature attachments which might govern the amount of sadness should certain characters be eliminated from the narrative. Some characters were capable of suicide, it was offered, while others deserved the chance to work out their problems before being removed. JKR, as Rowling is known to many of these fans, was the final arbiter of what one fan called "the big painful death centerpiece," and opinions varied greatly as to whom she would suffer the most from losing.

A reverence was directed toward her right to build or dismantle the community of characters she had created even though doing so was going to cause her certain pain. No one disputed this at any point in the thread, which left only articulated hopes that she would spare individual favorites. Sporadic comments here included the following: "I hope she doesn't kill Ginny" (Rbuckle2001). "I think the character that she loves [most] would be Hagrid. And THAT death would be extremely painful to write" (Greeke). "i am a huge fan of sirius, but for some reason i think he will probably die. i really don't want it to happen, but JKR wrote an entire book about him, and it would make sense for him to die" (Sweetpotato742687). "I love the twins! Ms. Rowling could kill one or both of them but I don't see that happening" (Argyle). "I would cry so much if JKR kills off Lupin" (Barenaked)! The conversation frequently returned to Bosshogg, who being the originator of the question attempted on nine different occasions to settle the issue by arguing that the ultimate decision to eliminate a character would depend on Rowling's feelings. He was most concerned about whether her feelings aligned with his own and those of other posters. "I'm trying to gauge whether my feelings about the characters jibe with what others feel," he stated. "That may mean diddly when it comes to what JKR feels, though."

Among a number of relevant issues articulated by Bosshogg and his conversational partners here, foremost was the unilateral attention paid to the feelings of J.K. Rowling. Her acknowledged pain in facing the torture of having to "kill off" a beloved character was taken seriously and never doubted. She, beyond

even the most perceptive and caring reader, knew her characters—indeed, loved them, as one poster stated—making her compassion legitimate in the minds of her fans. Secondly, respect for Rowling’s literary omnipotence—her unlimited power and authority in constructing her narrative—was acknowledged without dissent. Bosshogg and others understood that she was the boss of this story, and despite their wishes for the protection of certain favorite characters, it was commonly understood that she controlled all life-and-death decisions in the text and they would be respected by the readers. But the respect here was an unforced allegiance, and her authority a non-threatening arrangement created more by necessity than any design on her own part. She happened to be the author, and they were the readers. Thirdly, was the matter of shared feelings. On three separate occasions Bosshogg overtly wondered about alignments between his feelings and those of the author. Were they in or out of alignment? Were basic feelings shared? As Bosshogg said, “I have a real soft spot...and I think it’s because Rowling does too....”

Acknowledging the validity of Rowling’s personal feelings, the respect for her authority, and the linkage between how she and her fans approach an earnest matter such as the suffering and elimination of characters, speaks of a broad underlying existence of mutual identification between Harry Potter fans and what they choose to accept as the suffering creator of their chosen text. They see her as a co-sufferer, as someone who suffers the prospect of loss, in this case, as they suffer it. Mutual regrets, mutual empathies, and mutual compassions are all at work here in a socially constructed web of reciprocations radiating outward to distant orbits of the

fan culture. J.K. Rowling may have the final say on who lives and dies, but everyone in the subculture, including her, will feel the impact.

6.2.2 THE PERSUASIVELY-PRESENTED REFLEXIVE SUFFERER

Isolation/identification suffering, as we have in this fandom, requires a legitimacy provided by symbolic elements accepted by the fans as authentically representative of their fan object. In Harry Potter fandom, as mentioned, the object is split between author and text, and the identifying capacity of the text is dependent only on how skillfully and meaningfully it has manipulated those symbolic elements for the fans (to be discussed in “Identification of a Suffering Fan Text”). The identifying capacity of the author, however, is another matter. Transforming the author into a suffering nurturer requires transfiguration of a real person into a mythical figure. Joseph Price, though writing in another fandom milieu, describes this transfiguration process as requiring two elements: the dreaming or imagining of an iconic hero, and the projection of that dream onto a real public figure who can be transfigured into an identifying icon.¹⁹³

I will add that the transfigured individual needs to be, or have been, a persuasively-presented and reflexive sufferer: one whose suffering, in other words, provides convincing reflection of suffering elements and symbols residing within the fans themselves. From this essential communicative stage, identification is both introduced and acted out in such a way that it penetrates conditions of deep

¹⁹³ See p. 101 of Price’s *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, 2001.

isolation within the fandom. Relevant to this picture are, for example, Elvis Presley fans, whom Erika Doss describes as seekers of their icon's "useable past" of mutual need, addiction, and suffering with which they can forge a kind of fan-object co-dependency. "There is...a definite 'co-dependency' between fans and the figures they adore," says Doss. "An insecure Elvis...came to...realize himself in terms of his fans" and vice versa.¹⁹⁴ Reciprocal identification between a suffering celebrity and his fans is unmistakable with Elvis, as everyone was mindful of each other in a web of shared empathy which reached (and still reaches) into existing isolation among fans.

Elvis's transfiguration, of course, has occurred over a long period of time (fifty years), comparatively speaking. With J.K. Rowling, however, the transfigurative process has happened in speedy simultaneity with the accelerated pace of contemporary computer-mediated culture. Virtually overnight, she was mythologized as a transfigured suffering nurturer, which in itself arguably charts unexplored territory in the "new breed of fandom" alluded to earlier. The rapidity, moreover, with which her very selective biographical details have coalesced into her own useable myth (and been reported, distributed, and accepted across both fan and mass cultures) is a wonderment of spontaneous identity construction.

¹⁹⁴ Doss found, appropriately, that "the image of Elvis" loved most by his American fans was "the Vegas Elvis." This was the "fat, pain-racked, self-destructive Elvis" promoted by his impersonators long after his death. "Elvis's pain and suffering, his drug-addict death in a gilded bathroom, his failure to find happiness despite achieving the American dream," Doss adds, has carried his mythic celebrity status with more permanence than that of his earlier polished images.

Let us consider a likely scenario depicting how this process has occurred and how it has transfigured J.K. Rowling into a much-celebrated suffering nurturer who succeeds in identifying with her fans.¹⁹⁵ I locate her transfiguration in three separate sources that exist within the massive nonfiction meta-narrative: juvenile biography, semi-scholarly commentary, and the popular periodical press. Much overlap exists among these biographical sources, but each applies a unique voice to the construction of a celebrated suffering nurturer. I note the juvenile biography category first.

6.2.3 RHETORICAL PACKAGING OF JUVENILE BIOGRAPHY

These nonfiction narratives of J.K. Rowling written for young readers incorporate a rhetoric of pathos, whereby elements of her life story are presented as the unfolding of a sentimental myth. She becomes a character, then a conflicted character, and finally a heroine who emerges from the ashes of suffering

¹⁹⁵ This needs to be a fully developed study in itself. Locating J.K. Rowling in celebrity scholarship will necessitate a careful balance of four specific contexts: historical celebrity, gender celebrity, literary celebrity, and modern media/pop cultural celebrity. Each has the potential to help us better understand Rowling's status. From the historical context, for instance, we might learn how historical development of 'the star' as located between celebrity and hero status informs Rowling's place as a fan icon. Or, Rowling's emergence as a celebrity woman calls the gender context into relevance. In addition, the commercialization of authorship and the manufacture of literary celebrity require assistance from current literary celebrity theories. Or, finally, the modern media/pop cultural context offers theories, for instance, discussing how media has transformed once-distant fan-star relationships into face-to-face relationships. It should be said here that celebrity scholarship, which has run roughly parallel to fandom scholarship over the past decade, has much to offer research into fan cultures.

circumstances. Rhetorically, a homeric¹⁹⁶ narrative mood infuses the myth with a timeless, universal flavor which has the effect of placing it beyond the basic purposes of biography: that of objectively stating the facts of a person's life story. The young person who had ambitions of being an author, in other words, becomes expressed in this way: "Joanne Kathleen Rowling, at a very early age, had [an] image of herself as somebody who would put pencil to paper and create magic worlds." Or, conflict in school is presented as, "It was a tough first year for Joanne. She was not making friends as easily as she had in the past. Physically and emotionally she was changing. It all added up to a rough beginning in her new school."¹⁹⁷

Expressing basic biographical facts in this way contributes to mythologizing the subject. The would-be author becomes the would-be creator of "magic worlds." The normative events of youth become passages of dramatic emotional and physical transformation. Later, when the story enters adulthood, a continuation of this rhetorical packaging solidifies the myth of a suffering heroine who must find a way to triumph over her dire circumstances. Noted here are miscellaneous statements presented about Rowling's transition from a dislocated post-university student to her well-publicized life as a suffering single mother in Edinburgh:

For the most part, she held a seemingly endless string of boring secretarial jobs.... Joanne's employers frowned on her writing fantasy stories on company time, and she was dismissed from jobs.... Joanne would often lapse into fits of

¹⁹⁶ Or classical, storytelling mood.

¹⁹⁷ See pp. 32-3 of *J.K. Rowling: The Wizard Behind Harry Potter* by Marc Shapiro (2000).

depression. There were tears.... Unfortunately, the birth of the couple's daughter...did little to save the crumbling marriage.... The ride to Edinburgh was long and lonely.... As the weather turned from bright sunshine to dark and dreary, Joanne noted that it reflected her mood perfectly.... [A]s she walked around Edinburgh with Jessica, Joanne often felt the hard stares of strangers. It was as if they knew.¹⁹⁸

Here, an excessive pathos suffuses normative biographical events by making them appear extra-normative. The overland train trip to Edinburgh becomes a “long and lonely” journey from light into darkness, where a cruel destination of staring strangers and unknown obstacles waits. This journey is not unlike specific elements of the initiation phase pertinent to the hero with a thousand faces, who must journey by night along a road of many trials, and experience unknown circumstances.¹⁹⁹ Rowling, according to this characterization, emerges as a suffering heroine who slays a symbolic dragon consisting of personal failures and rejections. She has emerged from the belly of a great fish---to further engage heroic imagery—and will proceed to her true calling. It may be that the youth portion of an audience as large as Rowling's would not read a more conventional biographical style, yet presenting her story as a rhetorically-charged heroic myth has the effect of making it much larger than life. She, her personal suffering, and her eventual accomplishments become enshrined and rhetorically unforgettable.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 46-62.

¹⁹⁹ See David Colbert's interpretation of Joseph Campbell's “Hero with Thousand Faces” in *The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter: a Treasury of Myths, Legends, and Fascinating Facts* (2001).

²⁰⁰ A more recent biography, Connie Ann Kirk's *J.K. Rowling: A Biography* (2003), lessens the Homeric rhetoric somewhat, yet still presents Rowling as a mythical figure perhaps best indicated by the book's cover illustration: the author attired in a flowing red robe while holding in her hands a crystal ball.

6.2.4 THE ONE-WAY MOMENTUM OF SEMI-SCHOLARLY COMMENTARY

A second mythologizing source, that of semi-scholarly commentaries on Rowling and her books, present many of the same biographical details as the children's biographies, though they reduce or eliminate excessive rhetoric in favor of limited but useful academic backgrounding. The basic events of Rowling's life are analyzed and interpreted in an attempt to provide context to Rowling's known suffering. As such, these sources, too, exert a powerful influence on how fans comprehend her life. Suffering details are accepted, balanced, and explained here, especially in relation to argued connections between Rowling's life experiences and those of the fictional Harry Potter community of characters. How powerlessness and depression, for instance, as represented in how the books (or writing the books) align with the same experiences in Rowling's own life, merit space.

Addressing Rowling's hard times as a single mother in Edinburgh evokes interpretation from one commentator who places this series of events in a context of writing that emerges from suffering. The bleak flat she was forced by necessity to occupy, the receiving of public financial assistance, and the compromised care of her infant daughter, all warrant attention but specifically as they relate to Rowling's struggle to create.²⁰¹ To escape despair and recover self-esteem, she becomes a maker of the first Harry Potter book. The exercise of imagination transports her out of grim conditions, and her process of making incorporates an organicity which

²⁰¹ See Elizabeth D. Schafer's *Exploring Harry Potter*, 2000.

extends even to her material approach: savored longhand composition and the feel of paper underneath her fingers. There is no computer, no word processor, but just a suffering welfare mother in cold conditions working to make a valuable organic product.

Another example of semi-scholarly interpretation makes use of characters from book three, interpreted as reflective of Rowling's experiences with depression. Attention to the *dementors*, in this case, has been a way of presenting Rowling as familiar enough with severe depression to have created convincing characters who articulate felt hopelessness. Here, fans have been presented with a skilled author who knows what she's talking about because she has been there, in the misery of despondency. She is quoted as having once stated that the dementors of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* represent "the mental illness of depression":

That is exactly what they are. It was entirely conscious. And entirely from my own experience. Depression is the most unpleasant thing I have ever experienced. It is that absence of being able to envisage that you will ever be cheerful again. The absence of hope. That very deadened feeling, which is so very different from feeling sad. Sad hurts but it's a healthy feeling. It's a necessary thing to feel. Depression is very different.²⁰²

Not only do fans have this public confession from Rowling, they also have book characters—symbols—functioning as fictional representatives of how she has suffered. The symbols, moreover, exist dynamically both as magnifiers and

²⁰² See Colbert, p. 43. Also see Kirk, p. 60, who portrays Rowling's creation of the dementors as "frightening creatures that can suck out all joy and memories of any good thing and leave their victims empty with despair. This is territory that Jo can write about with personal knowledge...."

reminders, a potent combination for fans already believing that the object of their fandom occupies mythic status. She emerges as an authentic suffering creator, a potency further intensified in embryonic scholarship offering an interpretive consistency with what fans already know.

This interpretive consistency, however, must be recognized for being mostly devoid of critical commentary. With the exception of polemical religious semi-scholarship taking aim at *magick* in the Harry Potter books,²⁰³ moreover, the early semi-academic sources analyze and interpret but they seldom criticize. This to say, they function primarily in agreement with the majority reception of both J.K. Rowling and her books, avoiding positions seeming to contradict the majority opinion. This may be a response to the conservative voice perceived to exist in minority public criticism,²⁰⁴ or it may be motivated by a desire on the part of commentators and their publishers to reach large audiences with analysis and interpretation. Regardless of the source, however, semi-scholarly voices of critical intent are slow to emerge, further reinforcing the one-way momentum of the myth.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ See Richard Abanes' *Harry Potter and the Bible: The Menace behind the Magick* (2001). *Magick* here refers to the non-innocent practices of noted writer, Aleister Crowley.

²⁰⁴ This is conjecture based on the perceived protection of Rowling against conservative critics in the semi-academic literature to this point.

²⁰⁵ The emerging scholarship tends to focus primarily on the Harry Potter texts themselves, neglecting to address the early biographical presentations. *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon* (Whited, 2002), *The Wisdom of Harry Potter: What Our Favorite Hero Teaches Us About Moral Choices* (Kern, 2003), *Harry Potter's World: Multidisciplinary Critical Perspectives* (Heilman, 2003), *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Perspectives* (Anatol, 2003), and *Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts* (Baggett and Klein, 2004), address the books while portraying the author as primarily an instrumental figure in the books' creation.

6.2.5 MASS SUPPORT OF A MEDIA DARLING

A third mythologizing source is perhaps the most obvious one: the popular periodical press. From the beginning of Rowling's mass appropriation by global print and broadcast media, she was packaged as a real-life person who had transcended ordinary existence by achieving a fantasy life. She became the subject of a journalistic meta-narrative existing in parallel to the story of her immense book sales. Fulfilling standard criteria for news judgment she emerged as a media darling who, in original accounts, was cast in the image of fantasy characters such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *Cinderella*. Observe these accounts from America's two largest newsmagazines:

Rowling's Cinderella-like story began...in Edinburgh. An unemployed schoolteacher and the divorced mother of a 3-month old daughter, she began to write out of desperation, convinced she had nothing left to lose. ("Success: A Literary Sorceress," *Newsweek*, Dec. 7, 1998)

[The story of Harry Potter is] no more unbelievable than Rowling's own Cinderella story. An unemployed, unpublished divorced mother with a tiny daughter, she wrote a lot of the first Harry Potter book in longhand, sitting in a coffee shop while her toddler napped. ("Magician for Millions," *Newsweek*, Aug. 23, 1999)

Rowling, a single mother who wrote part of the Harry Potter book while on the dole, feels she has slid right down the rabbit hole into Wonderland.... [S]he never considered writing for children until one day in 1990, when "Harry just strolled into my head fully formed." That same year, however, her life fell apart. ("Abracadabra!" *Time*, July 26, 1999)

As each of these excerpts demonstrates, early accounts of Rowling's story combined her struggle to write, her personal suffering, and her eventual success, all three elements couched in terms and characters consistent with fantasy elements of her books. Though news organizations sought to avoid the most common cliché of all, *rags to riches*, this was precisely the story they were telling to their audiences. It was a narrative of rags to riches, connected by suffering, and to the present moment it has not changed course.

The rapidly maturing narrative became broken roughly into seven phases which, though not always told in perfect chronology, came together in support of the rags-to-riches theme. These phases included the death of Rowling's mother and its coincidence with the original imagining of Harry Potter on a train between Manchester and London. Next, came abandonment of the story simultaneous to an unhappy marriage and consequent divorce in Portugal. What followed was material and emotional impoverishment as a single mother in Edinburgh and then resumption of the writing, facilitated by a government grant, and eventual publication of the first Harry Potter book. The next phase included sudden wealth, notoriety, and critical praise for book one, followed by attacks from conservative religious groups for themes of witchcraft and sorcery. The final phase told of Rowling's emergence as rich, selfless, philanthropic, and preferring a life of anonymity rather than active celebrity. As more of the story becomes known, basic revisions have occurred, though none have compromised the media myth which has lodged in public consciousness. The revisions have actually intensified its effect: the

unhappy marriage is now understood as having been an abusive one, and other suffering (as well as success) components have been accentuated, with factual basis, to further support the rags-to-riches mythologizing.²⁰⁶

6.2.6 A PUBLIC FACILITATION OF BELIEVABLE IDENTIFICATION

What the journalistic meta-narrative has accomplished, moreover, is this: it has, to date, established an uncritical, mass-circulated myth of a suffering mother who has triumphed over adversity to nurture the world's suffering children through her writing. This is the story of an attentive figure that has found a way to use its own suffering so that it becomes a beneficial healing experience for the deprived. Tuned-in audiences across the globe know this story because no other one has ever been told, and fans (who extract their tastes and preferences largely from the mass audience) have adapted this myth to their own subcultural purposes. One of the most common thread-starters in the online Harry Potter fan culture involves the

²⁰⁶ Media attention given to revisions of Rowling's story have coincided with the publication of each Harry Potter book. Here, journalistic process and news judgment criteria come into play. With each best-selling book generating increased public attention, more efforts to background the story are made. A very good example of this is Stephen McGinty's three-part series in *The Scotsman*, presented in the days leading to publication of book five, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. "The J.K. Rowling story," "In the Eye of the Storm," and "The Legacy of Harry," provided additional noncritical background to known details of the story. McGinty's first sentence reads, "Before Harry Potter, before the novels, before the films, before the millions and millions of pounds, there was a little girl who liked to play witches and wizards" (*The Scotsman*, 16 June 2003). This "before" (and after, too) component joined the mainstream global press as a whole in enlarging Rowling's story, magnifying familiar elements such as the mother's death from multiple sclerosis, the troubled marriage, and the welfare experience in Edinburgh. Each element was bathed in new details, uncritically adding to the overall story. It remains this way: a constantly growing picture of amplified image components, true to its origins and lacking critique.

recitation of something Rowling said or did, as reported in the mass media. Fans consume the media narrative repeatedly, then log into the perpetual 24/7 conversation; what results, often, are the lengthy threads initiated by Bosshogg's statement: "Ms. Rowling has said in an interview that writing one death scene in particular will be painful to her. Which character do you think she's talking about?"

What the entire nonfiction meta-narrative of juvenile biography, semi-scholarly commentary, and the popular press has accomplished (for fans exclusively), finally, is little less than a facilitating of believable identification. The touching of shared self-awareness at core levels is in evidence here. It has been facilitated rhetorically, scholastically, and journalistically by the spontaneously quick and comprehensive media culture which appropriated J.K. Rowling as a known quantity: the one who knows them and whom they know. As Bosshogg also stated, "I have a real soft spot...and I think it's because Rowling does too...." Linked in mutual identification, fan and object share both pathos and wisdom over an important creative act seeming to be necessary and unavoidable. Consequently, at no time in Bosshogg's long thread did even one fan express a lack of trust toward Rowling for her plan to sacrifice a major character. She was, after all, only doing what they would do because, in their minds and in her own (they believe), she feels what they feel. The bond of mutual knowing and feeling (affective identification) resists breaches of trust, at least to this point in the fan culture. The suffering nurturer's resiliency is seldom in question.

6.3 IDENTIFICATION OF A SUFFERING FAN TEXT

A suffering text which identifies and invites reciprocation is the second half of what I have called “the multilateral object of devotion” in the Harry Potter fan culture. Here, I argue that the Harry Potter books, primarily, (and the resultant media culture, secondarily) function as a suffering fan text of deprivations, satisfactions, and abundance, all of which culminate in an ability to correlate with fans’ beliefs about themselves and their worlds. Fans seek, and believe that they find, an understanding of who they are and what needs they possess at the core human levels where reciprocal identification occurs. These needs may include, but are not limited to, self-esteem and the mutual granting of personal worth; experiences of aesthetic engagement and fulfillment; and even desires for the experience of spirituality and transcendence. The process of feeling known on some or all of these levels marks the center of the identification experience.

I continue with a second vignette from the *Ninth Annual St. Petersburg Times Festival of Reading*:

6.3.1 “I WOULDN’T MAKE HARRY HAVE TO GO BACK TO THE DURSLEYS....”

10 November 2001, Eckerd College, St. Petersburg, Florida. With its stated theme “Can Books Save the World?” the latest installment of one of Florida’s major book festivals has been launched. Spread out across the campus lawns of Eckerd College are book tables, booths, and entertainment venues devoted to the enjoyments of reading and the arts of

storytelling. There are “famous dead author” discussion groups, a local poet’s soapbox, and a Storybook Character Parade set to begin at 1 pm.

A place especially for children, the Big Top Story Tent, is offering readings of “The Legend of Santa and his Brother Fred,” “The Adventures of Ricky Raccoon and Jodi the Cat,” and “Kokopelli and the Butterfly” continuously throughout the day. More potent story-related energies, however, are emanating from the Dendy McNair Auditorium, where the advertised Harry Potter Book Discussion has just begun. Everyone is invited to attend.

People of many ages occupy the auditorium’s seats, but a cohesive group of two dozen young Harry Potter fans have formed a panel on stage. A moderator is questioning them about favorite characters (“Hagrid” “Hermione” “Professor Snape” “Professor McGonagall”), favorite scenes (“Christmas at Hogwarts” “When Harry meets Hagrid” “When Harry sees his parents in a mirror”), and favorite themes (“good versus evil” “triumph of the underdog” “fun”). There is a discussion of how local schools are, and aren’t, like Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; and another about what things are learned about Great Britain from the Harry Potter books.

Midway through the discussion, the moderator asks the panelists, “If you were J.K. Rowling, what would you do differently as the author of the books?” Many answers are given, but one in particular resonates with the other panelists and the audience. “One thing I would do different,” says an adolescent male fan, “is, I wouldn’t make Harry have to go back to the Dursleys at the end of every book.”

*The other panel members nod in agreement, while several fans in the audience cheer and clap their hands approvingly.*²⁰⁷

6.3.2 AN INTERPLAY OF DEPRIVATIONS AND ABUNDANCE

This blip on the radar screen of the emerging Harry Potter fandom may seem insignificant. However, this young fan's comment about Rowling sending Harry back to live with the Dursley family at the end of each book, I argue, expresses a common and revealing theme among fans: their difficulty with, but acceptance of, forced removal from an environment of satisfactions and abundance and forced return to an environment of variable deprivations.

By this, I mean to argue that fans do not like this forced fictional change of environments in their chosen text, but at the same time they believe that Harry's dilemma is their own dilemma in real life. They see themselves as moving in worlds of interchangeable extremes aptly described as a volatile mix of deprivations and abundance. They have on one hand an infinite number of opportunities to experience abundance in the form of pleasures and satisfactions. But, on the other hand, the deprivations they experience and see themselves as escaping through consumption of the text are as real, or perhaps more so, than the abundance. Indeed, it is likely that the forms of abundance have the effect of accentuating the deprivations: knowing what is good, in other words, increases one's awareness of what is not good.

²⁰⁷ This event is reconstructed based on personal observation on 10 November 2001.

As a family of *muggles* who work hard at keeping Harry from experiencing an abundant life, the Dursleys create conditions of extreme privation for Harry. Residing as they do on *Privet Drive*,²⁰⁸ this fictional environment stifles the hero repeatedly, exerting a comprehensive restriction on all avenues he might otherwise travel toward the realization of an active, fulfilled self. He feels dislocated from being aware that he doesn't belong in the muggle world into which he had been placed as an infant. He feels angry from the violated inner sanctum imposed on his adoptive family. He feels isolated due to his awareness that no one from this strange world understands him. And he hungers for satisfactions which would empower him toward self-realization.²⁰⁹ These deprivations are compounded, moreover, by the palpable separation he feels from the loss of his natural parents, who, according to the text, had been murdered when he was an infant.

The magical escape from Harry's locus privatio, moreover, occurs when he is transported to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. It is there he will embark on a path which leads to having his deprivations satisfied, partially at first and increasingly as his story unfolds. At Hogwarts, he finds himself suddenly located in a world where at least some residents recognize him for who he is, and

²⁰⁸ Despite her use of the word, *privet*, containing a portion of the word *privation*, there is no evidence that Rowling was trying to make a relevant point here. The privet is a well-known evergreen shrub, common in the construction of hedges existing in suburban environments such as the Dursleys's.

²⁰⁹ This four-point organization of Harry's deprivations corresponds intentionally to the four deprivations explored in Chapter Five. There may be other ways of viewing Harry's life with the Dursleys, though seeing it in this way, if nothing else, draws attention to the Harry Potter books as a suitable fan text. His suffering as a fictional character is consistent, moreover, with the variable deprivations I have labeled as privation.

many of his deprivations are met with nourishing satisfactions. “Compared to the Dursleys’s metaphorical starvation of Harry, both physical and emotional, Hogwarts nourishes him physically and spiritually,” writes Elizabeth D. Schafer in *Exploring Harry Potter*. An abundance of connectivity, release, identification, and empowerment begin to shape his existence as a maturing self, and in small doses he even begins to comprehend the meaning of his parents’ murder and how this greatest of losses can be approached. With a thus-far incomplete narrative, answers and solutions are not present, yet approaches are possible as Harry learns how to live in a self-nurturing environment.

6.3.3 ESCAPE INTO A WORLD THAT MAKES SENSE

This capsulized summary represents the heart of the consumed book narrative by the Harry Potter fan culture at this point. It is a narrative in which adventure, mystery, and romance²¹⁰ link with pervasive melodramatic suffering to form a central moral fantasy of contained suffering, around which all narrative events play out. Adventure occurs in the skillful, courageous heroism of Harry (assisted by his friends) as he discovers moral vision on his way toward the accomplishment of virtues. Mystery occurs in the acquisition and employment of

²¹⁰ These terms are offered in their original sequence by John G. Cawelti, who contributed one of the foundational texts solidifying our understanding of how popular literature functions as an artistry of escape. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (1976), while criticized for its reduction of popular literature to his three highlighted genres, nevertheless laid important groundwork in subjects such as justification of the enjoyment of popular texts, melodramatic suffering, and moral fantasies residing at the center of popular literature.

rational solutions leading to the resolve of hidden, secretive problems. Romance is foundational and functional, not primarily in the presentation of romantic sexual relationships, but in the colorful portrayal of secret spaces, lands removed, and sequestered sites contributing to the pleasurable existence of juvenile and adolescent narrative.²¹¹

The linkage of each of these elements, moreover to the pervasive suffering which exists is a melodramatic one, as is the suffering itself. By this, I do not mean to devalue the multiple ways suffering is depicted in the Harry Potter books, but rather to emphasize that it is presented in a context of essential rightness: the requisite correctness of how this fictional world is ordered and how living beings fit into it. Harry suffers overwhelming deprivations, but his suffering is thus far contained by rules of popular narrative which orders states of deprivation in such a way that things turn out right in the end. Such melodramatic suffering, furthermore, identifies strongly with young fans who instinctively crave social (especially familial) ordering. They need to see that their suffering occurs in contained, supervised spaces where positive forces rule over negative ones.²¹² Older

²¹¹ See especially June Cummins's "The Secret World of Harry Potter" in *Michigan Quarterly Review* (2000). Cummins notes the importance of the Harry Potter books in providing a land removed, to which young readers can escape in their instinctive need for imaginative privacy. She expresses concerns that transferring the books to commercialized culture may compromise this romantic secrecy. See, also, the following scholarly and semi-scholarly sources: "Harry Potter's Schooldays" by Alexandra Mullen (*The Hudson Review*, 2000), "Much Ado About Harry" by Michael Wenberg (*Mars Hill Review*, 1999), *We Love Harry Potter: We'll Tell You Why* by Sharon Moore (St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), and *Harry Potter and the Meaning of Life* by Philip Plymington (Grove Books Limited, 2001).

²¹² As Chantel Lavoie argues in her essay, "Safe as Houses: Sorting and School Houses at Hogwarts" (see pp. 35-49 in *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays*, 2003), the presence of

fans who read as young fans, and indeed all those who read the books as a means of escape from disordered circumstances, experience intense identification, too.

Harry's story touches them at their points of deprivation and facilitates their escape into a world that, to them, makes sense.

6.3.4 THE IDENTIFYING POWER OF POPULAR LITERATURE

A generous scholastic database, it should be mentioned, which explores identifying capacities of popular fiction, covers topics ranging from therapeutic elements of fairy tales to the abilities of *cult* books to speak to and also for audiences. Archetypes such as witches, shadows, and portals, in texts like *The Wizard of Oz*, for instance, have been approached as elemental identifying forces for readers encountering life struggles and spiritual quests for wholeness. Even mystery novels have been studied in contexts that speak to the management of social alienation.²¹³ For young readers especially (though not exclusively), a broadly acknowledged premise has been that the artificial worlds and symbols of popular genres can be seen as more successful than realistic, or *mimetic*, fiction in establishing lifelike, believable worlds. They possess a communicative effectiveness built on helping readers to pretend, whereby readers can more easily imagine their way into and out

contained, supervised structures, such as the houses into which students get sorted at the beginning of each book, provides a needed refuge from uncontained, unsupervised spaces outside the school. Harry gets sorted into the safe environment facilitating both his "independence" and his "sense of belonging" in a world where he otherwise has neither.

²¹³ See "Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer Tales: a Study in Religion and Literature" (Mahan 1986).

of fictional worlds containing suffering and catastrophic events.²¹⁴ Fiction that is escapist, and indeed formulaic, moreover, identifies with such audiences because it reproduces an experience of cultural consensus²¹⁵ in which all things work together for good, even though good is arrived at through melodramatic and often artificial means. The mimetic, on the other hand, in its emphasis on confronting readers with a reality not dependent on either the fantastic or the formulaic, may occupy a privileged place as serious literature, yet it is its escapist counterpart, arguably, which identifies the most with suffering readers.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ See Margaret and Michael Rustin's *Narratives of Love & Loss: Studies in Modern Children's Fiction* (1987). In the authors' words, "Literary realism especially becomes problematic when readers share little common experience of social worlds, except that mediated to them by mass communications. The radical simplifications of 'artificial worlds'...come to seem more lifelike and believable than 'realism' on a broader canvas. Within the constraints of these more 'specialized fictions' it becomes possible to create a complexity which is...felt to be intelligible, and more satisfying in this respect than readers' experience of their real-life worlds" (p. 16).

²¹⁵ This is Cawelti's concept, meant to express the importance of agreement making among readers over what is real, what is good and evil, and what is interesting. See "The Artistic Characteristics of Formula Literature," pp. 8-20, and "Formulas and Culture," pp. 20-36, in Cawelti's chapter, "The Study of Literary Formulas."

²¹⁶ We need to move cautiously, however, through this topic of identifying texts. I would argue here that the identifying power of a text containing artificial elements achieves its correlative power mainly with large audiences or the mass audience. This is not always true, of course, but this is its essential context, of which the Harry Potter books are a good example. Realistic or mimetic texts, however, have identifying power, too, which may actually be more intense, though with smaller audiences. Thomas Reed Whissen's studies of cult fiction, moreover, include more books of realism than fantasy in his list of cult classics. Mimetic fictions such as *The Great Gatsby* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* identify with their readers as strongly as artificial fictions like *The Lord of the Rings* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* identify with theirs. To bring this into the arena of fandom, the fact that both kinds of texts are capable of strong identifying powers is one more reason why *serious* texts (serious literature, film, and music, for instance) cannot be ruled out as authentic fan texts. Jane Austen's books have fans, just as J.K. Rowling's books have fans. (See Whissen's *Classic Cult Fiction: a Companion to Popular Cult Literature*, 1992, for further insights into cult literary phenomena.)

We may see this popular identifying phenomenon in John Cawelti's still-relevant argument that an art of literary escapism exists in the genres of well-executed popular fiction. Popular texts facilitate escapism first by offering a comprehensive force of identification that addresses the reader's need to resolve a tension between the experiences of order and disorder. Order versus disorder—or more specifically, order, peace, and security versus anxiety, uncertainty, and risk—are primal human needs, it is argued, which exist in a constant state of tension. We crave the first set of dynamics because they represent an equilibrium which sustains us in times of uncertainty and fear. We crave the second set when equilibrium itself becomes too constant, producing boredom. Popular texts synthesize these needs, Cawelti argues, thereby reducing or eliminating our individual and corporate experiences of this tension.

If Cawelti's theory can be updated to include post-millennial fan cultures and their chosen texts, it is accomplished through a revision of wording in his argument holding that human beings need anxiety and uncertainty. Fans have anxiety and uncertainty, which they seek to lessen or eliminate through the escape function provided by their fandom. Certainly, boredom is a motivating factor in fandom (as it is in random media consumption), and thus the need to experience contained anxiety and uncertainty in textual consumption resonates well when we consider the identifying power of popular fan texts. Yet, to say that Harry Potter fans, our example here, revel in textual conflicts merely because they are exercising their primal need for risk, stops short of diagnosing underlying concerns of contemporary

media consumers. What is more likely the case in the contemporary situation is that the need for conflict has merged with the experience of it in fan cultures. Harry Potter fans, in other words, need the portrayals of suffering they see in their text, but because their own suffering exists in generous proportions, they bring both need and experience to the text. The result is a very dense and comprehensive form of reciprocal identification reaching fans on those parallel, but not equal, levels. They read out of a primal need to play with pain, but even more so do they also crave the attention of a text they believe truly knows their own pain.²¹⁷

6.3.5 DAVID'S STORY

Let us take a look at how these factors might play out in the life and experience of one Harry Potter fan.

David, a fourteen-year-old fan from St. Petersburg Florida, was one of ten winners of a Harry Potter essay contest launched by Scholastic, the American publisher of the book series. In spring of 2003, Scholastic solicited three-hundred-word essays from fans, asking them to respond to this question: "If you could have one special power taught at Hogwarts, what would it be and why?" More than

²¹⁷ At least a minority opinion within emerging Harry Potter scholarship holds that suffering is a significant factor in drawing readers to the books. Whether the emphasis is on children and psychological trauma (see pp. 163-84 of "Wizardly Challenges to and Affirmations of the Initiation Paradigm in Harry Potter" by Deborah De Rosa, in *Harry Potter's World: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 2003), children being found by evil (see pp. 44-56 in John Killinger's *God, the Devil, and Harry Potter*, 2002), or children and disillusionment (see pp. 63-72 of Donna G. Woodford's "Disillusionment in Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix," in *Topic: The Washington & Jefferson College Review*, Vol. 54, Fall 2004), suffering is seen as a unifying textual component across the readership.

twelve thousand entries were submitted as fans sought to win a free trip to London's Royal Albert Hall to meet J.K. Rowling and hear her read from *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. The ten winners, including David, ranged in age from eight to sixteen and were selected from many geographic regions of the United States.²¹⁸

Describing himself as having read the first four Harry Potter books seven times, David originally received the books as gifts from his grandmother in celebration of his thirteenth birthday. "Grandma Grace," as he calls her, also encouraged him to enter the essay contest on the condition that he take her to England with him if he won. His untitled essay tells about being a third-year student at Hogwarts whose goal is to discover a magic potion that will heal broken hearts. He knows what an unhealed broken heart feels like, he says, because his heart broke the day his mother died. He writes:

One thing I have not yet had the privilege of learning is how to heal a broken heart. Although I am only fourteen years old, I have the experience of a broken heart due to the death of my mother, and it is still not healed.

For this reason I am determined to learn how to acquire the power of healing broken hearts. I don't care who makes it, evil or good, I just would like to have the chance to heal a broken heart. It can help people all over the world and cure problems. I loved my mom and she is gone. I would like the sadness to start lifting somewhat.

²¹⁸ David's story is reconstructed from two articles by Lane DeGregory in *The St. Petersburg Times*. They include "The Last Valentine's Day" (Feb. 10, 2002) and "If I Could Do Magic Like Harry Potter" (June 12, 2003). The Harry Potter Essay Contest is reconstructed from information on the Scholastic website on 26 June 2003 (<http://www.scholastic.com/harrypotter/essay.htm>).

I think it would be great, especially for kids who really should have the privilege of happiness in their young years. For this reason I am determined to learn how to acquire the power of healing broken hearts.

David's winning essay had joined nine other winners, seven of which clearly articulated themes of personal suffering. Another fourteen-year-old fan wanted to find a spell to cure obesity and the depression it causes. An eight-year-old fan wanted a potion that would cure the autism of his sister. A twelve-year-old fan sought to develop an *evolutio reparo* ("Latin for 'repair reading'") charm so that his older brother could learn how to read better. One fan, eight, sought a potion that would make her temporarily blind so she could know how a blind school friend feels, and a sixteen-year-old fan wanted a magic cure for her father who had suffered a stroke. This last fan wrote,

He is now left without any physical mobility on his left side. My imagination used to wander (sic.), as to how I could magically change things. Life has thrown my mom and me a devastating curve, and only my ability to pretend could rescue me from reality.²¹⁹

All of these fans have provided evidence which strongly suggests that their reading of the Harry Potter books is a natural fit with their personal awareness of their own and others' suffering. Reciprocal identification with the text here is as unforced as it is vividly expressed, with each fan understanding the playful relationship he or she has with it, but at the same time acknowledging deeper correlative activity. Their writing shows that this textual experience is about having

²¹⁹ Ibid.

fun while they also engage with the text on the levels of deprivation, empathy, and compassion. As Scholastic stated after the contest had finished, “Reading these essays was a...reminder of the deep connection J.K. Rowling’s books make with her readers....”²²⁰

David had said this himself, in the words of a fourteen-year-old who craved an identifying force in his life. “They [the books] really helped me. I got them at just the right time,” he said.

6.3.6 “YOU FEEL LIKE YOU’RE THERE WITH HARRY POTTER....”

David’s words “just at the right time” express his response to reading the Harry Potter books when he was feeling the lowest about losing his mother. They helped compensate the loss. His mother had taken him and his sister through a divorce, had remarried, and reestablished them in a stable family environment with a new father. Then, at forty, she developed symptoms of a severe cold, checked into a hospital, and seventeen days later died from influenza B and pneumonia. David was without his mother and his natural father, who had left the family after the divorce, but his stepfather was loving, stable, and present. This made the loss manageable for David, though the vacuum left by being motherless was often palpable. He said, “I used to wake up to the sound of my mom’s voice. Every morning when she walked into my room, she’d say, ‘Good morning, Sunshine!’ Now I wake up to bzzz, bzzz, bzzz.”

²²⁰ Ibid.

The Harry Potter books came from his grandmother a few months after David's mother died. He heard about them from a friend named Chris, who had told him "about [another] world he had found" in them. When David started to read them, he became distracted from fretting over his loss. "They really gave me other stuff to think about, instead of my mom," he said. He also liked the way they were written, which he interpreted as being different from "other books that are boring." He said, "I mean, you feel like you're there with Harry Potter. You can smell stuff and hear stuff and be right in that scene."²²¹ Then, after multiple pleasurable readings of each book, he found out about Scholastic's essay contest, entered, and joined the other nine winners in London on 26 June 2003. That is his story as a Harry Potter fan.

6.3.7 BENEATH THE PLAY AND PLEASURE: A SUPREME ORDEAL

David's comment about feeling "like you're there with Harry Potter" has more meaning for him, I argue, than simply that which might be explained away as a reader's absorption into an enjoyable narrative. There are, moreover, two clearly intertwined phases of meaningful, textually consumptive activity operating here: one having to do with the primal urge to play in and through the text (experiencing its abundance), the other having to do with a powerfully motivated desire to participate in what can be thought of as a supreme ordeal. This second phase may also be considered a primal response; though I argue, in the context of active

²²¹ Ibid.

suffering which occurs in fan cultures, that existent social forces play a prominent role in linking the reader voluntarily with the text. The fan here has chosen a specific text because it identifies with him as he experiences his specific ordeal.

Certainly, as his essay for Scholastic articulates, playing in and with the text is an important part of David's textual consumption. He writes about learning spells and making potions which he says "should probably contain stardust, cloud puffs, sunrays, skylights, rainbow pieces, and a piece of chocolate." This is an example of a child expressing involuntary, primal delights in response to a pleurably identifying text. He, like many other readers, is taking part in a magical, fantastic world of special flavors and objects, a world set apart from other ordinary worlds. Invisible train platforms, dark mysterious lakes, and other portals and thresholds have been entered and crossed over onto another side: the secret side where deprivations first begin to disappear even as they are mysteriously replaced by the satisfactions of imagined material and social abundance. There is much to eat, much to do, and plenty of people with whom to engage in the playful, pleasurable activities of childhood.

Along the way, however, symbols in the text begin to intensify. The secret existence of play and pleasure deepens into one of Harry's self-proof and self-realization amid obstacles. There are serious battles to fight, wounds to endure, and inflamed scars to manage. Being "like you're there with Harry Potter," moreover, becomes a whole-person exercise of merging with Harry's world and life experience, which are very much full of suffering expressed as deep privation. Harry is the

solitary hero whose phases of departure, initiation, and return (assuming he does return triumphant) are characterized by misery. The misery is broken up by brief returns to lighter passages in the narrative, but it is clearly his role as a suffering hero that is most remembered by readers.²²²

6.3.8 A SUFFERING CARICATURE WHO IDENTIFIES

What has seemed to have been under-addressed in the interpretations of the books is analysis of the obvious fact that Harry's personal suffering is too great for him reasonably to endure. His status as a suffering hero who must navigate his way through the supreme ordeal seems stretched in credibility because he is—to this point—a young person. To have had both parents murdered, himself painfully wounded in the same attack, and forced to exist in the forced privation of the Dursleys's environment (not to mention the attacks from evil foes he must endure as a student at Hogwarts), have caricatured him as a living punching bag. Possibly, this is why in interviews, J.K. Rowling has left open the prospect that he may not survive all seven books. On the other hand, as long as Harry's suffering remains

²²² The idea that suffering is what is most remembered (though not necessarily most articulated) by fans receives endorsement from the resistant fan, GenuineT, with whom I conversed often during the year of online research. Despite GenuineT's almost constant attempts to stifle confessional, sentimental thinking, she (assuming gender credibility) said this of Harry's suffering: "How would I evaluate the possible roles suffering plays in terms of Harry's character? Everyone in the story suffers in some way. Talk about suffering—talk about Lupin or Neville. Talk about Pettigrew, living the life of a rat. [Or] Hagrid, expelled and outcast from his mother's race. Ron and Snape suffer jealousy. Hermione suffers frustration. Everyone suffers" (22 July 2001).

melodramatically presented (resolved by containing forces in each book), he will continue to survive and ultimately endure.

As a suffering caricature, moreover, he identifies even more with young fans who likely would not be moved by a non-caricatured sufferer. Not only does he function as an archetype fulfilling the persuasive communication function of artificial beings, he is also a caricatured figure whose exaggerated suffering is accepted as relevant and believable by fans. Especially in the deprivation resulting from the loss of his parents, he becomes identified with all young fans who have experienced parental losses. With a fan like David, whose loss of a natural father to divorce and a natural mother to sudden death, the suffering caricature Harry presents forges a bond of mutual identification strong enough to explain the comments placed by David in his Scholastic essay. His words about feeling “like you’re there with Harry Potter,” moreover, sit side-by-side in persuasive sincerity with, “I have the experience of a broken heart due to the death of my mother, and it has still not healed. I loved my mom and she is gone. I would like the sadness to start lifting....”

6.3.9 IDENTIFICATION AT THE LEVEL OF PARENTAL LOSS

This, I argue, is an example of the identifying power of a suffering fan text. Disparate elements within such a text correlate with disparate elements within the textual consumer, in this case at the level of a child’s experience of parental loss. It is important, furthermore, to note that David believes he is this person who is

deprived of an affective mothering presence, and we would likely conclude, from evidence, that his belief is accurate. However, even if evidence showed that this were not an accurate summation of his real condition, the fact that he believes it to be real marks out the essence of the underlying pattern of identification.²²³ The fan perceives himself in a certain way at the core of his being, and, coupled with his particular reading of the chosen text, his perception merges with a penetrating and comprehensive form of identification.

That the author—the suffering nurturer—of the Harry Potter books found a way to foster resilient bonds of identification between the text she created and the fans who consume it, may go far in explaining why the series has grown excessively popular. She provided basic fictional materials allowing a generation of readers to satisfy at least one form of personal deprivation: that of parental loss.

An obvious corollary here, however, occurs in the question of how representative a fan like David may actually be? Without quantitative data revealing an accurate idea of family demographics in the Harry Potter fandom, we do not know the answer to this. It would be foolish, moreover, to assume that all

²²³ It is possible that a fan like David believes he has undergone a witnessing process not unlike Harry's own witnessing process. Even though their parents were removed from their lives by different circumstances (and one is fictional while the other is real), both the character and the real person are witnesses to the removal of their crucial life supports. Thus, David sees in Harry someone who has experienced his own tragic loss, solidifying the bond of reciprocal identification he feels. For insights into traumatic witnessing as it occurs in the books, see Heather Debling's "'You survived to bear witness': Trauma, Testimony, and the Burden of Witnessing in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*" (pp. 73-82, *Topic: The Washington & Jefferson College Review*, Vol. 54, Fall 2004). Debling sees the problem of witnessing as stemming from an experience of the catastrophic event itself and then the memory of the event over time, a two-fold intensity the subject finds difficult to bear. For David, bearing his own burden of witnessing is easier when he sees what Harry has had to endure.

fans experience reciprocal identification based on being deprived of familial bonds and presences in exactly the same way. Indeed, one of the winners of Scholastic's contest seemed to go in the opposite direction, writing, "Would I rid the world of pain? [No.] I realized that I'm happy just the way I am. I have a good family, nice friends, and a lot of books."²²⁴ Still, the verifiable presence of the Davids, who respond heartily to the suffering identification of the Harry Potter books (plus their corroboration by likeminded fans such as those in the Scholastic contest who seem to confirm that there is significant representation), argues at the very least for further research into the presence of family-based deprivation within the fan culture.²²⁵ It is possible to think that reciprocal identification of this particular suffering fan text may rest to an unknown extent on the symbiotic life experiences of parentless or single-parent children.

6.4 IDENTIFICATION *WITHIN* A SUFFERING FAN CULTURE

Identification with a suffering nurturer, and of a suffering text, is now joined by critical acknowledgment of reciprocal identification within the Harry Potter fan culture. Fans, by this acknowledgment, mesh their interactions in such a way that the psychological correlation they derive from the multilateral object of devotion in

²²⁴ Scholastic website.

²²⁵ Nancee Lee Allen, a professional counselor at St. Anne's Parish in Los Angeles, uses the Harry Potter books in her work with teens she describes as "overindulgent because of deprivation" they have experienced. She believes Harry speaks to parentless children who compensate for their losses through excessive forms of antisocial behavior, and that the books are capable of raising self-esteem when children see that Harry's experiences resemble their own. (Personal interview, 10 October 2005)

their fandom becomes the primary basis of their interactivity. They feel known, and they share this known-ness in their web of cohesive socializing. By way of critique, however, some of the research presented in this section brings into further question the supreme importance of fandom to fans seeking relief from suffering. The problem of fandom as necessity versus fandom as choice is at issue here, and it seems likely that some (perhaps many) fans choose when to allow their fandom to function as a means by which deprivations are satisfied. This is not to compromise the idea of fandom's impact on any particular fan, but instead to see this impact as a product of deliberation rather than spontaneity. To acknowledge this process and its related issues, we need to return to the online fan culture, though we begin with a third vignette from the emerging material side of the fandom.

6.4.1 FULL-LENGTH WIZARD WEAR

21 January 2002, Odeon Theatre, Edinburgh, Scotland. It is now a little over two months since the movie, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, made its debut in London. Movie-goers across Great Britain had been ecstatic when the film version of the first Harry Potter book was released in mid-November, and even in an afternoon matinee in Edinburgh two months later, there are still plenty of viewers in the audience. Children and adults, in surprisingly equal numbers, have escaped a winter drizzle falling outside on Nicolson Street, not far from the Nicolson Street Restaurant where J.K. Rowling is said to have written the book which led to the movie we are now watching. The crowd here is a subdued Edinburgh one, perhaps reflecting the mood of the weather.

This wasn't the case in America two months earlier. There, in the November sunshine of Florida's gulf coast, loud, energized crowds of children, parents, and others attended sold-out shows of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. Thirteen-year-old Spencer Bradham of Back to Basics Private School in Clearwater, and eleven-year-old Ricky Hawley of Coachman Middle School in Clearwater, even skipped school to see the film. The now-familiar character costumes were sported by many of the younger children, such as six-year-old Keith Perkins of Pinellas Park whom with round glasses, thick black hair, and full-length wizard wear, looked as much like Harry Potter as did Daniel Radcliffe, the lead actor in the film.

Many people knew that records in distribution, if not attendance, were going to be set. A record number of 3,672 theatres were scheduled to show the film on more than 8,200 screens in the U.S. At Citrus Park Town Center theatres in Tampa, the movie began its run by showing on six screens for patrons of a shopping mall closely resembling Main Street at Disney-Orlando's Magic Kingdom. Nearby at Tampa's AMC WestShore 14, Shelley and Bryan Jeter had taken their children, twelve-year-old Jessella and ten-year-old Cody, to a first performance. Shelley Jeter said they had planned this event months ago, promising Jessella and Cody that on opening day "we would get the tickets to the first show we could find."²²⁶

With the exception of literary purists who felt betrayed when J.K. Rowling sold away the movie and commercial rights to the books, the release of *Harry Potter*

²²⁶ Reconstructed from personal observation in both geographical locations and from "Off to See the Wizard" by Steve Persall, *St. Petersburg Times*, 17 November 2001.

and the Sorcerer's stone into theatres was an enormous event for the Harry Potter fan culture. Purists like POW64 complained that the “picturization” of characters and settings by the films would compromise what had been heretofore only imagined, but many fans welcomed the placement of their text into visual media. Ultimately, even many of the purists saw and enjoyed the film. It stayed close to the text of book one as Rowling had written it, and readers saw that another media form could amplify and clarify elements which had already been presented in writing by the author.

6.4.2 FAN INSECURITIES IN THE POST-9/11 AFTERMATH

An entirely different series of events—those surrounding the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States—also made the film timely by providing a new avenue of escape, for American fans especially. This, moreover, is where we will begin our discussion of reciprocal identification specifically as it exists between and among fans within the Harry Potter fandom. Our focus here, however, is not primarily on how the movie may have affected fans immediately following 9/11, but rather on how the fan culture as a whole responded to the presence of felt insecurities during the days and weeks after the terrorist attacks. Consumption of the first Harry Potter film was part of this response, but the greater activity was characterized by a drawing upon of resources from the entire media text at that moment. As I will show, the online members of *Talk About Harry Potter* became

introspective seekers of mutual identification based on their use of this text and its role as a source of comfort, escape, and comparative insight.

I must begin this discussion, however, with a disclaimer by pointing out that there was no measurable increase in fan traffic on either 9/11 itself or the days immediately following. In fact, there seemed to be a drop-off in board activity. Some members of *Talk About Harry Potter* continued to post messages, though many disappeared entirely from the board before returning gradually over the next several weeks. Also, there was a noticeable decline in the length of discussion threads immediately after 9/11, with only a few possessing the sustained interactivity of threads which had preceded 9/11. These declines and disappearances may be deemed significant as we attempt to learn more about the relative importance fandom plays in the lives of fans during times of public and private crisis. Is fandom to be accurately defined as necessity, or merely as choice, in the context of its accompaniment of crisis-driven suffering? With this text, in this particular interactive environment, the inclination is that choice seems the more likely alternative even in a fan culture we think of as cultic. These Harry Potter fans, moreover, whose extreme adherence and allegiance finds its expression in daily online interactivity, showed no rush to socialize their thoughts when they otherwise might have been expected to do so.²²⁷

²²⁷ Certainly, this was the expectation of this researcher. *Talk About Harry Potter* in early September showed heavy use in advance of the film, continuing on both the evening of 9/10 and the morning of 9/11. By the afternoon hours of 9/11, a noticeable drop in traffic was noted.

For instance, at 7:58 pm EDT, approximately eight hours after American television networks went on the air with the news reports of the terrorist attacks, board regular Ladyslipper posted a message of well-wishing. She wrote, "To anyone who lives in NY, or who has a friend or family member...in the World Trade Center, my best wishes go out to you to see that they come home alive and hopefully unhurt.... And if the worst comes, as little as we all wish it, my condolences as well." Ladyslipper's message was answered almost four hours later by one lone poster, Momofone, who at 11:15 pm added her "condolences and good wishes to Slipper's." Momofone also called for prayers from whomever might be listening, writing, "[P]ray to whomever you pray to with me. Be it God or Goddess or Jesus or anyone else, pray with me." This briefest exchange of messages remained alone on the board until midnight of 9/11.

Fan traffic increased somewhat over the following twenty-four hours as fans posted a few more messages expressing a mixture of shock, blame, and confusion. Again, expressed without linkages to Harry Potter textual material, miscellaneous statements included the following: "I hope they don't bomb me" (Babygirl). "They hijacked planes and drove them into buildings. There's nowhere you can go to be safe. They hate the US" (Moonshadow). "We all need to live our lives unregretfully and to the fullest and to take every day as a new beginning" (Mizerycase2). One regular, LarryofArabia, who often presented himself as a sage, said, "We could dispose of excess nuclear weapons to create a new natural resource: 'Lake Afghanistan,'" to which several on the board *flamed* him with put-downs. "Oh,

don't go blaming [anyone] yet, we still don't know who the terrorists were," said Teen Angel; and "In so doing we'd be sinking to Osama's level," said StNick2U.

The following two days, 9/13 and 9/14, continued to see a moderate increase in postings, still without textual tie-ins and still reflective of a search for perspective. If there was a prevailing theme over these forty-eight hours, it was the desire to know and say more about the new anti-American villain, Osama Bin Laden. He, his face, and his media-catapulted persona seemed to occupy the thoughts of those who posted messages. Even young posters (assuming age credibility) such as LiLfirebreath, when confronted by the spectre of this "evil villain," presented thoughts such as these: "He is Osala Bin Lade (sic.). He has a sick mind. He said he did it because we messed up their religion. They refer to us Americans as devils." Then, by 9/15, the non-Harry Potter message exchanges began to subside altogether as posters simultaneously began to complain and apologize for irrelevant postings. "Sorry for all of the off topic posts—I'll stop now," said Moonshadow. As if bringing a close to the initial reaction to 9/11 on *Talk About Harry Potter*, a regular, Bombshell, who often functioned as a summarizer of thoughts, described in a long narrative message a multicultural candlelight vigil occurring in his California town (assuming geographical and gender credibility). It had brought people together to contemplate the meaning of the 9/11 tragedy, and they were all ready to move on from there. "I'm simply in awe at how...a vigil melted [all our] differences away," he wrote.

Again, the fact that these first few post-9/11 days were characterized by decreased fan traffic, coupled with a complete lack of textual tie-ins, raises questions about the importance of fandom during moments of sudden crisis. If the socialization of textual consumption were indeed central in the lives of these Harry Potter fans, would they not have brought their concerns to the board in ever-increasing numbers immediately after the events of 9/11? Would they, moreover, not have expressed these concerns with numerous textual tie-ins? Both responses would seem likely. Yet, there was no such urgency here.²²⁸ Beginning on 9/16, additional members of *Talk About Harry Potter* did begin to return to the board in gradually increasing numbers, but even then the thriving interactivity which had existed immediately prior to 9/11 did not return in earnest until much later.

6.4.3 CHOICE VERSUS NECESSITY

A good deal of this is explainable if we visualize fandom as conditioned by choice rather than spontaneous necessity. I am not saying that it lacks importance for the fan; I am saying that the sense of importance is one which is chosen rather than necessitated. Deliberation is present. Fans choose when to pour themselves into their fan culture for purposes, in this case, of mutual identification which eases

²²⁸ Untested assumptions abound here, of course. One assumption, for instance, is that needed support structures for the fans of *Talk About Harry Potter* were to be found in other social environments, almost certainly offline ones. Another is that different forms of media, especially television, were suddenly more relevant to the fans' lives and interests as they sought to make sense of the public crisis. Still one more, is that the perceived seriousness of the external crisis did not resound with the psychological mood of the online fan environment.

their individual and collective isolation and is rooted in the chosen text.

Emphasizing choice over necessity, moreover, would seem to remain consistent with dominant cultural theories of media consumption which ascribe sovereignty to audiences. Indeed, sovereignty invokes the idea of choice as media consumers actively select what is important to them and reject what is not important to them. Choice also initiates a process of achieving mastery over consumed texts, whereby fans function as free agents able to socialize their consumption and increase the meaning originating in the reception process. This increase of meaning, where it is accepted as a valid construct in fandom, can actually be seen as a more powerful experience than what might be derived through spontaneous necessity. Thus, it is reasonable to think that whatever importance comes to the fan through his or her fandom is a specifically chosen importance, yet one also to be considered as potent.

6.4.4 THE BEGINNING OF TEXTUAL TIE-INS

The members of *Talk About Harry Potter* did return eventually—by choice—to the board to correlate with each other after time away. This is when the textual tie-ins began to occur. As soon as 9/16, then through September and most of October, fans posted many messages linking Harry Potter to the events of 9/11. Seeking and offering comfort, escape, and insight, fans posted short parenthetical messages and lengthy narrative ones, many of which possessed an undercurrent of shared grief. On 9/22, for instance, Deartemperance interrupted a thread with this message: “Hey everyone. What about this, Harry Potter against Usama (sic.) bin Laden. We could

all fantasize about getting him in literature, since we have almost no chance of doing it in reality.” In another thread, Dancingbear35 wrote, “It’s so sad! Something we will tell our children and grandkids! [When 9/11 happened] I thought right away about [H]arry, and how he felt when he was terrified of dueling [V]oldemort, and I understood his fear. Perhaps [JKR] will put something hidden in book five that will represent the attack [on] America.” In still another thread, Stretchedthin, worried about the post 9/11 future, wrote, “There have been several mentions in the books about reading the future, and how you can never tell exactly what the future will be because the possibilities are infinite.”

Each of these brief messages looked back at 9/11 accompanied by the chosen fan text. Fans wanted other fans to know how they were thinking and feeling, based on possible linkages between a public event which had shocked, outraged, and saddened them and a text which offered the possibility of relevant commentary. How the text might speak to and for them, in other words, became the means by which their personal feelings about 9/11 could surface, making the fans known on the message board. Deartemperance’s desire for revenge and wanting to get even acquired its support from imagining a duel between the textual hero and the real-life villain. Dancingbear’s fear found a voice in the textual hero’s own fear. Stretchedthin’s worrisome uncertainties matched indefinite references to the future as portrayed in the text. Socializing these textual tie-ins, moreover, contributed to the web of reciprocal identification which was now forming specifically in response

to 9/11. It emerged eventually as a portrait of intense reciprocation and shared knownness.

Longer narrative messages posted by fans carried this theme well into October as most of the identifiable members of *Talk About Harry Potter* returned to the board. With the terrorist attacks still fresh in mind, yet having a few weeks to reflect on them, some returning fans began to post confessional messages which linked more-considered forms of emotional response to the fan text. When regular poster Johnandkelly returned on 4 October, her experience of a depressing 9/11 aftermath and what was being done to “take Comfort” was expressed in a narrative rhetoric which addressed the entire *Talk...* community. She wrote,

Hi you guys. It seems that last night I went to sleep and it was Sept. 11 and this morning I woke up and it is Oct. 4th. I've been too down lately to be reading this message board and I find that I am over a thousand post[s] out of the loop. Sigh. I have also lost all patience, so I don't think I will be catching up any time soon. I just wanted you all to know that I am thinking of you and hoping that everyone is doing fine. It shouldn't surprise anyone here that I am taking comfort in rereading POA [*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*] for the umpteenth time. I hope that everyone takes care and maybe I will be able to shrug off this mood soon.

Johnandkelly's reference to reading Harry Potter book three functions as a testimonial through which the fan makes a statement about choosing one particular title to facilitate comfort from the real-world events of 9/11. It is what the fan wanted the community to know in relation to how she was feeling. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* was “the best written of the series,” Johnandkelly said later, and it allowed “for escape and full immersion into fantasy.” She also related

particularly to a character, Lupin, because of the character's perceived "insecurities" and his "having to deal with" situations beyond his control. That these features could be linked to 9/11 showed how Johnandkelly's assessment of the public ordeal drew upon the sustaining textual elements of one book.

6.4.5 THE HOPE OF BEING HEALED

Arguably, a purposeful public exchange of how fans were choosing ways to sustain themselves through varied aspects of their textual consumption was what was being developed in this brief post-9/11 window. Indeed, it seemed very much a window into the desire for a possibility of healing which might be expected to occur in a fan culture largely consisting of isolation/identification dynamics. With a supermarket of ideas, archetypes, heroes, and themes from which to draw upon, each fan can bring his or her chosen textual elements to the communal table, so to speak, for a public confession offered in the hope of being healed. Whether or not the healing alluded to here can be considered a legitimate transformation of suffering into cure is, of course, another matter. We need to be careful in our assumptions of genuine cures and behavioral changes, even though fans may be seen as persuasive seekers of these rewards. No research here has offered persuasive conclusions that seeking means finding when the desire to be healed is the sought condition. Structures and processes are in place, however, as fans attempt to choose and confess their way toward satisfied deprivation.

Another fan, Lemonlime, posted this confessional thread-starter, which moved the board even further into confessional tie-ins:

Through all of these awful and tragic [days], I compare a lot of what is going on in real life to Harry Potter. For example, check out my quote, ('It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.' Albus Dumbledore.) How true is this in our society. I pray to God that nothing else will happen to our country and [that] the worst has [already] happened. I know perfectly that Harry Potter is a fantasy book and is not real. [However,] I compare it to my life at this time. When I was at school [on 9/11], the principal of the school came into my art room. We were all working. The principal told us we must watch TV because we had to know what was going on. Kind of like Dumbledore telling the school that Voldemort had [suddenly] come into power.

Lemonlime's confession went farther than Johnandkelly's in establishing several noteworthy themes that would appear often in the days ahead. Without apologies, it emphasized that comparing 9/11 to the Harry Potter books for comfort and insight was a normal response to the crisis. Also, it clearly acknowledged that the books were fictional and not to be thought of as "real," despite their value as sources of insight and encouragement. Finally, specific scenes and quotes from the books were presented as relevant to what was going on in the real world. We may interpret Lemonlime's expressed pattern here as a kind of popular liturgical confession: a functional, organized, expression of chosen textual material whose purpose, in this case, was to evoke reciprocal identification and ultimately to bring about healing. Again, it was a fan's testimony of how the text was helping him/her comprehend the event, and it was shared on the fan's behalf and that of the entire community.

This pattern was repeated with some frequency on *Talk About Harry Potter*.

“Bin Laden could be Voldemort, and Bin Laden’s followers, the Death Eaters,” said Catcaller, a board regular. “The dementors could also be terrorists who want to suck out the very soul of a free society and all that is good.” Catcaller also found encouragement in quoting Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts and the books’ paradigm of adult stability. “It is my belief—and never have I so hoped that I am mistaken—that we are facing dark and difficult times,” she quoted. Another fan, Peanutbutter15, likened Voldemort and his followers to the Taliban, whom she interpreted as attempting “to spread discord in this great country” and which could be countered only if “we stand together.” Again, Dumbledore was quoted: “I say to you all...in light of Lord Voldemort’s return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort’s gift for spreading enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open.”

In these and many other postings of that moment, fans had appropriated a chosen text with which they experienced deep correlation—the essence of reciprocal identification—and which made for interesting attempts at communal, confessional healing immediately after 9/11. A web of correlative interactivity was being established here, and whether or not it functioned as a genuine healing experience for fans is a somewhat dubious but enduring question. What we can assert with reliability is simply that a process of sought-healing was engaged, and it was based

on fans' choosing to do, say, and repeat that which was text-relevant. This text-relevance was then applied to the external event toward which everyone was suffering, and, socialized via the message board, the process itself continued being fed. Exercising their fandom in this way during this post-9/11 window provided a brief concentrated glimpse of what had occurred throughout the year—before and after 9/11—as fans on *Talk About Harry Potter* provided constant examples of isolation/identification through their online culture. I will take a look now at some of these other examples and consider what they, too, mean.

6.4.6 SQUELCHING AN UNDERBELLY OF PERSONAL SUFFERING

The post-9/11 window seemed to close abruptly in late October as the immediate impact of the terrorist attacks receded, and also as the sages and objectors on *Talk About Harry Potter* increasingly silenced confessional voices. GenuineT, one of the most vocal objectors on the board, treated confessional postings with increasing hostility which effectively reduced their frequency. In mid-September, for instance, after Catcaller had posted a message about “relating the books to the recent tragedy,” GenuineT quickly responded, “[R]elating the books to the recent tragedy had little to do with JKR’s insight.” By late October her resistant tone had increased in perceived intensity to, “JKR is not a prognosticator. That she may relate her writing to other conflicts is a stretch. Voldemort is not Bin Laden. Children should not be guided to ‘see’ things which they would not normally see and adults should be careful not to presume....”

Throughout the year GenuineT and a chorus of followers took it upon themselves to keep confessional voices in check. No one fan, it seemed, was going to be allowed too much freedom in expressing himself or herself emotionally, especially in taking critical license with the Harry Potter books and what they might mean. This resistance toward the confessional, testimonial impulse seemed welcomed by many on the board because it often kept threads on theme, and it reduced excessively subjective comments. On the other hand, it created an atmosphere of inhibition at times, whereby board members resisted saying what was on their minds for fear of being flamed in public. Many comments from the heart during the course of the year, furthermore, were expressed with caution, often preceded in their delivery by attempts at public diplomacy and apology.²²⁹ Confessional postings which followed 9/11, of course, had been tolerated because of the magnitude of the external crisis, and because no one was going to silence emotional, searching voices at that moment. But, even tolerance at this particular time had limits, as GenuineT made publicly clear by late October.

²²⁹ For example, one such “comment from the heart” came from a young fan (assuming age credibility), Msmorgan, who had been flamed badly when she posted a particularly confessional message about being helped by the Harry Potter books. She responded by stating, “You call [me] simple minded 4 having an imagination. I have been an HP fan for about 2 years and I think I have even found personal strength within its pages to help me with my daily life. I have never been popular at school. I was voted quietest for the yearbook. I am quiet because I have nothing in common with people my age. The HP books helped me realize this [was okay]. I now have a small circle of friends who I know are true friends. Like Ron and Hermione.” After posting this message two regular board members suggested to Msmorgan that she might find one of the children’s message boards more to her liking (29 June 2001).

I interpret this internal board dynamic as a conscious recognition by many fans that resistance needs to be applied periodically in fan communities so an underbelly of personal suffering does not spill out painfully and embarrassingly, compromising an existing status quo of fan interactivity. I am speaking here about an online protocol, which levels or flat-lines fan dialogue in the 24/7 environment. Agreed-upon levels of acceptable and appropriate emotional content govern the conversational stability of the entire board, and fans stay on a more-or-less even keel most of the time. Certainly, voices depart from the line on occasion, but if they violate the protocol to such an extent that board norms are overtly transcended, the offending fan risks getting flamed. On *Talk About Harry Potter*, explicit public flamings were directed toward posters who violated protocols related to sex, profanity, over-familiarity, and other challenges to the moral status quo of the board. However, equally-focused were the flamings of posters whom for one reason or another had ventured into confessional, emotion-laden territory which also seemed to take critical liberties with the text. At one fan's suggestion that Christian parallels and "a higher purpose" might be found in the Harry Potter books, GenuineT again responded in kind: "I don't see 'a higher purpose' [and] were the books to suddenly make a 'Christ' parallel, I might be forced to barf and abandon them—and many other[s] who are Wiccan [and] Atheist...might heartily agree."

6.4.7 DISGUISED CRIES OF PAIN

With this board-enforced correctness in mind and its ability to stifle confessional voices, I now take another interpretive risk. I argue that the largest proportion of fan suffering rarely surfaces in overt ways because the prevailing mood of fan interactivity wishes it not to surface. Clues to this suffering, however, are spread across the interactive plane like the tips of icebergs signifying the presence of much larger objects lying beneath the surface. To add an intentional metaphor to the intentional simile here, fans leave a trail of crumbs leading through a forest to a house of great privation. Clues appear along this trail in items as small as fan signatures, as large as fan novels, and as constant as fan conversations. The real house of privation, too, makes itself known the more one approaches it. Indeed, I do not hesitate to argue further, drawing from these ubiquitous clues, that it is reasonable to think of fan cultures as social entities constructed primarily upon human deprivation. Suffering has found a contemporary mediated plane of existence in modernity where at least superficial satisfactions can be found, according to an individual's cultural preferences. Where isolation/identification seems to rule, furthermore, it is not unreasonable to think of a fandom such as the Harry Potter culture as a place where fans make disguised cries of pain. They cry out to be known for what they have lost and for what they do not have, and they do so in the safe confines of their organized cultural choices where they can attach their pain to a text, an author, or some other received and socialized object. Much of the year of online research was spent considering these disguised cries of pain.

For example, Littlelove16, a regular poster on *Talk About Harry Potter*, closed all of her posted messages with this signature quote:

In the absence of angels, in the presence of fear, people acting like angels begin to appear. And they do not have halos, and they do not have wings. It's the everyday people who come through by doing miraculous things.

Whereas many regular posters change their signature quotes periodically, Littlelove16 kept hers throughout the entire year of research. Noting this, I contacted her by e-mail to ask her about the quote. What did it mean? Where was it from? Why did she leave it attached to her name? In the first of six correspondences, she requested that I use her name, Lacy, and said that she had taken the quote from the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which had been crafted by people who had lost loved ones to the disease. "It is a quilt in which a person who knows someone who was a victim of AIDS or HIV creates a panel to commemorate that person," she said. "I have lost two uncles to the epidemic. I include the quote because I like it and couldn't find a better one for my signature."

In our next correspondence, I asked how her use of the quote related to Harry Potter, since she displayed it continuously with her frequent postings on *Talk About Harry Potter*. Without additional prompting, she began to talk about how she related to the theme of suffering in the books, especially as it centered in Harry's loss of his parents and how he was a good person despite these losses. "I think it has made him a stronger person because you know, 'That which does not kill you makes you stronger,'" she said. Harry was compassionate, selfless, loyal, and willing to die

for his friends, she added. Then, again without a prompt, she brought our correspondence back to the losses of her family members, relating them to the text and dropping additional clues which illuminated her own suffering. She wrote,

Harry's parents were killed by the most evil wizard in existence. Some give him sympathy for it. Slytherins, though, have animosity toward Harry, and feel [his parents] deserved to die. My uncles died at a time when the AIDS epidemic was still new (sic.), and yes they were gay. Some people thought that AIDS was God's punishment for gay people. Some say AIDS is a cure, not a disease, and it is only ridding the world of Gay people. In the world of Harry Potter, "Death Eaters" laugh in his face because of what he has gone through, because they feel his parents deserved to die. Some people think my uncles deserved to die. But thank goodness for the Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs of the world, who are very friendly and see that as untrue.²³⁰

Here, Lacy seemed most concerned with painful life experiences having their roots in persecution, undeserved suffering, and unjustified loss. These certainly were Harry Potter's experiences, she was saying. Harry was a victim of the undeserved loss of his parents, who had endured persecution he now must endure as their surviving son. She said nothing about experiencing persecution herself, but the fact that she perceived her uncles as having been persecuted because of their homosexuality, coupled with her obvious pain from losing them, facilitated easy movement between the text and her own story. Over the following days of our correspondence Lacy added several themes: that Harry's suffering was interesting because "he pushes it away so easily"; that Harry felt embarrassed by "what he has

²³⁰ 20 July 2001.

gone through at times”; and that “if our beloved character sulks too much, people will think he’s in it for the attention and no more.”²³¹

This collection of thoughts, juxtaposing Lacy’s suffering with that of her chosen text, had functioned as the raw material beneath this fan’s signature quote. The few lines of public verse poetically stitched together from an accepted symbol of her own losses, moreover, were what she felt comfortable presenting to her fan culture on a daily basis. What the culture made of this symbol is not known. To Lacy, however, it spoke for her as the voice of a suffering innocent who must make sense of loss, death, and moral consequences in a world where persecution rules. It was also her symbol of hope. “Everyday people” who function like benevolent angels can be found “in the presence of fear.” We are justified in thinking of this symbol and what may lie beneath it as a fan’s carefully selected cry of pain, or at the very least as a clue to that cry. Placed daily on the message board, it was Lacy’s way of seeking, with regularity, a correlative power of identification within the small space she occupies in the Harry Potter fan culture. We are also justified in viewing her signature quote as an example of articulated subtlety. With protocols forbidding excessive interactive variance, fans are forced consciously or subconsciously into symbolic word and phrase choices marked by the faint, the delicate, and the fine distinction. Much that proceeds on the message boards, hence, does so with caution and in disguise. When we begin to take this verbal and symbolic subtlety into account, moreover, board interactivity and the suffering beneath it opens up

²³¹ Correspondence was exchanged between 15-23 June 2001.

significantly. The mode of communication itself has been forged and treated by internal pressures, and it reveals, bit by bit, pressurized suggestive thoughts of felt deprivation.

6.4.8 FAN FICTION AS A SOURCE OF CLUES

Another source of clues fans drop to express their cries of pain lie, arguably, in the fan fiction they post voluminously in designated online areas.²³² These fictions are unilaterally rife with the presence of imagined suicides, murders, kidnappings, parental desertions, depressions, nightmares, moral depravity, and states of despondency. They are published by novices whose abilities to spell, punctuate, or structure coherent sentences are virtually nonexistent. Others, however, exhibit the fluidity and verbal refinements of seasoned fiction writers. Where they are perhaps most revealing of inner turmoil are in the raw imaginative cries of novices, though it may be said too that the experienced writers simply express more sophisticated forms of turmoil. In both types of fan fiction, expressed privation dominates this little-understood phenomenon of fan production.²³³

²³² At least some of this immense volume of fan output is the result of fan impatience with what Lelia Green and Carmen Guinery see as “the pace of the official canon HP text.” The *fanon*, therefore, rushes ahead to compensate for what is not yet officially written or addressed thematically. See “Harry Potter and the Fan Fiction Phenomenon” (*Media-Culture Journal*, Vol. 7 Issue 5, Nov. 2004).

²³³ At least one attempt has been made to address suffering in fan fiction, most notably by Camille Bacon-Smith in *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1992). The primary context here, however, is gender, specifically as expressed by women *Star Trek* fan writers who explore male suffering through a genre Bacon-Smith labels *hurt-comfort*. Through stories about slavery, rape, and death, for instance, women fan writers try to understand the sources of male suffering, the idea of comfort, the practice of

Because of its status as an under-analyzed element of fandom, we need to move cautiously through any insights and inferences we might choose to apply to fan fiction. Little is known about how accurately or inaccurately imaginative writing presented in interactive environments expresses what goes in the fan's actual life. To say, for instance, that a fan's story about a parent who angrily walks out of the house and never returns is a reenactment of what has gone on in actuality, cannot be relied upon as accurate interpretation. It may or may not be autobiographical. Indeed, the fan may be telling this particular story because he or she thinks it will make for high drama. Or, what may also be likely is that the fan is making an attempt to replicate mood, tone, and content he or she has *poached* and then recast based on consumption of the chosen text. The Harry Potter books, in other words, speak quite clearly about suffering, so why would we think the fan fiction based on them would not be presented in a way that preserves a sense of their original voice? Certainly this position has validity.

My point of departure here, however, is based primarily on the autobiographical question per se. It seems likely, based on my interviews with fan writers, that some fan fiction is at least marginally autobiographical. Yet, we need to take a closer look at dynamics of fan interactivity before we can make a best possible

empathy, the differences between physical and emotional suffering, and the eradication of hurtful behavior. Bacon-Smith writes, "All hurt-comfort fiction tries to express pain and suffering so that the reader can share the experience directly, both of the sufferer and comforter.... Suffering...is remade in fan fiction." Published well-before the explosion of online fan fiction, *Enterprising Women*...considers the work of writers in material fan clubs and is a valuable pre-online source.

assessment of what fans are doing in their published fanfics. If they are socializing a mass experience of suffering, as I argue they are, how does this happen, and why have they chosen a deliberately imaginative means to facilitate their cries of pain? To answer this we must first recall the previously expressed observation that a protocol exists, whereby the normal, day-to-day interactivity of fans naturally conforms to a prescribed level which reduces textual asides. If a posting fan violates this protocol, he or she is flamed by other members of the community. On *Talk About Harry Potter* flamings most often resulted from fans becoming too religious, too emotionally confessional, and too quick to take critical liberties with the Harry Potter books. All participating fans were and are subject to a pressure driving them to maintain the interactive status quo.

Conversely, the environments allowing for the presentation of fan fiction offer the fan a much larger sphere of public expression. The only real protocols here are those designed to reduce tame, bland, poorly researched, and poorly presented fanfics. Flourish's warnings about *Mary Sueism* to the fan authors of *fictionalley.org*, for instance, are instructive. Avoid one-dimensional, antiseptic Mary Sueism in which the fan author writes about unflawed characters living in perfect worlds, and miraculously saves the day when superficial conflicts enter the picture. "Mary Sues...are the bane of all genres of fan fiction, not just Harry Potter," Flourish emphasizes.²³⁴ Fan fiction should be anything but the product of a delimiting status

²³⁴ *Flourish* is the online fandom moniker for the co-founder of FictionAlley.org, one of several large websites devoted exclusively to Harry Potter fan fiction. See "Mary Sueism

quo, according to this view. In fact, if there is a prevailing protocol in this environment of fan production, it is the unspoken agreement to let venom spill and chaos reign.

6.4.9 A SUITABLE ENVIRONMENT FOR ANGER AND ISOLATION

The fan fiction environment, therefore, becomes everything the standard interactive fan environment is not. Certainly, it possesses its own kind of correctness, but generally speaking, fans know that this is where they can actively exorcise themselves and their unsatisfied deprivations.²³⁵ They can be angry and isolated to their hearts' content. They can write about "guilt-ridden" characters who drown in "a river of [bad] memories and regrets" and characters "whose world was turned upside down" by friends who betrayed them.²³⁶ They can juxtapose hymns with murders, and true love with violent rape. Indeed, the popular category of *slash*, which recasts the sexual orientation of male characters and places them in often-violent homosexual relationships, puts forth an increasingly overt type of fan

(and How to Avoid It)," "How to Make a Good Impression," and "A Guided Tour of the Fandom," in which Klink/Flourish offers guidelines for writers and historical perspective on Harry Potter fan fiction. See also "Researching Fiction: an Essay by CLS."

²³⁵ To be fair, some restrictions are placed on excessively emotional content here, too. Klink/Flourish adds in her writer's guidelines, "Emotional scenes should not be overplayed. If you want your readers to know your character is sensitive, fine; if you do so by making her cry hopeless tears over a smashed spider, that's bad. Perhaps it would be better to have her comfort someone whose pet died or something, but only if it also furthers the plot; gratuitous scenes are bad" (Ibid).

²³⁶ Taken from a collection of seventy-eight *fics* on Schnoogle.com (12 July 2001).

production standing in resistance to behavioral and character norms.²³⁷ “When you think about it,” states Firebolt of *fictionalley.org*, “no fanfic is completely in character....” To be “completely in character,” in other words, would place fan fiction in a space of accepted behavioral and existential modes, thereby compromising its role as a dumping ground for animus seeking release.²³⁸

As a space where isolation can seek identification, it is equally fertile. Here, the deprivation of social engagements establishing self-awareness and self-worth function as the narrative basis for fanfics poaching Harry’s isolation and that of other characters in the series and transforming it into their own isolated scenarios. A very popular fictional element, moreover, is the nightmare, through which fan writers seem easily to objectify conditions of loss, loneliness, and alienation.

“Another Nightmare” by Bedeviled articulates a common mood:

Desperately, he struggled to remember who he was and whether there were more to his life than this hopeless incorporeal emptiness. Solitude was not at all novel to him, he worryingly realized, for he had been an orphan. Then he managed to vaguely remember not one, not two, but many, growing close to him, declaring amicable intentions, promising support, offering trust. Surely, they would not dream of him being left alone, of him being beaten by suffering. They would come and rescue him any moment

²³⁷ Slash predates online fan fiction, though it has received a boost in online Harry Potter fanfic. Stories of male characters engaged in mutual sexual relationships abound. Not all slash depicts homosexual relationships, though. *Het slash* combines male and female characters.

²³⁸ An argument could be made for considering animus—release as the primary deprivation expressed within Harry Potter fan fiction. Much anger is evident in the various genres and categories. However, I hold to the premise that the fandom as a whole is more reflective of isolation seeking comprehensive forms of identification. The existence of both types of deprivation, however, would seem to support the privation thesis of variable states of deprivation in fan cultures.

now. No. They would rather let him sink into oblivion. They would even forget his name.²³⁹

The nightmare is common, the mood is common, and the fictional elements of unfulfilled promises and even people forgetting names are standard features within these isolation narratives. By poaching the original mood of the chosen text, the fan author has just enough of a borrowed creative tail wind to write his or her own story inclusive of isolated images and themes. Whether or not the new story is autobiographical, moreover, becomes less important than the fact that it is the fan's reconstruction of what is deemed important. It may well be partially autobiographical, but it doesn't have to be. It only has to agree with the original set of fictional paradigms, and in agreeing the fan arguably is saying this is what I think, this is what I feel, this is what is important.²⁴⁰

Two other fan authors, whom I inferred were young fans, wrote nightmare stories in which the poached text reemerged in exaggerated combinations of physical and emotional torture. Untitled, these stories reflected themes related to child abuse, drawing their imaginative force from the abuse of Harry at the hands of the evil character Voldemort and the manipulative presence of the Dursleys. In the first story, Cuddly117 (Alicia) had Harry commit suicide by plunging a dagger into his heart, splitting his chest open and releasing evil spirits. Despondent that Voldemort "had taken everything away from him, including his friends and

²³⁹ Taken from Schoogle.com (13 July 2002).

²⁴⁰ The *fanon* a (term sometimes used to describe the poached *canon* of texts), in other words, may be thought of as the collective endorsement of relevant meanings applicable to each fan's vision of what is important.

parents," he felt "that there was nothing else to lose."²⁴¹ In the second story, Lizardgurl (Annie) had begun the narrative with Harry saying, "I feel as if I am in one big nightmare with nowhere to run." This nightmare stemmed first from false accusations of obesity leveled at Harry instead of at his obese cousin, Dudley, and later from Mr. Dursley making a deal to have Harry removed permanently from the house. "You idiot boy, at least you won't be my problem anymore," Mr. Dursley states. "I made a deal to get rid of you!" The story moves to a close with Harry, alone and on his own, being tortured by his aloneness in a graveyard, writhing in pain from the inflamed scar which marks his forehead.²⁴²

Nothing in these nightmare stories distinguishes them from hundreds of similar ones poaching basic suffering elements of the original chosen text. These original elements are scooped up and savored, then recast in such a way that new elements of plot and action reinforce those already established by the text.

Moreover, just as all fan fiction may be said to succeed not by how original it is but how faithful it is to code, so Alicia's and Annie's nightmare scenarios are effective precisely because they turn the text's original mood of suffering into their own mood of suffering. Even in these juvenile productions, one mood leads into the other, smoothly, naturally, and without violating the original intent. But, again, why is this the case, I must ask? Why, in other words, do the moods link? One possibility is that the fan authors here enjoy linking them for personal entertainment

²⁴¹ Taken from America Online Fan Fiction (29 July 2001).

²⁴² Ibid. (31 July 2001).

or for no purpose at all. The greater likelihood, however, is that a purpose does exist, whereby Alicia and Annie are saying, I know this story because it is somehow true to my own story. I want other fans to know this, too.

In interview, Alicia spoke with me about being engaged with the Harry Potter books on the level of family loss. She stated,

Probably the main reason Harry Potter books are such a big part of my life is because they help me take my mind off of things. They put me in a type of trance where I can forget about my worries and troubles. About a month ago, my grandmother passed away. It was a really bad experience for me. During the time while she was getting sicker and sicker, I re-read each HP book, and somehow the books helped me cope with my loss.²⁴³

Obviously, an autobiographical element is at work in Alicia's response here. It is an indirect element because she does not project her grandmother's death into her story, yet it clearly reveals a sense of her psychological orientation. She experienced the loss of a loved one, sought out the original text for help and coping, and finally, I infer, wrote a story linking her experience of suffering with the mood of the text. The story, therefore, becomes the clue to Alicia's cry of pain.

Annie, in interview, was less overtly autobiographical in her responses, but she too hinted at a presence of connecting forces between her life, the text, and her fan fiction. She said to me that she was angry, had bad dreams because of "things" that had happened to her, and related to Harry Potter because "it is about my life." What she wanted to emphasize, however, was her attraction to writing about people who suffer. She said that she did not "trust" stories that did not possess nightmares,

²⁴³ Online interview (6 August 2001).

and that if she did not have enough of her own from which to draw, she would simply imagine others. She said,

If I don't get it, I create it. I love to write about pain, suffering, murder, and kidnapping. I hate stories [in which] everything is nice and perfect and nothing bad happens. Harry has some of my life [in him]. The Dursleys treat him like dirt. I try to hold my anger in but if they blamed me for something I didn't do I would go ballistic. It is as if I am in Harry's shoes. I had some bad [things] that happened to me when I was younger.²⁴⁴

Less coherently expressed than Alicia's thoughts, Annie's comments nonetheless reflect a similar background of suffering that facilitates a live connection between her life, the fan text, and how she appropriates the mood of both entities through fan fiction. She distrusts the antiseptic story because it reflects neither her real life nor the text she believes reflects her real life. Her fan fiction appropriates a story of suffering and aloneness, and regardless of how effectively these conditions describe her own life, they represent the story she can support within her fan culture.

It is reasonable to state, finally, that when we peer into the clues residing within suffering fan fiction, we see a dense image consisting of one part fan experience, another part chosen fan text, and still another part appropriation of the two. Like fans of many other texts, those in the Harry Potter fan culture have found themselves attracted to this dense image, both as it exists in others within the culture and as they themselves use it for the purposes of self-expression in the company of other fans. The imaginative freedom of the fictional form allows them a confessional

²⁴⁴ Online interview (7 August 2001).

and emotional liberty not provided by other forms of interactivity. In short, fans have found a way to hurt in public. Their cries of pain and continuing search for mutual identification finds a voice in the imaginative reconstruction of their chosen text.²⁴⁵

6.5 CONCLUSION

It would, I conclude, be valuable to explore fully an isolation/identification fan culture existing primarily *offline*, and to compare it with the online fan culture presented here. How does the search for, and experience of, identification in material fandom environments differ according to the uses of media which facilitate and condition them? Almost certainly, there will be significant differences. Again, as I argued in Chapter Four, the medium is always the message, and fandom is as conditioned by its particular applications as is any other social process. Separating the fandom, moreover, from the online culture which contains the Harry Potter cult is very much a gray area. As the body of research into online culture clearly shows, relationships more than other factors are what people seek in online communities.²⁴⁶

Isolation seeking identification, therefore, seems a natural fit with online

²⁴⁵ This “continuing search for mutual identification” might also be seen as a search for explored “intimacy” in and through fan fictions labeled as “intimatopia,” according to Elizabeth Woledge. “In intimatopic texts, the writer will do almost anything to engender intimacy, including depicting the extreme suffering of their heroes,” Woledge writes. See pp. 97-114, “Intimatopia: Genre Intersections Between Slash and the Mainstream” (*Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, 2006).

²⁴⁶ See Campbell in *Mediating Religion: Conversations About Media, Religion, and Culture* (2003), pp. 213-228.

interactivity, whereas this may not be the case in the material environment.

Certainly, isolation/identification is not restricted to any mediated environment, but its existence very likely differs according to its precise media location. This is another area of future research.

VII

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION



CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

7.1 A QUIET MEDIA-AGE SUFFERING

There is little doubt that suffering, as it has been described and discussed in the previous pages, is an important underlying factor among fans and the cultures they inhabit. This is supported by research into the practices of non-cult fans existing near what I have referred to as the plane²³⁹ of organized tastes and preferences. It is true, also, of cult fans, whose activities occur nearer a plane of extreme adherence and allegiance. Where it has been possible to learn something about both sets of fans, evidence for the dynamic, operational presence of deprivations seeking satisfactions is ample.

Support for a thesis of privation in fandom may also be found, illustratively, in the numerous stories about fans presented in fiction mediated by books and cinema (see Appendix A). While many of these stories function as exaggerated portraits of cult fans, they are fundamentally true to the elements of conflict that lie

²³⁹ As stated earlier, plane refers to “level of existence or consciousness” as defined by *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*. The phrase, “plane of organized tastes and preferences,” therefore, means the existential level where people begin to organize their cultural tastes and preferences, becoming fans in the process.

submerged within all fans. The storytellers who produce such narratives may begin with genre material—mystery or comedy, for instance—but they do not end there. They end in stark portrayals of suffering fans who crave satisfactions, usually in the form of intense identifying experiences provided by their fandom.

The evidence for an undercurrent of privation in fan cultures, therefore, is persuasive, and having this knowledge furthers our understanding of why people become fans and why they maintain this chosen cultural experience over time. Variable states of deprivation—privation—function as a key motivating force in the lives of fans.

It is possible, however, to miss seeing that this is the case. The fact that meaning derived from fandom is divided between experiences of both pleasure and pain is one reason the pain side can be overlooked. Most fans have an easier time describing the pleasures they receive from being a fan of something than any suffering that is associated with fan experience. Fandom researchers know that more than habits and patterns of pleasurable consumption are in place among fans, yet when we confront the ease with which fans articulate the pleasures of their fandom, we are likely to conclude that forces other than personal suffering are the ones we should use for insightful analysis.

Another reason for missing the presence of suffering is that the suffering itself is subtle and often quiet. As stated early in the thesis, suffering depicted as privation does not announce its presence in the way physiological pain, for instance,

does.²⁴⁰ States of deprivation are often expressed as quiet separations, alienations, and losses, which can be dealt with through artificial means and temporary escapes. Privation is very much a quiet suffering of our media age, I have argued, and the organized consumption and socialization of mediated cultural products provides one prominent form of relief.

This relief, I will add, transcends the rewards of random media consumption because the structures and organized processes of fandom function as an antidote to the random malaise of privation. The variable states of deprivation residing within my definition of this subtle form of suffering are in and of themselves shapeless and random. Who can say where and when loss produces alienation, or separation produces voided aspirations, for instance? These experiences of human suffering do not come measured, bordered, quantified, or compartmentalized, which throws into question the notion of therapeutic satisfactions coming from experiences of randomness. It is, instead, the organized state of experiences, whether in reception or socialization of meaning, which provides at least temporary reliefs. Modern life, complex and random, craves order and organization, wherever it can be found.

A third reason for missing the presence of suffering in fandom is that internal dynamics such as deprivations requiring satisfactions can be sidestepped in favor of external issues which neglect to address internalized cause-and-effect relationships as they exist within the fan. The temptation to dwell on external manifestations in researching fandom is large because the surfaces themselves are so intriguing and

²⁴⁰ See 2.2.2: "Portraits of Child Privation."

little understood. Why pay special attention to Karen's use of *The Simpsons* to reconnect herself with imperfections in her family when the ritual practices of the reception setting are of equal interest?²⁴¹ Why focus on David's use of the Harry Potter text to ease his suffering from the loss of his mother when his multiple pleasurable readings of each book (which are unlike "other books that are boring") merit equal attention?²⁴² Fandom is both an internal and external practice, and it may be that external factors of its social side have simply captured the attention of researchers to a greater degree at this point.

Thus, despite the fact that suffering may not be immediately recognized as a primary component of fandom, I hold to the argument that its existence as privation is a constant factor in why people become fans and why they maintain this chosen cultural status. In all of my conversations with fans, online and in person, I have seldom mentioned privation, deprivation, or any other term associated with suffering, including the term suffering itself. The existing data came, rather, from questions about meaning. "Explain in detail where personal meaning comes from...and how it comes to you" has been the primary statement I have emphasized over and over. Meaning making persists as fandom's *sine qua non*, and this essential feature consistently leads to the conclusion that meaning and suffering are inextricably linked in fandom's range of activities.

²⁴¹ See 5.2.4: "Reconnecting With Family Imperfection."

²⁴² See 6.3.6: "You feel like you're there with Harry Potter."

7.2 TOWARD A THEORY OF SUFFERING IN FAN CULTURES

What is still desired here, though, is a final discussion that places findings and arguments presented within this thesis onto at least the beginnings of a theoretical platform corresponding to the four deprivational categories explored in the previous chapters. Each deprivation and its accompanying satisfaction has thus far been discussed only in close proximity to the actual empirical data, allowing for a clarity of vision respecting the activities and articulations of individual fans. This kind of descriptive approach is valuable to studies of fandom as we increasingly need to see who fans are and what they do before new and justifiable theorization can occur. Once this is accomplished, however, moving toward the assembling of theoretical components so that a theory of suffering in fan cultures is possible should be a desired goal. My purpose here is not to offer that theory, but rather to present components potentially suitable for the presentation of such a theory. To do so, I would like to move beyond dislocation/connectivity, animus/release, isolation/identification, and hunger/empowerment, grounding each deprivation and its accompanying satisfaction in theoretical material allowing the discussion to move forward to a future organized theory.

7.2.1 BEYOND DISLOCATION/CONNECTIVITY

As illustrated by the dislocation/connectivity findings reported in Chapter Five, the evidence for family-based deprivation in the current research is substantial. In addition to these findings, which were acquired through the original

questionnaire-assisted interviews, new findings from the revised questionnaire strongly echo the same theme. Consuming and socializing media texts because they provide a connection for the fan to family members in a variety of contexts dominated answers to the question about meaning for thirty-five new respondents. It was evident in many more of the 136 new respondents, too, though beyond the acknowledged thirty-five it was less of a central factor.

“This fan interest was passed on to me by my dad,” stated Kedrick, a self-described fan of American popular western writer, Louis L’amour. “He enjoyed them and had quite a few [L’amour books], so I started reading them and grew to love them.” Another fan, Jessica, spoke about her collection of books and artifacts from *American Girl*, a popular book series. “It gives me an awareness of my culture and heritage, and my [African American] family history, too,” she stated. Still another fan, Whitney, spoke of her continuing participation in the fan culture surrounding a long-running television show, “7th Heaven. “It connects me to my mom and my sister,” she stated. Other respondents spoke about “bonding,” “being like,” and “becoming closer,” to various family members through a diverse range of cultural products. A curatorial fan, Gina, spoke about her collectible culture serving as a reminder that she needs her mother’s love. “I need to know I will be loved specifically by my mother,” she stated.

With such relationships being the important factor that they clearly are in fandom, I argue that motivational research into fan cultures consider making well-considered efforts to adapt elements of attachment theory as established by the

original attachment theorist, John Bowlby,²⁴³ while retaining the current perspective on fandom as a location and expression of contemporary human suffering.

Dislocation/connectivity in fandom, then, becomes informed by a better understanding of how and why fans form around media texts and other cultural products in an attempt to reconnect with family relationships that have been affected by loss, separation, and other factors occurring across time and space.

Attachment theory is a comprehensive set of data-supported material that places family relationships at the center of our lives as human beings. Originally focusing on biological factors of mother-infant relationships, Bowlby argued that attachment processes could also be seen to be in operation throughout the balance of people's lives: from childhood, through adolescence, and into various passages of adulthood.²⁴⁴ Behaviors such as brooding and clinging, occurring across the spectrum of human activities, were examples of issues strongly influenced by the character of attachments, secure and insecure, we formed with our principal and subordinate caregivers when we were children. While mother was and is the most important actor in attachment, Bowlby acknowledged that father and other members

²⁴³ Studies such as Tamyra A. Pierce's "Violence in the News: Attachment Styles as Moderators of Priming Effects" (*Journal of Media Psychology*, Vol. 10 No. 1, February 2005) is a recent approach to looking at media consumption from an attachment perspective. Applying Bowlby's writing to the effects of secure and insecure attachments on aggressive thoughts of university students after viewing violent news programming is adaptable, for instance, to the animus/release element of suffering within the present research. See, especially, pp. 5-8.

²⁴⁴ See pp. 198-209, "Attachment Behaviour in Man," in *Attachment: Attachment and Loss, Volume 1* (Bowlby 1969). For a concise overview of attachment theory, see "Attachment Theory as an Organizing Framework: A View from Different Levels of Analysis" by Paula R. Pietromonaco and Lisa Feldman Barrett (*Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 107-10, 2000).

of the family could play important roles as contributors to attachment behavior so long as a sense of familiarity operated within the relationship between caregiver and child.²⁴⁵

In the current research on fandom, we have seen numerous examples of fans expressing the desire for connection to many familial objects of attachment.

Mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and siblings all show up in the findings. Of course, the key issues here are how and why it is possible for the fan to use a media text or other cultural product for the purpose of reinvigorating an essence of attachment that has become lost or diminished over time? As seen in virtually all of the dislocation/connectivity respondents, media consumption was occurring at very early ages and in close proximity to adult caregivers.

Consumption was, therefore, central to a secure environment in which some form of media existed side-by-side with an adult presence. Later in life, moreover, as the adult fan experiences forms of separation from that secure environment, it is possible to see cultural tastes and preferences as conditioned primarily by the need or strong desire to recapture that secure environment. Ashley, the fan of children's movies, strongly echoed this possibility when she stated of her fandom, "[I]t makes me feel young and reminds me of my family home. It brings a sense of security."

It may be, also, that dislocation/connectivity fans are able to effect, or at least to approximate, forms of reattachment by placing a familiar face on the objects of their tastes and preferences, and even to place invisible attachment figures in the

²⁴⁵ Ibid., (Bowlby) pp. 202-5.

consumptive environment. Karen, the *Simpsons* fan who saw the famous televised cartoon family virtually as a mirror image of her own family, seemed very much inclined to apply an actual interchangeability to her family members and the Simpsons' family members.²⁴⁶ She described both in terms of identical personality quirks and daily life conduct, and she seemed at ease in placing Marge Simpson's and Homer Simpson's identifiable characteristics of personality and temperament upon those of her actual parents. When she views the show, it is likely that in this way she is effecting a sense of reattachment by bringing her family into the consumptive environment through her particular appropriation of the family she sees on television. Rachel, the fan of *Gilmore Girls*, provides evidence of a similar attachment dynamic but arguably goes even further by following up her viewing sessions with a conference phone call to her family members who have also watched the show, simultaneously but in another geographical location.²⁴⁷ In so doing, she seems very much to be using the television show as a kind of substitutionary reattachment method followed by an actual reattachment accomplished by phoning her family. She views the show, calls home, and establishes an environment in which intentional socialization of the text with her family members completes the reattachment dynamic.

²⁴⁶ See 5.2.4, "Reconnecting with Family Imperfection."

²⁴⁷ See 5.2.5, "'Going Home' to an Environment of Celebrated Imperfections."

Bowlby also wrote that when we are children, moments of perceived and impending crisis have the effect of intensifying attachment behavior.²⁴⁸ Alarm created by threatening events such as the departure, or impending departure, of the caregiver has the effect of producing a state of mind whereby even an infant attempts to initiate interactivity with the caregiver. The child fears the caregiver's leave-taking and attempts to compensate for this threat of felt separation and loss. While Bowlby's context in this case still was the early relationship between mother and child, a naturally occurring topic becomes how this behavioral dynamic might possibly manifest itself later in life. Fandom, as mentioned several times, features a broad range of socially consumptive intensities, from the organized tastes and preferences of culture fandom to the extreme adherence and allegiance of cult fandom. Concerning the dislocation/connectivity dynamic, might this intensity fluctuate according to the nature of real and perceived threats of separation for the adult fan? Seemingly, this is the case for fans in the present research who spoke about crisis situations intensifying their fandom in the wake of sudden losses of family members.

The best example of this was Irmalee, the fan of reggae musician Bob Marley who demonstrated an interestingly complex attachment to both family and her Caribbean cultural heritage.²⁴⁹ She had described herself as a Marley fan, in any case, but her fandom intensified when a grandfather whom she characterized as

²⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 203-4.

²⁴⁹ See 5.2.9, "Restoring Spiritual Support in a Nonnative Culture."

“father, advisor, and buddy” passed away. This event was something she had been unable to accept, describing her response to it as though it were “a war” she was fighting within herself. After dropping out of society for a period of time, she then spoke of finding peace in turning her life “toward Bob Marley and the life he lived.” The intensity of experience deriving from the loss of her family member actually solidified her attachment to Marley, possibly as a surrogate attachment figure, even as her fandom took on a sense of religious zeal and intensity.

Attachment, to be sure, is a complex subject and well-worth exploring as an underlying theoretical component of dislocation/connectivity in fandom. Just as all theories of mass communication behavior are premised on theories from other disciplines, so the motivations of fans seeking family reconnection should find important referential insight in the range of attachment dynamics known to exist from the earliest moments of relational behavior between children and their sources of human security. Especially as such behavior involves crisis and the suffering that emerges from crisis, a conversation between attachment theory and dislocation/connectivity in fandom is possible. “In sickness and calamity...[and] in conditions of sudden danger or disaster a person will almost certainly seek proximity to another known and trusted person,” Bowlby states about attachment behavior occurring across the lifecourse.²⁵⁰ This seeking of proximity, moreover, warrants critical attention focusing on the possible ways sought proximity can be achieved in mediated culture. As has been shown in the present research, there is

²⁵⁰ Bowlby, p. 208.

indeed a virtual proximity both sought and achieved through cultural tastes and preferences. Virtual proximity may not be equivalent to actual proximity, or it may be a stronger proximity existing within the mind and senses of the fan; but many fans seem to seek it in ways that call attachment behaviors into account.

7.2.2 BEYOND ANIMUS/RELEASE

In addition to the respondents categorized as animus/release fans under the original questionnaire, fourteen people responding to the revised questionnaire were also placed in this group. Comments about the “release of tension,” achieving “a sense of calmness,” and arriving at a state of “reflection” following the “release of emotion” allowed these new fans to be evaluated as individuals in which states of animus seeking release were evident. Danielle, who described herself as a fan of the culture surrounding the participatory sport of snowboarding, said, “It helps me relax and get away from all the drama in life.” Another fan, Kate, a self-described EMO music fan, said, “It’s an emotional release and helps me reflect.” Still another fan, Kevin, who described himself as organized around classic rock music culture, stated, “I think the raw emotion of classic rock has helped me get away from life issues after a difficult divorce.”

As Pierce has argued, attachment theory may be one applicable source of insight for better understanding media consumers who report aggressive thoughts occurring in consumptive media environments. Insofar as the topic of aggression seeking release becomes part of the discussion, attachment theory would seem to be

viable in potential application to the animus/release dynamic in the present research. One argument would be that insecurely attached fans are attracted to cultural products offering some kind of release. Pierce's respondents were viewers of violent news programming on television, and her conclusion was that insecurely attached individuals exposed to violence in televised news showed considerably greater amounts of primed aggressive thinking than did securely attached individuals. No attention was applied, however, to whether or not Pierce's respondents could be evaluated in the context of individuals seeking forms of release through socialized media consumption. Nevertheless, applying attachment theory to animus/release seems a potentially valuable approach to better understanding this form of deprivation.

My own theoretical interests here, however, lie in applying recently revised elements of catharsis theory to animus/release in fandom. Catharsis theory holds that venting states of emotional pressure and buildup produces a state of mind that is more positive than one in which anger, hostility, and other forms of animus dominate. It is at the very least a popular, and sometimes a clinical, belief that having a catharsis is an effective, healthy release mechanism. The roots of catharsis go back to Aristotle, who argued that people could release themselves from fear by viewing staged tragedies. More recently, Sigmund Freud observed that anger builds up inside human beings like hydraulic pressure until it is released through some kind of activity. While many would agree with Aristotle and Freud, recent studies have seemed to show that catharsis may be overrated as a release mechanism.

People may, in fact, become more, not less, hostile by engaging in activities that appear to release them from their pent-up hostilities.²⁵¹

Animus/release in the present research benefits from this revised thinking on catharsis in at least two ways. First, the catharsis research calls into question the notion among animus/release fans that what they do in fandom is somehow a healthy component of their lives. As has been shown, some fans in this category believe that their fan activities prevent them from a potential of inflicting harms on themselves or others by means of what they perceive as healthy cathartic experiences. Secondly, it opens up the possibility that some, but not all, of what fans do in seeking release from states of animus might indeed actually be healthy. As has also been shown, not all animus/release fans enact this behavioral mechanism in exactly the same way. Some seek intense physical forms of release through cultural products such as heavy metal music, while others seek less intense experiences through products facilitating more reserved responses. In short, the research motivates us to examine more carefully the means by which release is obtained by animus/release fans through their tastes, preferences, and the social activities of their fan cultures.

²⁵¹ Works relevant to this position include the following: "Chewing on It Can Chew You Up: Effects of Rumination on Triggered Displaced Aggression" by Brad J. Bushman, Angelica M. Bonacci, William C. Pedersen, Eduardo A. Vasquez and Norman Miller (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88(6), pp. 969-83, 2005); "Does Venting Anger Feed or Extinguish the Flame? Catharsis, Rumination, Distraction, Anger, and Aggressive Responding" by Brad J. Bushman (*Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28(6), pp. 724-731, June 2002); and "Catharsis, Aggression, and Persuasive Influence: Self-Fulfilling or Self-Defeating Prophecies?" by Brad J. Bushman, Roy F. Baumeister, and Angela D. Stack (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 76 No. 3, pp. 367-76, Jan. 1999).

Brad J. Bushman, a lead researcher questioning the effectiveness of catharsis, has written, “Although it might be good for your heart, intense activity is probably not an effective technique for reducing anger and aggression.”²⁵² Bushman, who argues that forms of dissipation (or allowing hostilities to slip away naturally) are more effective than forms of rumination (or allowing hostilities to fester through “self-focused attention”²⁵³) in releasing pent-up emotional states, offers a perspective that challenges the cathartic notions of fans who seek healthy release through products such as aggressive music and sporting culture. As mentioned, both types of animus/release fans organize themselves around intense, physical activities, believing that the intense catharsis they experience will prevent them from committing harms. Probably the best example of this in the present research is Pris, the self-described fan of heavy metal music culture. “I have a very small tolerance [level],” she stated. “If I had no [metal culture] I would go crazy and be an evil person.”²⁵⁴

This is the tip of one fan’s self-focused attention of which Bushman has called rumination, I would argue, as Pris articulates what she must have, for herself, before her deprivation of peaceful inner sanctum can be satisfied. Previously, she had spoken of “getting out her frustrations,” getting her “blood pumping,” and getting “pissed off,” each activity seeming to be part of a ruminative cycle experienced by Pris. Over and over again, she reenters her culture of heavy metal music both

²⁵² See Bushman, p. 730.

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 726.

²⁵⁴ See 5.3.2, “Compromised Inner Sanctum.”

textually and socially, seeking but seemingly not finding any lasting form of release she desires. What she seems more aptly to be doing is affirming the validity of rage in her own life through a catharsis-driven process of rumination. Wayne Cristaudo, a researcher who has written about audiences of “rage rock,” argues that consumption of this product is indeed to be understood as a self-affirming process. “The energy of the music and the lyrical content of rage rock simultaneously affirm the reality of one’s own rage, loss, and despair and the validity of feeling them,”²⁵⁵ he states. Self-affirmation, moreover, is the likely explanation of Pris’s fan experience, rather than seeing it as an effective means of acquiring peace through catharsis or as a prevention of doing harm to others. The catharsis she seeks only intensifies what she already feels, thereby rendering Pris more of a threat to herself than to anyone else.²⁵⁶

With intense catharsis, therefore, being a questionable form of satisfactory release seeking among animus/release fans operating within aggressive product cultures, attention can shift to fans seeming to experience forms of dissipation that may be more productive. Of avoiding a process of anger response by means of dissipation, Bushman and his co-researchers write, “If individuals choose to focus on their bad mood and the provocation that elicited it, they may unfairly lash out...If,

²⁵⁵ See p. 7 of “The Truth and Divinity of Sickness and Rage in the Karaoke of Despair” by Wayne Cristaudo (*Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. II, pp. 1-12 Spring 2003).

²⁵⁶ Carrie B. Fried also observes this self-directed phenomenon among heavy metal fans, arguing that threats to self occur in a context of peer group identity and fans “trying to assert who they are” within a peer group. See pp. 17-18 of “Stereotypes of Music Fans: Are Rap and Heavy Metal Fans a Danger to Themselves or Others?” by Carrie B. Fried (*Journal of Media Psychology*, Vol. 8 No. 3, pp. 1-27, Fall 2003).

instead, they choose to let their negative mood dissipate and focus on other events, they are less likely to lash out.”²⁵⁷ Drawing from this statement, a key question for better understanding animus/release fans becomes centered on whether or not this particular deprivation/satisfaction dynamic allows for some type of dissipation to occur in the socially consumptive environment. If the answer to this question is yes, then some of what goes on in animus seeking release can be understood as productive, even healthy. Dissipation, the act of allowing hostilities to dissolve through distraction leading away from self-focused responses such as rumination, would, moreover, need to be recognized as a productive release mechanism in fandom.

Beyond two animus/release fans evaluated as seeking operational rest conditions through musical texts, evidence for dissipation seems lacking among respondents working under the original questionnaire.²⁵⁸ The revised questionnaire, however, produced a respondent describing himself as a fan of exotic fish and aquarium culture for the purpose of seeking “calmness” and “relaxation.” Moua, an immigrant from Southeast Asia, spoke at length about his participation in this culture. A fandom socially experienced in activities ranging from online chat rooms to retail aquarium culture, he said, “Helping others set up an aquarium is part of my fan experience.” Yet, the heart of the culture was his simple observance of

²⁵⁷ See p. 982 of Bushman, Bonacci, Pederson, Vasquez, and Miller.

²⁵⁸ It is possible, however, that dissipation components were at work in fans categorized into other deprivational categories. Fans of Precious Moments figurines and other curatorial products, for instance, may have experienced dissipated energies because of their fandom, though there was little or no evidence such dissipation was motivated by pent-up emotional states.

swimming fish after the “exhaustion” of the day. “I find it relaxing at the end of the day to sit back and look into the aquarium,” he stated. “It is relaxing to watch how water gives life to fish and how the whole ecosystem works in an aquarium. I look at the variety of fish and I wonder why this fish was chosen to look like this or like that. Honestly, at the end of the day when I find myself [needing] to sleep, I turn the light on in my aquarium because it makes me calm. I am in there swimming with the fish.”

Moua’s repetition of the phrase “at the end of the day” is consistent with the statements of other animus/release fans. Cheryl, for instance, a cathartic soap opera fan responding to undesired plot variations by engaging in an act of physical aggression, had said that by the end of her day she had “had it with the real world” because “hundreds of things could have gone wrong with” her life.²⁵⁹ Moua is implying something similar here, though how different are the two fans’ responses to basic life confusion and exhaustion. Cheryl engages in what appears to be a form of ruminative catharsis likely to be repeated the next time she doesn’t see what she wants to see in her soap opera. Moua, on the other hand, engages in a more dissipated response, a response less self-focused and more outward in its trajectory as he seeks to dissolve his animus by projecting himself visually into the aquarium. The image of himself “swimming with the fish” is itself consistent with the concept of dissipation: it allows whatever he is experiencing at the end of the day to dissolve

²⁵⁹ See 5.3.3, “Rewards Existing on the Other Side of Release.”

rather than to fester through rumination. No catharsis is needed. A simple letting-go process satisfies the basic deprivation.

Again, these distinctively different kinds of responses operating within animus/release begin to reveal that what occurs in the motivational realms existing beneath fan behaviors can be appreciated in a context of healthy and unhealthy activities. It is doubtful that the ruminative, cathartic actions of fans making meaning in product cultures that nurture aggression can be thought of as healthy. Even fan cultures forming around products that disguise or regulate aggression, such as sporting product cultures like American baseball or British football, frequently engage animus/release fans prone toward ruminative catharsis. British football as a sport is not fundamentally an aggressive or violent product, but hooliganism and other forms of extreme catharsis are well documented among fans such as those forming around the Millwall team.²⁶⁰ Similarly, baseball, a sport distinguished from other spectator sports by its ability to disguise the aggression of its athletes,²⁶¹ is fully capable of serving as a cathartic experience for ruminative fans.

Ultimately, audience sovereignty, and specifically fandom as an act of willful determinative choice, is in evidence here as fans select where, when, why, and how they wish to use their fandom as a means of animus/release. Choosing a ruminative response over a dissipative response, or vice-versa, may be as much related to

²⁶⁰ See 5.3.1, "Fandom and Violent Masculine Culture."

²⁶¹ Darryl V. Catherine develops this concept in "Curses and Catharsis in Red Sox Nation: Baseball and Ritual Violence in American Culture" (*Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. III, Fall 2004).

personality as it is to the fan's personal criteria for entertainment. The fan may not choose to experience feelings of pent-up hostility in the first place, but the method of responding is likely conditioned by how the fan wants to make sense of his or her life and the pressures of existential living that befall it. Insofar as activity within a fan culture can facilitate this desire, the fan will in all probability believe that a fundamental deprivation has been satisfied.

7.2.3 BEYOND ISOLATION/IDENTIFICATION

The isolation/identification category of deprivation presented in both chapters five and six explored the nature of psychological correlation between fans and objects of fandom. Fans organized around many products identified with those objects, whether human or fictional, to such a degree that it was possible to locate the center of their meaning making in an expressed need for reciprocal identification. They identify and believe that the object identifies with them, it was argued. In the Harry Potter fan culture, this process extended to the interactive subtleties present among online fans, thus revealing evidence of reciprocal identification between fans themselves, as well as between themselves and the object. The importance of negating or reducing existent forms of human separation appears to inform the deprivation/satisfaction dynamic among all isolation/identification fans, and this separation receives additional theoretical background and analysis here.

Eleven fans responding to the revised questionnaire exhibited isolation/identification as a prime motivating factor in their fandom, each articulating a sense of knowing, and being known by, the object of their tastes and preferences. Feeling as though someone speaks directly to them and can understand what they go through in their daily lives was again a familiar theme. Christina, a self-described fan of popular musician John Mayer, said, "He somehow always says just how I'm feeling." Haley, a fan of popular icon Jessica Simpson, said, "If I feel alone, I know there is someone else out there in the world that I can relate to." Megan, a fan of singer-songwriter Avril Lavigne added, "I feel that if Avril heard some of what I write, she could relate just as much as I do to her." A movie fan, John, spoke of actor Bruce Campbell as the source of spoken "lines [that] relate directly to my personality," and Keith, a fan of film director Wes Anderson, spoke about projecting himself into Anderson's movies because the worlds they create are more "tailored to his life" than the real world in which he lives.

Earlier, I defined isolation as a deprivation of deep social engagements acting on a person's awareness of who they believe they are at a core human level. Identification was expressed as a process of creating and sustaining feelings of psychological correlation between entities.²⁶² While holding to these definitions as the basis of isolation/identification, supplementary concepts may be justifiably integrated here as a more revealing picture of fans seeking to know and be known is sought. Rhetorical amplification becomes a desired research tool, moreover, as this

²⁶² See 5.4.1, "Aloneness as a Deprivation of Deep Social Engagements."

form of deprivation/satisfaction penetrates an untheorized realm of fans trying to satisfy states of aloneness by engaging with objects they do not really know in any traditional sense. A fan of a celebrity, not to mention some kind of fictional product creation operating in whatever popular milieu, does not really know that object on the basis of social interaction between mutually cognizant participants involved in face-to-face communication. The knowing and being known exist outside the interpersonal framework, and other factors related to identification need to be taken into account.

Rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke's doctrine of consubstantiality, for instance, places identification in a context of innate, acknowledged human separateness motivating human beings to identify through forms of communication.²⁶³ Identification compensates²⁶⁴ for both our biological separateness from each other as well as for forms of separation based on class, status, and interests. Yet, we also are in possession of distinctive qualities of personhood contributing to our value as unique persons, and we are motivated to join this value, or substance, with the existing personhood of others. Consubstantiality, therefore, assumes its character as a bringing together of substances both unique and capable of existing as one substance: hence, consubstantiality or literally "with substance" emerges as the basis of a beneficial joining together of entities by means of identification.

²⁶³ See pp. 19-23 in *A Rhetoric of Motives* by Kenneth Burke (1950/1969). See also pp. 1-4 of "Identification as a Key Term in Kenneth Burke's Rhetorical Theory" by Brooke L. Quigley (*American Communication Journal*, 1(3), May 1998).

²⁶⁴ Burke, p. 22. "Identification is compensatory to division," are his exact words.

Breaking down the formula into its simplest terms, Burke writes, "A is not identical with...B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so....To identify A with B is to make A 'consubstantial' with B."²⁶⁵ Consubstantiality, we may add here, is arguably most evident in the context of interpersonal, face-to-face relationships and the communication processes that facilitate them, but it cannot be confined to the stage of mutually cognizant parties. It transcends such a stage. A identifies with B based on mutual "interests" and the assumption of mutual interests, just as Burke stated. These are the cornerstones of consubstantiality facilitated by identification, whether the identifying process has occurred between parties in mutual cognizance or on a stage of non-cognizant parties. In fandom, the obvious stage of affective identification is a non-cognizant one.

Amit, the fan of comedian Jerry Seinfeld, was quick to point out the range of interests he shares with the object of his fandom. The collection of Superman artifacts, the desire to be well groomed and hygienic, and the tendency toward pickiness in his dating relationships, each contributed to the presence of affective identification between fan and object in the fan's mind.²⁶⁶ As with other isolation/identification fans, the perception of shared interests supported Amit's consubstantiality with his fan object, even though Amit would have been the first to

²⁶⁵ Ibid, pp. 20-1.

²⁶⁶ See 5.4.3, "Identification with Real People or Product Creations."

acknowledge he did not know Jerry Seinfeld in any interpersonal context. The relationship was a mediated one, facilitated entirely by television viewing, yet the strength of identification manifested itself at the level of shared personhood. An even better example of a presence of identifying power in a mediated relationship was that of Carla, the fan of popular vocalist Mary J. Blige.²⁶⁷ The shared interests between fan and object here occurred at a level of seeking relief from shared personal suffering. Carla, an African American woman who saw herself as having lived a troubled life, said that the pain she was able to distinguish in the voice of her object was her own lived pain. Consubstantiality, therefore, consisted of the bringing together of suffering selves in the mind of a fan who had come to believe she and her object identified with each other on a high spiritual plane.

As the cases of Amit and Carla illustrate, we need to look at isolation/identification within fandom as relevant to an environment in which the meaningful assumption of joined interests prevails. Just as Burke allowed assumed interests to co-exist equally with actual interests in the formation of consubstantiality, so it is acknowledged that the challenge in better understanding isolation/identification exists in exploring the nature of assumption. Fans assume much in this deprivational category based on the isolation they genuinely feel. They assume the developmental bonding of friendship, the affective presence of spiritual companionship, and the mutual bearing of burdens, to name just three expressions of joined personhood. In supposing these expressions are true, as the definition of

²⁶⁷ See 5.4.2, "Reciprocal Identification."

assumption implies, isolation/identification fans employ a system of virtual identity construction supporting their lives, lived otherwise in emotional, psychological, and spiritual isolation. Disembodied selves, furthermore, are brought together through affective, mediated identification, allowing the fan a strong support system nurtured outside an interpersonal context of face-to-face parties.²⁶⁸

It should be mentioned here that an important element of persuasion is also at work in the development of consubstantiality between fan and object. Burke's phrase "persuaded to believe so"²⁶⁹ implies that affective identification can originate in a process of persuasion transcendent of actual joined interests making one person consubstantial with another. In fan cultures, organized media consumption as a persuasive act becomes an important partner with assumption of joined interests in determining the effectiveness of fan-object identification. Persuasion, the act of moving a receiver of encoded messages to some kind of action during and after the decoding process, may be seen as unilaterally operational in fandom, but it is especially prominent in isolation/identification fans where the relationship between fan and object is so personally intense. To a fan such as Carla, no mediated persona is as intensely persuasive as that of Mary J. Blige, so that it becomes possible to see

²⁶⁸ I am speaking textually here, of course, as the relationship between fan and object (or text) is most at issue. Regarding the social component of fandom, it can obviously be argued that a face-to-face interpersonal context is at work in isolation/identification between fans themselves, independent of the object. However, even the social discussion can be placed in a context of disembodiment and virtual identity construction as fans increasingly work out their fandom in online environments through which shared personhood is arguably a virtual construction.

²⁶⁹ Burke, p. 20.

this example of identification as conditioned significantly by a combination of assumed interests and active persuasion.

The same process has been evident throughout the isolation/identification category within the present research. Even among product creations such as fictional objects and genres of media content, the fan object can be visualized as reaching out to the fan in a persuasive act moving the fan to some kind of action. David, the Harry Potter fan functioning in consubstantiality facilitated by identification with the fictional character, implied that the product in this case altered his behavior through distraction: he was given “other stuff to think about”²⁷⁰ while dealing with the death of his mother. This meaningful distraction occurred as the result of enjoyment derived from reading uniquely communicative books, but David’s identification with the parentless Harry Potter character provided the largest persuasive act. “I mean, you feel like you’re there with Harry Potter,”²⁷¹ he stated in verbal enunciation of his consubstantiality with a product creation. Identification, in this case, transcended not only the stage of interpersonal communication between cognizant parties but also the existence of any verifiable human presence.

Mike, the self-described fan of noir culture, carried this process even further, moving it into an aesthetic realm offering a product he described as reaching him at the level of complex temperament and personality traits. He had interpreted Noir as

²⁷⁰ See 6.3.6, ““You Feel Like You’re There with Harry Potter.””

²⁷¹ Ibid.

a film product characterized by the narrative depiction of isolated characters in dark, shadowy places. He cited the influences of several noir director/storytellers, but the essence of his identification was the dark mood of isolation provided by the product. “Most characters in a noir story are alone,” he stated. “I, too, tend to be alone, as an only child, an outcast, the guy who sits in the dark corner and observes.”²⁷² The mood and character of his life as he perceived it matched the mood and character of the mediated product, Mike was saying, placing the nature of his identification into a realm of aesthetics and form. Noir was the perfect aesthetic amalgam with which he could find deep identification.

Brooke L. Quigley, who also appropriates portions of Burke’s understanding of consubstantiality facilitated by identification, writes about “identification through form.”²⁷³ Noting Burke’s argument that “purely formal patterns”²⁷⁴ can be a crucial component of the identifying process, he discusses the variety of ways young women identified with the late Princess Diana based on life stages familiar to her devotees. Diana as family member, socialite, moral crusader, and mythical princess were all types of form, Quigley argues, the latter functioning as a “familiar mythic form” persuasive to young women dreaming of meeting a handsome prince and having their life transformed.²⁷⁵ The form, in this sense, was a stronger object of identification than the actual person because Diana’s fans were able to invest it with

²⁷² See 5.4.1, “Aloneness as a Deprivation of Deep Social Engagements.”

²⁷³ Quigley, p. 2.

²⁷⁴ Burke, p. 58.

²⁷⁵ Quigley, pp. 2-4.

not only their hopes and dreams but also with images of who they believed they are at the core levels where reciprocal identification occurs. As with the case of Mike, the potency of identification with form is evident.

The seeking of deep identification leading to consubstantiality, we may conclude, encompasses all of these topics, and we may also feel justified in applying a sense of unbridled, multidirectional seeking to the isolation/identification dynamic. Isolation, the motivator for such seeking, functions as a potent force initiating actual and virtual contact with the presence of a persuasive object, and it certainly appears that the object can take many forms. Kimberly Chabot Davis, who discovered in her ethnographic research that the process of identification transcends any singular type of identity construction, rightly visualizes identification as an inclusive form of cultural pivoting: an amalgamation of an individual's desires, experiences, and needs with which the identifier stops at chosen points and turns toward many possible directions.²⁷⁶ This turning crosses established lines of human familiarity such as race and gender until an object of consubstantial reward is encountered and accepted as real. Identification "is [also] a form of articulation...a conscious negotiation between self and other,"²⁷⁷ Davis adds, conveying a further image of the identifier as one part expresser of clear intentions and another part evaluator of responses. Brought together in self-managed psychological reciprocity,

²⁷⁶ See p. 9 of "An Ethnography of Political Identification: The Birmingham School Meets Psychoanalytic Theory" by Kimberly Chabot Davis (*Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society*, Vol. 8 No. 1, Spring 2003).

²⁷⁷ Ibid., p.6.

the identifier operates as if in steady conversation with the identifying presence. This understanding presence, whether a face of familiarity, an unknown body, or a symbolic environment, is both the object of the fan's seeking and the nurtured relationship resulting in mediated companionship.

7.2.4 BEYOND HUNGER/EMPOWERMENT

The hunger/empowerment deprivation, I argue, lacks the emotional intensity of isolation/identification as existing between fans and objects, yet it is more prominently represented in the general statements about meaning making articulated by fans. As seen in the broad range of hunger/empowerment fans responding to the original questionnaire, respondents to the revised questionnaire exhibited a multiplicity of hungers seeking some form of empowerment through fandom. A theme common to respondents was expressed as a fairly certain belief that organizing around a cultural product of some type produces strength of a behavioral nature in the individual fan. The power to improve oneself through inspired, life sustaining behaviors encompassed an equally broad range of products offering socially aesthetic meaning to the fan.

Of the seventy-six new respondents placed in the hunger/empowerment category, many spoke at length of self-focused, transformative experiences. Nick, who described himself as a fan of film director Tim Burton, said, "His movies help me stay strong in what I want for myself." Mark, a fan of movie soundtracks, stated, "There is a good amount of time spent simply thinking about how I can improve my

life, and the music serves as a background to my thoughts.” Micah, a self-described fan of electronic gaming culture, said, “The ability to jump into any story line and virtually live with greater power than I’ve ever possessed is quite compelling.”

Annemarie, part of a global Jane Austen fan culture, talked about “characteristics” from Austen’s books she uses “as guidelines for my own behavior.”

The power of inspiration, moreover, emanating from peculiarities of aesthetically conditioned material was a prominent theme here. For another fan, Ariel, who described herself as part of an interactive culture organized around the films of director Wes Anderson, the mention of captivating forms fundamental to meaning making was made, though less in a context of isolation/identification than one of cravings for a personally inspired life. She stated, “The colors, the absurd and random comedy, the style of shots, the music—my desire to be a fan is intertwined with my desire to be an inspired person.” On the surface, Ariel’s comments sound similar to those provided by Mike, the noir fan. However, evidence of social isolation needing to be satisfied through a process of identification seemed to be lacking. Quite likely there was some type of active identification in operation, yet the larger part of motivation for Ariel presented itself as an aesthetic support she uses to place herself above a self-perceived level of uninspired living.

The broadness of hunger/empowerment in the present research is served by an equally broad-based theoretical model allowing for nuanced fan behaviors existing across a wide range of motivational issues. Many different hungers are in evidence here, from those seeking forms of romantic empowerment and

empowerment of life situation, to the hunger for spiritual empowerment facilitated by particular music, film, and literary products. These are fans seemingly not motivated, primarily at least, by attachment, catharsis, or identification objectives, but rather by extremely complex desires for self-improvement. In addition, I see hunger/empowerment fans as very much in control of their product uses and gratifications, implementing as they appear to do a plan for their lives inclusive of cultural products consciously designated as stepping stones to higher planes of existence. Even, or perhaps especially, young female fans of products such as boy bands use their organized tastes and preferences to raise their life to a higher level, in their own minds.

The contributions of Steven Reiss, who working independently and with other researchers over the past decade to develop a multi-point guide for understanding basic motivations underlying media consumption and issues such as religious experience, are arguably useful here.²⁷⁸ Sensitivity theory, as Reiss has named his research, is a uses and gratifications approach to media consumption consistent with the idea that human beings are motivated to consume media based on internal and external needs. Arranging his uses and gratifications into sixteen basic motives and joys, supported by references to varied forms of corresponding

²⁷⁸ See *Who am I? The 16 Basic Desires that Motivate Our Actions and Define Our Personalities* by Steven Reiss (Tarcher/Putnam, 2000) plus the following articles: "Why People Watch Reality TV" by Steven Reiss and James Wiltz (*Media Psychology*, Vol. 6, pp. 363-78, 2004); "The Sixteen Strivings for God" by Steven Reiss (*Zygon*, Vol. 39 No. 2, pp. 303-20, June 2004); and "A Comprehensive Assessment of Human Strivings: Test/Retest Reliability and Validity of the Reiss Profile" by Susan M. Havercamp and Steven Reiss (*Journal of Personality Assessment*, Vol. 8 No. 1, pp. 123-32, 2003).

animal behavior, Reiss proceeds from motive name to motive description to animal behavior to joy. The motive name, saving, for instance, is described as a desire to collect; the underlying animal behavior involves the hoarding of food and other objects, leading to the joy of ownership. Or, the motive name, romance, is described as the desire for sex and courting; its underlying animal behavior involves reproduction based on the need for survival of the species, leading to a joy of sexual gratification or simply what Reiss calls lust.²⁷⁹

It could be argued that Reiss's sensitivity theory is comprehensive enough to function in theoretical support of fandom as a complete subject, since it addresses both the underlying nature of product use and its applicable social factors. The motives of peer companionship and play, the desire for social approval, and the desire to collect, for instance, warrant further study in the exclusive context of specific acts occurring within certain fan cultures (such as the many collectible cultures that emerge in empirical research). Indeed, each of the sixteen motives also has at least marginal relevance to the present focus on suffering in fan cultures. Power, vengeance, physical activity, family, and order, all motive concepts presented by Reiss, easily enter basic discussions of the four deprivation/satisfaction categories explored in the previous chapters. In fact, one of Reiss's arguments, consistent with the present research, suggests that motives underlying media consumption and socialization are universal, though individuals will "differ in how

²⁷⁹ See Reiss and Wiltz, Table 1, "Reiss's 16 Basic Motives," pp. 365-6.

they prioritize the sixteen basic desires.”²⁸⁰ This is consistent with the present research theorizing the presence of a lead deprivation in fan suffering; other forms of deprivation appear to be present in fans, though in many cases it is evident that one particular deprivation/satisfaction dynamic is mostly at work in the fan culture.

Despite the persuasiveness, however, of using sensitivity theory in unilateral support of what occurs in and motivates fandom, I would argue that Reiss’s thinking fits best with the hunger/empowerment deprivation among fans. As mentioned, Reiss’s motives and joys can be seen as relevant to all four categories, but there are questions as to how deeply integrated his overall approach to uses and gratifications are with the deprivational contexts of dislocation/connectivity, animus/release, and isolation/identification. Concerning animus/release, for instance, he is reluctant to allow the concept of release into sensitivity theory’s appropriation of violent behavior exhibited by aggressive individuals in the consumptive environment. The gratification for such individuals exists not in energy release but rather in trait experiences of vindication, a gratification to be understood, in other words, as something more positive: a joy rather than a release.²⁸¹ The concept of aggressive people achieving states of vindication, or the ability to justify themselves against self-perceived forms of persecution through media consumption, is intriguing as an alternative model to cathartic release among general media consumers; however, it doesn’t seem to account for the ample evidence of energy release among fan

²⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 367 and Reiss, p. 317.

²⁸¹ Reiss and Wiltz, p. 368. Here, the authors refer to sensitivity theory as “a trait model of motivation,” while “catharsis theories express energy models....”

consumers existing between the planes of organized tastes and preferences and extreme adherence and allegiance. Reiss's motives encompassing family and social contact also seem lacking in depth with regard to dislocation/connectivity and isolation/identification, though these and other topics may receive needed attention in the future as sensitivity theory is explored in specific contexts such as fandom.

Appropriating gratifications as joys, however, is rhetorically and thematically consistent with the hunger/empowerment deprivation. Hunger as a motive for fan experiences is answered by something positive: a condition in which improvement, success, or some kind of beneficial state becomes the response to a craving. This is quite reasonable to many fans answering questions pertaining to what their fandom means to them, personally, and is the likely reason so many fans can be placed in the hunger/empowerment category. An individual organizes around a product of some type for the simple reason that it makes his or her life better, at least in the person's own mind. It may be, also, that individual fans have an easier time expressing gratification as joy because it is easier to articulate a discourse based on a positive abstraction than one interpreted as more negative or introspective. The joy abstraction contains within it visions, images, and intimations of a person transformed through a normal process of growth and experience, rather than a forced admission based on an acknowledgment of loneliness, isolation, or anger, for instance. Nevertheless, hunger/empowerment is a large, legitimate deprivation in fandom, supplemented theoretically by Reiss's attention to an arrangement of motives and joys.

The motive of curiosity, according to Reiss, involves a desire for knowledge leading to a joy of wonderment for the individual. Just as the underlying animal behavior encompasses a motive of efficiency in the acquisition of food and the avoidance of prey,²⁸² so the member of modern human society has a motive to increase his or her knowledge, resulting in an experience of wonder. This theoretical assertion can be applied to many hunger/empowerment fans in the present research seemingly driven by a curiosity-knowledge-wonderment triad of seeking. Jen, who described herself as a fan of artist Salvadore Dali, had initially entered her fan culture after being curious about one of Dali's paintings.²⁸³ She then acquired knowledge from what she interpreted as Dali's unusual visual perspective as directed toward common objects. Finally, she received a joy of wonderment in learning how to incorporate into her mind a more creative way of approaching her everyday life. "I guess you can say that Dali has helped me create [a more imaginative world for myself]," she had concluded. Adam, a respondent to the revised questionnaire, articulated a similar pattern of curiosity, knowledge, and wonderment. As part of an interactive global fan culture organized around popular Japanese visual media, he became curious about Japanese animation through "anime" fans he knew in high school. Adam's curiosity motivated him to study the Japanese language and to visit Japan on more than one occasion, giving him greater knowledge about a wide range of Japanese visual media. The joy of wonderment

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ See 5.5.2, "Non-romantic Aesthetic, Psychological, and Spiritual Empowerment."

produced by this knowledge consists of adopting an “ethnic identity,” according to Adam, plus the joy he receives from introducing forms of Japanese popular media to uninitiated people. “I like to turn people on to it,” he stated. “It gives me as an American a sort of ethnic identity where I feel I have none.”

To the degree that wonderment emerges from curiosity via knowledge in three essentially equal proportions, fan behaviors and experiences within hunger/empowerment can be seen as normal, even healthy, exercises of self-education for the fan. Curiosity provides the motive to learn something, and in so doing the fan is rewarded by acting on his or her initial impulse. Then, through forms of intentional socialization, fans undergo basic experiences of group interaction, and it is not inaccurate to see groups of self-educating fans operating as units of corporate learning. Online or geographically situated cultures, from fan clubs to interactive fan authors, seem to function in this way. Of course, learning something is not always the goal in hunger/empowerment, but even when the motives are romance, order, or tranquility, to name three additional motives on Reiss’s list, a beneficial experience reflective of positive social equilibrium may emerge from motive-to-joy proportionality. Very legitimate hungers, or cravings, are thus satisfied in a healthy cultural system facilitating the production of meaning for the fan.

One of the most promising ways, finally, of applying sensitivity theory to hunger/empowerment involves the enlistment of motives and joys seemingly in possession of spiritual or religious components. With both the original and the

revised questionnaires producing respondents who received spiritual empowerment through fan interests, it is natural to adapt basic spiritual themes from among Reiss's list. As mentioned, Reiss moves sensitivity theory beyond its applicability to media consumption and into a theorized relationship with religious motivation. This is certainly a reasonable action considering the numerous similarities between the two forms of meaning making, and it may also be of use in supplementing what has been said about fandom as religion. Of particular interest here are Reiss's motives of order and tranquility. The motive of order, according to Reiss, involves the longings for organization and ritual in a person's life, and successfully engaged it produces a joy of stability. The motive of tranquility involves longings for internal states of peace and safety, producing a joy of inner peace.²⁸⁴ Order leading to stability via ritual, moreover, and tranquility leading to inner peace via internal self-improvement, form a combined set of motives and joys readily applicable to the spiritual empowerment component among hunger/empowerment fans.

While seldom expressing their experiences and behaviors in these precise terms, fans seeking spiritual empowerment do seem to be governed in large part by the joys of what they believe to be stability and inner peace. This is to say that they are seekers of order and seekers of tranquility, with the states of ritual and internal self-improvement provided by their fandom facilitating the dual satisfaction of being both stable and internally peaceful. Ken, the fan of musical group U-2, spoke of a "centering" experience he receives from being organized with other fans around U-

²⁸⁴ See Reiss and Wiltz, p. 366, and Reiss, p. 307.

2's music. "They [U-2] literally transport me to a quiet place in my mind, a centering place, where everything comes into focus and all that is distracting just falls to the side," he stated.²⁸⁵ Here, the joy of stability seems very much present in Ken's choice of words: "a centering place." Being centered, or grounded, is a stabilizing condition, even a physical "place" from which Ken can live out his life with a resolute sense of determination, and he needs his U-2 fandom for its provision of this personal stability. At the same time, however, the motive-to-joy picture for Ken is incomplete without adding "the quiet place" he speaks of to "the centering place" he requires for personal stability. The quiet place is his other joy. It is the state of inner peace resulting from Ken's status as a seeker of tranquility. It is, furthermore, the condition of a suddenly free and focused mind in which "all that is distracting just falls to the side," as he has stated. The joys of stability and inner peace, emerging from sought order and sought tranquility, therefore, complete the picture of Ken's hunger for spiritual empowerment and its satisfaction through fandom.

The only obstacle that would seem to limit sensitivity theory's applicability to hunger/empowerment is a lack of development among Reiss's arrangement of specific motives and joys. More needs to be said with regard to each motive, joy, and underlying animal behavior, so that detailed explanations are able to find their reflection in the empirical data coming from fan ethnography. Such detail might even facilitate potential application to dislocation/connectivity, animus/release, and isolation/identification fan cultures if it can be seen as consistent with the explicit

²⁸⁵ See 5.5.4, "Spiritual Empowerment."

character of each deprivation. For now, the consistency of Reiss's motive-to-joy approach with what hunger/empowerment fans say and do is evident, and future applications of sensitivity theory to fandom might yield impressive motivational insights if presented from that perspective.

7.3 CONCLUSION: PAYING ATTENTION TO FAN SILENCES

I will add, in conclusion, that researching the presence of suffering in fan cultures is a formidable challenge consisting of applying descriptive attention to the nuances of fan experiences and behaviors and seeking ways of applying external theoretical insights to the existing data. Acknowledging the presence of separate categories of deprivation, and attempting to move beyond those categories in the quest for theoretical background and support, is also much needed, I would suggest. This type of research is a narrative journey in which the personal stories fans share reward the researcher with glimpses into lived deprivation that is fundamental to contemporary understandings of the human condition. Every story told, and each word chosen, by fans to express what they do and why they do it, has a transcendent value. They are enunciations that are at once reflective and illuminative of contemporary life lived in the social, mediated framework that defines the modern world.

As many researchers would do, however, I have tended to rely on the most articulate responses from fans to support this thesis. The multi-textual fans

represented in Chapter Five, as well as online Harry Potter fans in Chapter Six who opened up to me through thoughtful, reasoned responses, have yielded persuasive data. The immediate impact and potential implications of their comments are always significant. When Carla backgrounds the isolation/identification dynamic in her Mary J. Blige fandom saying, "I have had a lot of pain," she then becomes articulate in expressing a therapeutic identification she experiences with Blige. In her mind, she and Blige are joined in friendship, sisterhood, even spiritual companionship, which nourishes the essential reciprocal bond.²⁸⁶ This is similarly true of Mike, who in articulating therapeutic identification he experiences with noir culture, effectively contextualizes his fandom by saying, "Most characters in a noir story are alone. I, too, tend to be alone, as an only child, an outcast, the guy who sits in the dark corner...."²⁸⁷ These are the articulate voices represented by considerably less than fifty percent of the primary research. As I catalogued and organized all responses prior to writing, I may have desired a larger proportion of such voices.

Yet, as time has passed, I have thought increasingly about the voices I had previously evaluated as inarticulate, and have come to value these more than before. There have been many instances of inarticulation in the research. By inarticulation, I mean to say that incomplete thoughts, non-specific statements, and indeed, silences, have been evident in a large portion of the data. Such inarticulate voices seemed to appear often in respondents I categorized as animus/release fans. Orpha, for

²⁸⁶ See 5.4.2: "Reciprocal Identification."

²⁸⁷ See 5.4: "Isolation/Identification."

instance, a fan of *The Sims* computer game, had been an inarticulate interviewee who said she used her fandom to “manipulate lives” within the safe confines of a computer game. She did not elaborate.²⁸⁸ A number of fans categorized by the other three deprivations also seemed to fall short of making complete statements about the meaning they received from their fandom. April, a fan of singer Ricky Martin, did not, and would not, elaborate on why or how her fandom allowed her “to clear [her] mind from pain and discomfort.”²⁸⁹

As I continue to interview fans through referrals and by random selection, I have come to recognize that inarticulation is the norm rather than the exception when meaning is the subject of discussion. Late in 2002, for instance, I was put into contact with an eleven-year-old girl who is known in her locale for being a cult fan of television personality, Lucille Ball. Despite her youth, Hannah was able to describe for me in precise detail her life as a Lucy fan: when it began, what she does, what she collects, and with whom she socializes her fandom. Yet, when I stopped her in mid-sentence at one point in our interview, she abruptly stopped talking. I had questioned her statement, “When I cry, I sound like Lucy.” What did that mean? I asked. She could not tell me. “When you cry, are you really crying?” I asked. She said yes, but little else. “Are you crying out of some kind of sadness?” I asked. “Maybe, I guess so,” she said after a pause, but again there was no articulation that might have clarified why she seems to use the object of her fandom

²⁸⁸ See 5.3.3: “Rewards Existing on the Other Side of Release.”

²⁸⁹ See 5.5.1: “Empowerment through Romantic Fantasy.”

to facilitate crying produced by undefined sadness. All she said was that her family thinks it's very funny that she cries that way.²⁹⁰

This kind of inarticulation has grown increasingly common in my interviews with fans, and it has caused me to become more curious about the topic of fan silences. Usually (not always), there are momentary comments which seem to allow placement of inarticulate fans into one of the four deprivation/satisfaction dynamics. Yet, when I attempt to seek elaboration, it often doesn't seem to be there. That does not mean it is not there, but if something is going on it is not surfacing. These silences need to be understood. They need to be seriously considered, valued, measured, and compared, so that some kind of interpretation of why many fans go silent on the meaning question is possible. Further, where I have tended to value articulate fan voices more than inarticulate ones, am I erring in favor of articulate responses simply because they are dense with information? What if a greater suffering, a greater existence of privation, is present in the pauses and silences of fans who cannot seem to find words to express themselves? I originally addressed this problem in Chapters One and Three and have continued to ask myself these questions in an attempt to know as much as I can know about my topic, even (especially) if it means revising future research approaches.

These fan silences, if they could be understood better, might also assist projection of the present thesis into broader, related areas of study. In Chapter One I began by asking a number of broadly-stated questions: "How do people suffer in

²⁹⁰ Interview with Hannah A., 14 December 2002.

today's world of mediated culture?" "Do habits of media consumption decrease experiences of human suffering?" "Can mediated experiences function as predictors of the internal and external suffering states of media consumers?"²⁹¹ In seeking a way into these and similar questions, might silences themselves, in the consuming process and afterwards, produce a relevant backdrop to the search for knowledge about how media and suffering are linked in the modern world? I am reminded of my niece, also mentioned in Chapter One, who committed suicide literally hours after engaging in her fandom one last time.²⁹² Certainly, she was silent as we never knew what led to the suicide or why a last experience of her fandom accompanied her final escape from the suffering she must have been experiencing. Silence is her legacy.²⁹³

In 2003, I learned of another suicide that produced some notoriety and is worth mentioning here.²⁹⁴ Daniel, a twelve-year-old boy from Virginia (USA) hanged himself October 2000 outside his bedroom at his family's suburban home. Three years later, his mother, Sara, told me in a telephone interview that Daniel had been "a pretty normal kid." His good looks, popularity with other children, and life in a secure middle-class family, however, were not enough to overcome depression

²⁹¹ See 1.1: "Questions Framing the Study."

²⁹² As mentioned in Chapter One, suicide remains an important subtopic of the suffering-in-fandom thesis. As with some types of fandom, suicide can be seen as motivated by the need to escape. It is the extreme form of escape "when normal escape routes are not noticed," according to Williams in *Suicide and Attempted Suicide* (1997). It is also relevant to the privation concept, specifically as a response to anomie and despair in modern life.

²⁹³ See 1.2: "Suicide of a Fan in the Family."

²⁹⁴ Sara Fritz Kidney wrote about her son's suicide in *The Floridian* (16 November 2003). I interviewed her by telephone on 5 February 2004.

and agitation he was experiencing immediately prior to his suicide. One of Daniel's psychologists had written of him: "Emotions are difficult for Daniel, especially negative ones. Daniel does not easily process emotions. They are often internalized, neither easily experienced nor sorted. He relies on an inappropriate coping style that involves passive detachment and a lowering of personal expectation."

Of his media habits, all Sara knew for sure was that Daniel liked "words and stories," and he collected the musical CDs of specific rock bands: *Limp Bizkit*, *Rage Against the Machine*, and *Green Day*. But predictably, he was silent about any role these media (and possibly fan) interests played in his life, according to Sara. She and her husband had no real idea why these particular groups were significant, if they held any significance at all. Daniel's silence may have been part of the normal secrecies and privacies of adolescence,²⁹⁵ though even at that age level I would like to know why silence about consumed media seems to be a common theme in the life of suffering people like Daniel. Is silence a product of the inability to process emotions, as the psychologist had suggested? Is it the product of inappropriate coping styles, passive detachment, and lowering of personal expectations—all part of the psychologist's diagnosis of Daniel? Is silence a direct reaction to "unsorted" deprivations? These diagnostic terms, as expressed by Daniel's psychologist, strike at the heart of experienced privation: the existence of variable states of deprivation,

²⁹⁵ Earlier, in 6.3.3, "Escape into a World that Makes Sense," I mentioned how the Harry Potter books (as a fan text) reach into the secret, private spaces of young Harry Potter fans. See "The Secret World of Harry Potter" by June Cummins (*Michigan Quarterly Review*, 2000).

the random malaise of modernity which requires an organizing mechanism, the silent suffering of individuals who have become lost, separated, alienated.

Understanding the behavioral disorders of Daniel, Jerusha (my niece), and others like them lies primarily in clinical disciplines existing outside the sphere of influence exerted by media studies. Acquiring insights into the media practices of such people, however, should provide valuable assistance to all who wish to understand and bring relief to suffering as it exists within modernity. This has been part of my argument from the beginning. In Chapter One, I expressed the hope that the present study would introduce a media component into integrated models from the humanities and the caring professions (as well as from theology and practical theology) seeking to address suffering in modern culture.²⁹⁶ How might mediated culture be drawn into cooperative, interdisciplinary efforts to understand and alleviate suffering in the modern world? I asked how might popular texts and audience uses of entertainment products be brought to bear on the key issue addressed by such cooperative approaches: the meaning people find in their own existence? Where possible, I have sought to present material which has something to offer in these areas.

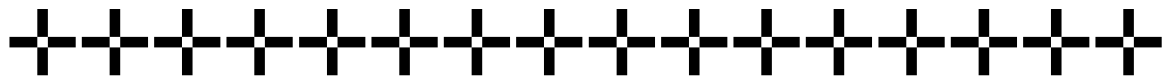
The four deprivations and their accompanying satisfactions offer an adequate starting point for this endeavor. Approaches to the problems of both suffering and meaning are going to benefit by considering the distinct possibility that many people are suffering from one or more of the deprivations I encountered in my research.

²⁹⁶ See 1.4: "Continued Hope for Integrated Models."

Dislocation, animus, isolation, and hunger are likely conditions in a world where excessive mobility, frustration, loneliness, and spiritual malnutrition seem to be on the increase. These unpleasant features of modern life create a kind of satisfaction seeker who has plentiful sources of temporary rewards at his or her disposal. Too many potential sources of satisfaction, in fact, exist in today's diffuse spiritual marketplace, and most of these lie in mediated culture. We are talking about seekers who move primarily in realms outside the traditional, recognized church.

What these seekers find in fandom is the connectivity, release, identification, and empowerment, well documented throughout this thesis. They have found a way to combine the need to consume meaningful texts of effectuality and personality with the parallel need to organize their consumptive habits around social opportunities (especially human relationships) that are available to them. The potency of this cultural practice should not be underestimated. With technology constantly improving both the delivery of information and the opportunities for socializing it, cultural consumers seem to have a widely opening door in front of them through which they can pass on their way toward new ways of exercising their intentional socialization of textual consumption. Doing what we do with what we like promises to continue in the years ahead as both a meaningful cultural practice for individuals and social groups as well as a relevant object of scholastic research and enquiry.

APPENDICES



APPENDIX A: MISERY FACTORS

Originally presented as a lead-in to Chapter Five, this short essay looks at suffering in two fictional portrayals of fandom. The film Misery dramatizes the privation of a cult fan while the novel Simone's Letters depicts the privation of a fan whose experiences lie closer to the plane of organized tastes and preferences. The argument here is that privation is evident in both situations, and the extreme applications of a cult fan's suffering reflect the rudimentary elements of a non-cult fan's suffering. They are connected, differing in degree only. The fact that fictional narratives about fandom are studies of deprived individuals (as opposed to being stories of adventure and romance, for instance) is further evidence that what lies beneath fandom are variable states of deprivation. The core experience is privation.

The following classic movies, as Henry Jenkins has noted, explore various dimensions of fandom which have tended to perpetuate fan stereotypes: *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (1947), *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), *Play It Again Sam* (1972), *Fade to Black* (1981), *King of Comedy* (1983), and *Misery* (1990).²⁷³ These stereotypes have

²⁷³ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, 1992, pp. 14-15.

presented the world with a consistent set of images depicting fans as “emotionally and socially immature,” “unable to achieve a proper place for themselves in society,” “distracted or over identified,” “orgiastic,” “neurotic,” “psychotic,” “degendered,” “psychopathic,” and “fundamentally alien to the realm of normal cultural experience,” Jenkins argues.

But, rather than targeting such stereotyping for how it has skewed the public picture of fandom toward abnormal representation (as fandom scholarship has done for the past decade), I argue that we should view stereotyping as fictional, mediated exaggeration of the elements of privation which lie submerged in all fandom. The rudiments of human isolation, aloneness, loss, and uncategorized deprivations increase geometrically here and merge into bizarre habits of media consumption, further coalescing in despondent individuals who, while not the norm, represent mythically-exaggerated versions of the norm: fans whose suffering, in other words, has fallen off the scale. My prime example of this process is *Misery*, Rob Reiner’s cinematic interpretation of Stephen King’s novel of the same name.

Misery tells the story of Annie Wilkes, a psychotically addicted reader of popular romance writer, Paul Sheldon, and his series of novels which portray a character named Misery Chastain. When Sheldon is critically injured in an automobile accident near Wilkes’s isolated rural house, she nurses him back to health but refuses to let him leave. The kidnapping goes unnoticed until the local sheriff becomes suspicious.

In a revealing narrative sequence, the sheriff discovers Wilkes has been purchasing sets of Sheldon's books plus large amounts of typing paper. The sheriff then drives out to Wilkes's house to inquire about Sheldon's whereabouts. When Wilkes hears the sheriff's approaching vehicle, she quickly and violently drugs Sheldon with a hypodermic syringe, moves him to a secluded space, and rushes to the door to meet the sheriff before he knocks for entry.

"Do you know anything about Paul Sheldon?" the sheriff asks.

Wilkes, out of breath, recites the biographical details a fan would know about Sheldon and says, "Why, I'm his number one fan."

The sheriff then looks around the house, and a panicked Wilkes makes up a story about God telling her that she would be "the late" Sheldon's replacement and that's why she's been buying the typing paper. Revealing her physical isolation, she confesses, "I've been rattling on like I've never had a houseguest," to which the sheriff answers, "It must get lonely living way out here by yourself."

"Unless you enjoy your own company," Wilkes responds, "you're not fit company for anyone else."

There is an uncomfortable silence as each watches the other's movements. To Wilkes's relief, the sheriff says he should leave. Once outside, however, he suddenly hears noise from inside the house, rushes back inside, and finds Sheldon bound and gagged. A concealed Wilkes sneaks up behind the sheriff and shoots him in the back with a shotgun, killing him, then tells a horrified Sheldon, "It's a sign that you and I

were meant to be together forever.” She informs him of her plan to take both of their lives. “Oh, Darling, it’ll be so beautiful,” she says.

We certainly would have reason to view this narrative sequence of *Misery* as further reinforcement of cinematic media’s negative portrayal of fannish behavior. Another use of the text, however, would be, as stated, to focus on the exaggerated images of privation presented in the narrative. Indeed, Reiner’s (and King’s) exaggerated portrait of Annie Wilkes extends to the point where only the prospect of double-murder, accompanied by suicide, will adequately ease the suffering of a fan who craves permanent, mystical identification with the object(s) of her fandom. Wilkes’s stark physical isolation, of course, moves the story out of normative fandom’s intentional social dimension, but even this aspect of the narrative is effective in its depiction of fan privation which has no therapeutic social component. A normative Annie Wilkes would have satisfied her privation through textual consumption but also through intentional social behaviors involving other fans. Instead, she chooses an anti-social track which transforms otherwise normative textual consumption into violent, addictive behavior.

To see a pattern of fan privation in greater detail, let us further break *Misery*’s narrative down so that important scenes of fan suffering are juxtaposed with interpretation. It should be clear from these scenes that Wilkes’s story is one of variable states of deprivation which are literally all over the map, static only in the mystery of what may lie at their base but dynamic in their various forms of

representation within the narrative. Consider the following scenes and their brief explanation:

SCENE

Opening scenes show Annie Wilkes trying to ease Paul Sheldon's suffering with painkillers. She wants to bring him back to life, nurse him back to health, and ease the pain of his injuries. She even shaves him with care to avoid cutting his face.

Wilkes's first disappointment occurs when she coaxes Sheldon into letting her read his unpublished manuscript. It contains profanity, which she sees as lacking in "nobility." She is deeply disturbed by this.

Wilkes feels nothing for Sheldon when he says he needs to phone his daughter on her birthday. She ignores this father-daughter bond and Sheldon's pain at not being able to contact his daughter.

Wilkes tells Sheldon about the pain of broken marriage and how her discovery of Misery, the character, helped her through it. "She made me so happy. She made me forget my problems," Wilkes says, adding that she read each book over and over.

Wilkes has a meltdown when she finishes reading Sheldon's manuscript and finds he has killed Misery, the character. "You murdered her!" she shouts repeatedly and breaks her chair in anger. She tells Sheldon that he can't leave, and no one knows he's even there. She is deeply disturbed by Misery's fictional death: the one who sustained her is gone.

Next morning, Wilkes resumes the nursing of Sheldon's wounds. She claims God has spoken to her, and that Sheldon must burn his new manuscript. She talks more about God — "putting us on this earth to help others," and she is here to help Sheldon rid the world of filth. She doesn't notice his pain at the manuscript going

COMMENT

Mix of suffering and compassion.
Desire to eliminate object's suffering.

Intrusion of the unexpected threatens safety and consistency found in the object of fandom.

Insensitivity toward another's suffering.

Acknowledgment of personal suffering and its relief through repetitive affiliation with a literary character.

Extreme suffering from the loss of a life-sustaining object. Sudden loss intensifies a deeper protracted experience of loss.

More insensitivity to object's suffering, even as she thinks of using him/it to actualize herself and her role in life.

up in flames.

Wilkes wants Sheldon to resurrect Misery by writing a new book which features the character's return. She slams a ream of paper on his healing legs when he objects. After Sheldon tells Wilkes that he's suffering intensely and that he wants her to make the pain go away, she doesn't respond immediately. Then, she coldly says, "It just breaks my heart to see you this way." She gives him more pain relief capsules and brings him a pad for ideas.

Wilkes reveals her addiction to movie texts as a child and how she felt cheated by them when they didn't proceed logically week after week. She won't let Sheldon "cheat" in that way: the new Misery text must proceed in a logical, authentic way.

Sheldon writes Misery back to life. When Wilkes reads a few chapters, she is beside herself with joy. "Misery is alive!" she shouts over and over, while twirling like a child. She says she's going to play her Liberace records, saying, "He's my all-time favorite."

In severe depression one night, Wilkes tells Sheldon he'll never know what it's like "to lose someone like you, if you're someone like me." She believes he'll leave as soon as he is well, and she doesn't have what it would take for him to love her. She displays a revolver and suggests she is capable of committing suicide.

Sheldon finds Wilkes's scrapbook, which contains her father's obituary and several newspaper clippings which suggest she has murdered those under her care.

Wilkes drugs Sheldon with a hypodermic needle, then tortures him by breaking his ankles with a sledgehammer. As he lies bleeding, she says, "God, I love you." When Sheldon makes an obscene gesture to her, she appears finally at rest—knowing she has reduced Sheldon to total helplessness and bitterness.

Intense rage and the infliction of physical pain on the object of her fandom.

Luke-warm response to object's suffering. It gets lost in her hunger for new ideas about resurrecting the character.

Dependency on purity of thought and intent within the text.

Loss has been defeated—turned into gain—by the return of the beloved fictional character. Resurrecting euphoria transfers to consumption of another media text.

Suicidal suffering amid the awareness of impending loss and unrequited love: pain of knowing what one can never have.

Suffering the loss of a parent is seen as a foundational deprivation.

Acquisition of well-being through another person's suffering; infliction of torture accompanied by obsessive love.

Sheldon sets fire to the manuscript he has been forced to write, destroying Misery and Wilkes in the process. In a fight to the death, he stuffs charred paper into Wilkes's mouth, then kills her by crushing her skull with a typewriter. Much later, Sheldon is seen having lunch with his agent. He is lame and must use a cane for support—the effects of his imprisonment and torture. Sheldon tells the agent that he grew somehow, in a way not otherwise possible, from his ordeal. He learned, benefited, and is redeemed by his own suffering. Annie Wilkes's suffering, on the other hand, destroyed her.

Suffering is redemptive for the hero and the story, but destructive for the villain and fan.

The exaggerated portrait of privation revealed by these scenes from *Misery* is instructive. It shows, for instance, that despite being exaggerated here, suffering in fandom clearly possesses a reciprocal dynamic, whereby it is both received and rejected, experienced and inflicted, embodying a constant taking-in and giving-out process which is intrinsic to the social and textual nature of fandom. Experienced suffering, as Annie Wilkes demonstrates, may take the form of harsh, proactive cravings which the fan will satisfy with an intense singular necessity. Or, it may take the form of despondency and suicidal depression, which Wilkes also exhibits. Still again, it may express itself as insensitivity and cruelty, though this is where experienced suffering crosses over into inflicted suffering: through rage, anger, and torture. The animus which has been harbored internally now receives its external application in the form of damages inflicted, in this case, on Sheldon, the object. Few fans would ever reach this level of ill behavior, but at least some of the responses reflected by this exaggerated portrait may be seen to exist in lesser forms within normative fandom, too.

VARIABLE EXAGGERATED DEPRIVATIONS

What is equally instructive here is the difficulty of locating the precise root causes of Annie Wilkes's privation and its resulting forms of radical fan behavior. Is the problem loss, and is the sense of loss the superficial losing of temporal objects or a deeper disappearance of human relationships and meanings? Is the problem more one of impending loss, as in her awareness of unrequited love? "You'll never know

what it's like to lose someone like you if you're someone like me," she says to a recuperating Sheldon in the movie's most revealing scene. (She is standing in the darkness, clutching a revolver.) Here, the loss is an impending one, but in speaking from Wilkes's personal experience it must also be rooted in past losses, too. We know that the loss of her father was especially devastating to her because she has saved his obituary. Or, is the problem more one of separation, alienation, and isolation? Reiner painstakingly depicts Wilkes's physical separation, placing her in an isolated house separated from any neighbors and, we are led to believe, a long way from town. Is this physical isolation symbolic of a greater social and psychological isolation which she satisfies through her textual addiction?

Of a certainty, what we can say here is that Annie Wilkes's deprivations are variable, and the way she satisfies them is through equally variable rewards and releases she derives from the textual dimension of her fandom: the experience of a popular literary character and its creator.

Lacking the normative social components of non-cult fandom, *Misery* is not the most accurate exploration of fandom we have, nor even our truest cinematic portrayal of the subject.²⁷³ However, it may be the best exaggerated portrait we have

²⁷³ Not all movies about fandom depict exaggerated cult fans. A more normative view can be found, for instance, in Woody Allen's *Radio Days* (1987), which explores World War II-era radio fandom. The intentional social component thrives here as Allen portrays the radio medium and its variety of programming as a cultural centerpiece around which a family of fans gathers in daily consumptive interactivity. There is humor in every scene, though even in Allen's depiction of normative fandom one sees ample evidence of suffering. Listeners sitting in the dark while a radio narrates catastrophic events of the war are among many relevant scenes.

of privation in cult fandom. Virtually all of Annie Wilkes's psychological deficiencies function as enlargements of basic deprivations which can be seen to exist unilaterally in fandom. They are blown out of proportion by Reiner, with the intentional or unintentional effect being that we now have at least some idea of what lies at the root of any fan's excessive textual consumption: loss, alienation, separation, the variable states of deprivation I have called privation. The resulting danger, moreover, is not the assumption that Annie Wilkes is essentially the same as other fans but rather the assumption that she is fundamentally different. Even her unmanaged animus, which, cut off from normative behavioral associations leads her into the murky area of murder-suicide, is not a completely foreign object to fans who socialize their textual consumption near the plane of organized tastes and preferences. Extreme potentials may never be realized by the mass of normative fans, but the foundational elements of such potentials can never be eliminated from core experiences and understandings of fandom, either.

Within less-exaggerated but still-fictional portraits of fandom, for instance, we have little difficulty noting seeds and roots which could become fully-realized potentials under suitable conditions. An example is Helena Pielichaty's short epistolary novel, *Simone's Letters* (1999), which tells the story of a ten-year-old girl's theatre fandom. In evidence here are many of *Misery's* themes, explored this time through popular literature and as they exist in the letters of an isolated child who connects with a fan object in more normative conditions.

Simone, the child, writes letters to Jem Cakebread, a touring company's leading man. She soon reveals that her letters are a coping mechanism to help her get through physical suffering from asthma and emotional suffering produced by the ending of her parents' marriage. She believes that she is the reason her parents divorced, and her letters to Cakebread increasingly reflect a craving for fandom's unique type of social-textual therapy. She lives in a world of attachment and confession, whereby she releases her feelings and is sustained by her object-confessor at the same time. She writes,

P.S. I did make my parents split up, Jem, but it was an accident. I kept having asthma attacks, so Mum couldn't go to work and we didn't have enough money and that made them argue. After an argument Dad would go to the pub and not come in until late, then they would argue again and I would get another asthma attack. If I didn't have asthma, Dad would never have gone to the Bag O' Nuts Fun Pub...and left an 'I can't cope' note on the kitchen table.²⁷⁴

Simone is at once lifted up by her articulations and then locked into an increasing dependency (or, indeed, a co-dependency) of further confessions which reveal a craving for shared suffering. "[I]f there's anything you want to tell me, like how your dad died and was it painful, feel free," she writes in another letter.²⁷⁵

Simone wants to tell of her own privation, but she wants to hear about the object's privation, too. It is always reciprocal. Even when she strays toward attractions to physical pain, as when she tells Cakebread about a version of the Cinderella story in which one of the "ugly" sisters "cuts her toes off with a meat

²⁷⁴ Pielichaty, p. 27.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

cleaver” to make her foot fit a fur slipper instead of a glass one, she yearns to have Cakebread join in her fantasizing about pain and blood. Drawing a picture of a slipper possessing packets of ketchup, and holes “to release blood,” powered by a remote-control pump which would make “the ugly sister” bleed when prompted, she tells Cakebread, “Don’t forget my tip.... You could use ketchup instead of blood.”²⁷⁶ What would Annie Wilkes have been thinking at this age, and how would she have acted? we may ask. How would her own co-dependent fan behaviors have developed? Would they similarly have been produced by mysterious combinations of loss and blame, and at what point do such variable deprivations mutate into darker potentials? We do not know the answers to these questions, though we recognize that it is not unreasonable to visualize threads of suffering which connect the extreme behaviors of an adult Annie Wilkes with the non-extreme potentials of a juvenile Simone. Fandom is undergirded by variable states of deprivation whether the fan’s experiences are expressed as organized tastes and preferences, extreme adherence and allegiance, or somewhere in between.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

APPENDIX B: SUPPLEMENTAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I have stated that autobiography can play a role in advanced academic studies. The text of one's own life, in Beaudoin's words, is an important text, especially for the researcher of contemporary life issues. Considering, monitoring, and ultimately knowing this text can function as a supplemental technique through which one's own experiences round out what others have said about a particular set of experiences. In the gathering of data, it can also serve as a way of internalizing what others have said, bringing statements into harmony or dissonance with what one has experienced himself, thereby increasing the chances of understanding and being understood. Empathic authority, moreover, seems very much a natural outgrowth of such internalization: it becomes possible to say that because I have experienced, I now have a chance at understanding what my respondents have experienced.

The dangers of autobiographical research, on the other hand, occur when the text of one's life becomes the leader of assumptions so that observations are forced to conform to what the researcher already believes to be true. Pure objectivity is never possible in any research situation, yet unmonitored autobiographical assumptions can have the effect of ruling out even attempts at objectivity which always should be made. The present study is not my story, I would add, and I am in error if I allow excessively subjective liberties to influence the gathering and presenting of data. The fact that I have been a fan, am a fan, and likely will continue

to be a fan, is secondary to the body of research presented in this thesis. Hence, I offer the term, supplemental autobiography.

As noted in Chapter Four, I divide my fan experiences into four phases: childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and mature adulthood. I should also mention that I am a child of 1950s middle class America. As such, I was part of the first generation of children steeped in the five-industry media culture pre-dating the Internet. Media consumption consisted of some variation involving books, newspapers, magazines, radio and sound recording, and television. While I do not remember the precise points at which random consumption merged into patterns of organized tastes and preferences, it can be said that the rapidly expanding media culture of the 1950s offered ample opportunity for variations in the intensity of media consumption by average consumers.

Fandom, as I define it, began for me as a child growing up in 1950s Detroit. At some point which I do not recall precisely, I became a fan of Detroit's professional baseball team, the Tigers. This text—the team as both a singular entity and a collective of individual players—was appropriated publicly through the place of its activities (the local stadium) and via the media (books, newspapers, magazines, radio, and television). It was, thus, a mediated text consumed by fans through a variety of activities ranging from physically attending ball games at Tiger Stadium to reading box scores in the sports pages of *The Detroit News*. Spontaneous socialization occurred through these same activities. Yet, a more rigidly intentional form of socialization, away from the public setting and media forum and unique to

the semi-private world of the fans themselves, occurred in the form of memorabilia consumption and artifact rituals: especially the collection, distribution, display and bartering of baseball cards. Well before even the preteen years, these rituals were sophisticated activities and the basis of a non-mainstream cultural exchange of commerce and interactivity. Cards were weighed and valued according to the players they represented, the age and physical quality of the card, its aesthetic value, and many more-subtle criteria such as the story the card told (or implied) and even the expressions on the players' faces. Meaning emanated at least in part from the players the cards represented, through I argue—against the opinions of many fans—that meaning came from the card itself, possibly independent of what it represented.²⁷⁷

Fandom occurred again, in musical form during my late teen years. With the mass of American teenagers who possessed mainstream tastes, I became a consumer of popular musical products ranging from *The Beatles* to B.B King. Organized record and memorabilia purchases which marked, and mark, a rite of passage for popular music consumption among young people, occupied much of my time from early adolescence onward. However, it wasn't until I learned to play a musical instrument that I fully entered an overtly intentional social world of popular music

²⁷⁷ I am speaking retrospectively, of course, as it has been many years since I collected baseball cards. Thinking through memory (all the way back to childhood, nonetheless) has helped me solve certain aspects of the debate in my own mind about the sources of mediated meaning. Memory tells me that the card itself was the object of intense identification, not entirely what the card represented. The card was an independent object with its own sense of meaningful space as it was enjoyed, stored, traded, and displayed.

fandom. Being able now to play the songs I heard, to write new songs that sounded like songs I heard, and to share these essential expressions of fan production with others who were reformulating, recasting, and recreating the sounds they had consumed via the mass-marketed American record industry, satisfied sub-cultural hungers for identification and empowerment. There were few among my immediate circle of fans who did not do this in some way with the music of Neil Young, James Taylor, or Joni Mitchell, to name a few sources of our fandom. Neil Young's chord progressions, melody, lines, and the way he constructed a worldview through his ragged poetry of fragmented soul, for instance, became psychological bedrock for my subculture's subculture. We filked him²⁷⁸--and perhaps still do years later—for the raggedness we could poach from his musical product.

A third fandom occurred in young adulthood when I organized interests around a small group of American authors. A random discovery of Ernest Hemingway's stories about northern Michigan, where I had vacationed with my family as a child, had served as a point of entry into Hemingway's world of religious rebellion, family dysfunction, and suffering consciousness which sought healing in

²⁷⁸ Filk is the name given to original folks songs written and performed by fans. It is a crucial element of *Star Trek* fandom, for instance, whereby fans extract themes from the text (episodes, characters, etc.) and transform them into filk. Entire conventions devoted to filk—*Filkcons*—have been held. By *filking* Neil Young, I am noting that songs based on Young's style and persona were written and shared in my circle of friends. This phenomenon grew out of corporately playing and singing actual songs recorded by the artist.

Michigan's watery wilderness lands.²⁷⁹ Through these stories and other components of Hemingway's literary corpus, I gained entry into the similar worlds of Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson, William Faulkner, and various other writers who, to me, spoke engagingly about resistance to religious authority through a vivid textual aesthetic. American scholars have referred to this phenomenon as an American procession,²⁸⁰ whose representative writers functioned as American Adams, collectively representing a complex interplay of acceptance and rejection aesthetically directed toward the country's Puritan heritage. Raised in a religious environment with my own set of theological inconsistencies, this narrative proved always compelling and many times magical. I describe myself as a fan of it because my intentional socialization of the consumed text has been no different from that directed towards products of popular culture. I have participated in the fan club experience, collected numerous forms of memorabilia over the years, and traveled pilgrim-like (no different than pilgrims to Elvis Presley's Graceland, for instance) to the homes and landscapes of American writers and their literary product.

Lastly, a fourth and still-emerging fandom, of my middle adulthood, has grown out of intense organized interest in popular musical culture of the 1930s and 1940s. Steadily over the past decade my personal collection of musical recordings

²⁷⁹ These were Hemingway's Nick Adams stories, now collected into a single volume, though originally published in separate collections of short stories. Nick Adams was one of Hemingway's alter-egos who appears originally as a child, then later in periods of adolescence, young adulthood, and middle age.

²⁸⁰ See Alfred Kazin's *An American Procession* (1982).

has drifted from the music of my own generation to that of earlier generations. The pre-1950s recordings of Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Nat King Cole, and many others who recorded during the World War II era, have become a taste and preference accompanied by the collection of era-relevant artifacts, clothing, and memorabilia. I still have contemporary interests, but this cultural desire to experience an earlier generation's musical past has become a fannish activity that has shown an increase in personal investment. I partake of this culture as a nostalgic venture, to be sure, though my consumption also possesses a contemporaneous nature. It is new to me in the sense that I encounter it as an unfamiliar text, free of the general memory associations I might have were it the musical culture of my own generation. It is, however, conditioned by memory and nostalgia in the sense that it was a musical text of my parents' generation, and when I experience it I do so accompanied by this source of memories.

Interpreting these stages of fan experience could take varying approaches. As my fan cultures have been presented according to stages of personal development, I might well focus my attention on the importance of an age context. What range of age-related variables influence fan behaviors and practices? Or, I might choose to focus on a gender context, noting the fact that I am a male fan whose interests appear to be heavily weighted toward male texts and objects, with the opposite gender serving as exception rather than rule. I could also choose to explore a thematic context by seeking to isolate thematic threads which might be argued to

connect fan experiences related to sports culture, literary texts, and popular musical culture. Each of these approaches would seem to be warranted.

As I have considered my own fan experiences, however, I have continually sought concepts which are more basic. I have, in short, worked to define, describe, and place my fandom in a framework of elemental self-understanding. Thinking of myself as a fan has led me to conclude that as a child maturing in a media-rich environment, I acquired an early tendency to value some products of media and culture more than other ones. This fundamental valuation-devaluation process initiated a subsequent process through which random consumptive activities became organized according to levels of textual interest. These resulting structured habits which emerged from randomness led, I believe, to the exercise of the social functions by which my own fandom may be identified. I collected, shared, and participated with others whose organized tastes and preferences coincided with my own cultural choices.

Over time, little has changed. The consumptive practices and social structures of fandom are in place, despite the fact that I have organized myself around new tastes and preferences, socializing them accordingly. I would add here that I have a normal life of “serious” disciplines and pursuits, inclusive of family, career, and citizenship, for instance, and I like to think of myself as defined by these intents and purposes. Yet my life as a fan continues, and sometimes (though I may not wish to admit it) I see myself defined as much by cultural choices I interpret as leisure-oriented as by any serious side I might possess. This, of course, raises

questions about what I have been seeking all these years as a fan, and why I continue to operate as a seeker of meanings obtained through fandom's socially consumptive processes.

Though I had given thought to this question prior to the present research, it wasn't until I had begun interviewing fans four years ago that I noticed parallels between what I was hearing and what seemed to play out in my own life as a fan. The existence of hungers and the identifying capacities of popular texts and celebrities were relatable elements. The presences of anger and release as expressed by many respondents seemed less relevant to me personally, though I was not surprised to see these topics emerge in the research. The largest surprise, however, concerned the presence of family-based deprivation evident in so much of the research. Not only had I not greatly anticipated this element in my respondents, I had not anticipated the presence of family-based deprivation within myself and my fan experiences at all. Yet now, when I look at these experiences, I can see that a very substantial element of them possesses family implications. From my experiences of mediated sports fandom as a child (which I shared with my father) to my current fan interests in war-era music (which has been a way of dealing with the losses of family members to old age), I have used much of my fandom as a means of seeking family connectivity.

The situation is more complicated than this. However, as I observed in the case of David Dawson, the Harry Potter fan approached in Chapter Six, a clear way into root motivations lying beneath fandom seems to lie in better understanding

family-based deprivation and the roles it may play in instances of intense cultural consumption and the social activities it encompasses. If my system of deprivations and satisfactions is accepted as a starting point, then a subsequent stage of research should be devoted exclusively to family-based deprivation as an undergirding component of fandom.

I want to know more about my life as a fan. I want to know how I have used organized patterns and habits of cultural consumption to address areas of deprivation in my own life. I want to know how the pleasures and the deeper satisfactions of fandom operate, and I want to know more about balances between what I find meaningful and what I do with that meaning. Most of all, at least for now, I want to know where meanings derived from organized consumption rank in terms of their importance to my life and well being. I feel as though I am learning from those with whom I continue to converse, which makes this study of fan cultures as much an effort at personal education as one contributing to fandom scholarship.

APPENDIX C: FANDOM QUESTIONNAIRES

The following reprinted questionnaires were used to collect data from 256 fans. The first one was administered between August 2001 and May 2002 at the University of Tampa and Southeastern College, both located in the Tampa Bay region of Florida. It served as a facilitator of interviews I conducted with 120 fans and required significant explanation for

respondents, especially term definition. The second questionnaire, administered at Crown College in Minnesota in 2004 and again at Azusa Pacific University in 2005, reached a total of 136 respondents. It attempted to rectify some of the weaknesses of the original questionnaire. See Chapter Four.

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO RESPOND TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONNAIRE. IT IS PART OF A RESEARCH PROJECT WHICH SEEKS TO ADD TO WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT FANS, THEIR SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS, AND HOW THEY MEASURE THEIR LIVES BY THE MEANING THEY RECEIVE FROM BEING A FAN OF SOMETHING.

“FANDOM,” AS WE MAY CALL THIS ACTIVITY, MAY BE DEFINED ACADEMICALLY AS “THE SOCIALIZATION OF TEXTUAL CONSUMPTION.” IN OTHER WORDS, IT IS WHAT WE DO WITH WHAT WE LIKE, WHETHER WHAT WE LIKE IS A MEDIA PRODUCT OF SOME TYPE, A SPORT, A CELEBRITY, A GROUPING OF THINGS, OR SOME OTHER OBJECT OF OUR HEIGHTENED INTEREST. WHEN WE LIKE SOMETHING TO THE EXTENT THAT WE FIND WAYS OF SOCIALIZING IT THROUGH A FAN CLUB OR OTHER ACTIVITY, WE MAY SAY THAT WE ARE A PART OF A FANDOM.

1. List, in order of importance to you, the various products of media and culture of which you can reasonably describe yourself as a fan.

1.	6.
2.	7.
3.	8.
4.	9.
5.	10.

2. As accurately as possible, name your fandom, whether it be a single-item fandom (such as a star, icon, or text) or a pluralistic fandom (such as a genre, collection, or grouping).

3. How did you become a part of your particular fandom (through friends, through some type of media, all of a sudden, gradually over time, etc.), and how long have you been a part of it?

4. What do you do in your fandom (of what do your fan-related activities consist)?

5. Describe any curatorial consumption (artifact collection) your fandom entails, and what do you as a fan derive from this experience?

6. How much money do you spend on your fandom, and on what activities, products, media, do you spend your money?

7. How much time is consumed by your fandom and in what activities?

8. Explain how your fandom affects the following activities:

how you dress

how you decorate or arrange your personal surroundings

9. What is the most unusual thing you do as a fan within your fandom?

10. How and why are media and mass communication essential to your fandom, and could your particular fandom exist without media of some type?

11. How does the textual experience of your fandom work?

12. How does the social experience of your fandom work?

13. Why is the textual experience more important than the social experience of your fandom or vice-versa?

14. Explain in detail where personal meaning comes from in your fandom and how it comes to you.

15. What happens to your fandom over time (strengthens, diminishes, stays pretty much the same), and why?

16. Would you describe your fandom as crucial to your life and well-being, or would you describe it more as an accessory to your life?

17. Are there any “deeper” aspects to your fandom whereby you are able to view it in religious or philosophical terms?

18. What else can you add to the description of your fandom and why you are a fan within your particular fandom?

Fandom Questionnaire

Thank you for taking time to respond to this questionnaire. It is part of a research project which seeks to add to what is known about fans, their social and cultural choices, and how they look at their lives according to the meaning they receive from being a fan.

“Fandom,” as we may call this activity, can be defined academically as “the socialization of textual consumption.” In other words, it is what we do with what we like, whether what we like is a media product of some type, a sport, a celebrity, a grouping of things, or some other product of our heightened interest.

When we like something to the extent that we find ways of socializing our interests in a fan club or other social environment, we may say that we are part of a fandom.

1. List, in order of their importance to you, products of media and culture of which you can describe yourself as a fan.

2. Which of the above can you describe as your most important fan interest?

3. How did this fan interest begin for you?

4. What kinds of activities do you do in this fandom?

5. Do you collect and/or display anything related to this fan interest? If yes, please give examples.

6. How much money do you estimate is spent by you to maintain this fan interest, and on what?

7. How much time do you put into maintaining this fan interest?

8. Explain how this fandom affects the following activities (if applicable):

(how you dress)

(how you decorate or arrange your personal surroundings (if applicable):

9. What is the most unusual thing you do as a fan within this particular fandom?

10. What role(s) do the mass media play for you in this fandom?

11. How would you describe your experience of “the text” in this fandom? (The “text” is the object of your fandom, whether it is a book, a movie, a celebrity, a sports team, or any bounded entity serving as the object of your fan interests.)

12. How does the “social” dimension of your fandom work? (“Social” refers to external things you do in your fandom. Participation in fan clubs, online fan

communities, or anywhere fans gather to socialize their interests, are examples of the social dimension within fandom.)

13. Which is more important to you as a fan: the textual side of your fandom or the social side of it? Please explain.

14. Where does personal meaning come from in your fandom?

15. What happens to your fandom over time (strengthens, diminishes, stays pretty much the same)?

16. Would you describe your fandom as crucial to your life or is it more of an accessory?

17. Is there anything about your fandom that would cause you to think of it in religious terms?

(end of questionnaire)

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