Introduction

*Make Fandom Great Again*

In a March 2017 interview with *ICv2*, Marvel Comics’ senior vice president of sales and marketing, David Gabriel, blamed a slump in October–November comic book sales on the changing tastes of comic book readers. More precisely, Gabriel blamed the sales slump on a perceived *lack* of changing tastes among comic book readers. In a quotation that rapidly spread across digital fan platforms like Twitter and Tumblr, Gabriel bluntly stated, “What we heard [from some comic retailers] was that people didn’t want any more diversity. They didn’t want female characters out there. That’s what we heard, whether we believe that or not. I don’t know that that’s really true, but that’s what we saw in sales.”¹

It is significant that Gabriel’s comment conflates diversification with the development of female characters, particularly considering that Marvel Comics’ diversity initiatives of the past several years have included racially recasting iconic superheroes such as Spider-Man (mixed-race teen Miles Morales, who first donned the webslinger’s suit in 2011) and Captain America (with Cap’s black friend and fellow superhero Sam Wilson taking up the iconic shield in 2015).

There are two primary takeaways from Gabriel’s statement. The first is that the blame for Marvel Comics’ sales slump lies with female comic book fans, particularly those who have vocally criticized comic books’ lack of creative and representational diversity. This framing re-affirms that Marvel still considers women to be a surplus audience for mainstream superhero comics, and that they presume male readers are unlikely to invest (emotionally or economically) in female-led titles. Placing the blame on female fans for a sales slump precipitated by an array of issues, ranging from oversaturation of the market² to Marvel’s own unpopular crossover events and the corporate propensity to continuously reboot titles,³ thus has a subtextual goal: to attempt to quash...
further calls for diversity through the logics of market rationalization. Second, and equally importantly, Gabriel’s statement reaffirms Marvel’s commitment to its “meat and potatoes” fanboy base, a code phrase used within the comic book industry to justify abandoning diversity titles and initiatives.4

Facing immediate pushback from predominantly female and minority comic book fans, and a wave of think pieces contesting his statistical claim about the comparatively low sales for “diversity” titles, Gabriel quickly walked back his response. Clarifying that Marvel remained committed to its newer female characters, Gabriel suggested that he was merely responding to comic retailers’ concerns about the company’s perceived “abandonment of the core Marvel heroes.”5 Ironically, and as many fans were quick to point out on social media, Marvel’s sales slump was due in part to its own abandonment of one of those core heroes in 2016 with the (re)launch of Steve Rogers: Captain America #1, which culminated in 2017’s crossover event series Secret Empire. The deeply unpopular reveal that Captain America was a Hydra Agent provoked immediate outrage from fans, who objected to a character created by Jewish men to explicitly fight Nazis becoming an agent of Marvel’s fictional Third Reich. The character was billed by one blogger as “the hero that bigoted comic book fans deserve,”6 and other fans were quick to draw parallels between the erosion of Captain America’s character and more cancerous forms of prejudice spreading through geek culture and society at large.

The past decade has been marked by growing fan activist efforts surrounding issues of diversity in media production cultures, and pushback from mostly cisgendered, heterosexual (cishet, hereafter), white, male fans who view these efforts as an unwelcome encroachment of “political correctness” and “SJWs” (a pejorative term deployed by anti-feminist, racist, homophobic, or transphobic commenters online to disparage “social justice warriors”) into geek and fan culture. As the aforementioned controversy surrounding Gabriel’s comment makes clear, industrial “diversity” initiatives are often viewed skeptically by marginalized fans as performative or perfunctory, particularly when they are ultimately wielded to justify the industry’s commitment to preexisting demographic conceptions of fans as straight, white men. A vicious cycle has accordingly emerged: minority fans offer justified
critiques of hegemonic production cultures and media representations, content producers offer (routinely half-hearted) responses to speak back to these concerns, and media industries dismiss minority fans’ textual predilections as too niche when these efforts are not immediately successful, thus further empowering a segment of entitled white, straight male fans to dismiss minority fans’ concerns and invalidate their claim to “authentic” fan identity.

Unwittingly, both Gabriel’s dismissal of diversity initiatives and Marvel’s repeated corporate calls for fans to exercise “patience” with their fascist makeover of Captain America perfectly reflect the fan culture war that has evolved over the past decade and its connections to our broader political landscape. Just as “meat and potatoes” evokes a sense of stasis and stability, comfort and conformity, the anxieties underpinning this incident (and, indeed, undergirding misogynist pushback to the mainstreaming of fan culture) are rooted in the fear of change. Digital media platforms may have amplified the voices of minority fans, but as a market segment, fangirls, fans of color, and queer fans are still considered outliers rather than central to popular conceptions of “fan” demographics. This is especially the case with video games and comic books, which are still staunchly considered to be masculine fan preserves, even as audience data increasingly challenge those assumptions. Importantly, these two elements frequently form an insidious feedback loop, as evidenced by the mounting “frequency and intensity” of harassment of female video game players in recent years and “the growing presence of women and girls in gaming not as a novelty but as a regular and increasingly important demographic.”

Perceived shifts at the micro level of media textuality and target demographics are thus deeply bound up with macro cultural concerns that conflate legitimate criticisms of systemic and intersectional forms of oppression with a censorial rise of “PC culture,” and dramatically overstate the power and privilege of minorities in the process. Our cultural moment is one in which diversity is routinely positioned as a zero-sum game, and whether the topic is comic book superheroes or immigration, pushback is predicated on the same flawed logic: more for someone else will inevitably mean less for me. The “me” in both of these scenarios, whether we are discussing comic book fans or American working-class voters, is normatively codified as white, cishet men. I preface *Fake Geek*
Girls with a discussion of the controversy surrounding Gabriel’s comments because this book is centrally concerned with how androcentric conceptions of fan culture and identity have become entrenched despite fan studies’ characterization of fandom as a decidedly feminine and potentially feminist space. Marvel Comics’ statement, and the centrality of male comic book retailers and fans to their market rationalization, sets the stage for this book’s attempt to map the growing industrial and fan-cultural efforts to marginalize female fans over roughly the past decade (2006–2017). In theorizing the industrial desire to contain and circumvent female fan engagement, this book addresses how the mainstreaming of fan culture has been marked by a backlash from (predominantly white, cishet) male fans, reflecting the growing cultural influence of the alt-right and Men’s Rights movements, and refracting the media industry’s gendered messaging about which “fans” they value within convergence culture.

Ironically, those initiating the backlash against fangirls or striving to police “authentic” fan identity along gender lines are typically those who have gained the most power and privilege from geek culture’s movement from the margins to the mainstream. It is thus, paradoxically and overwhelmingly, white, cishet men who tend to decry the loss of fandom’s subcultural authenticity, even as they reap the demographic, industrial, authorial, and representational benefits of this loss. It is vital to acknowledge from the outset that the fanboys who envision geek culture as an inherently masculine preserve represent a small (albeit disproportionately vocal and vitriolic) percentage of all male fans. Likewise, boundary policing within fan cultures is not new, nor an exclusively masculine pursuit, with gatekeeping practices historically functioning as “part of the initiation, the us versus them, the fan versus the nonfan.”8 This book explores the growing tendency to strictly gender these categories as an act of exclusion rather than initiation.

Without question, the terms “fanboy” and fangirl” are problematically essentialist fan identities, constructing too simplistic a binary to adequately reflect the diversity of fannish self-identification or multivalent forms of fan participation. Julie Levin Russo has argued that “fanboy”/“fangirl” is a necessary taxonomy because we have yet to come up with any terminology to replace it,9 but I would further contend that the “fanboy”/“fangirl” taxonomy remains dominant, resonant, and
useful precisely because it is stringently gendered. How fans participate, and whose participation is valued by media industries and fan scholars alike, is commonly determined by these labels. As Russo notes, the impulse to “move beyond” these gendered terms could “lead us away from this attention to power and into a more insidiously ‘neutral’ map of our diverse fannish and academic pursuits.” Rather than “move beyond” the fanboy/fangirl binary, falling prey to the logic of “posts” (postfeminist, postracial, and so on), it is increasingly vital to consider how this binary is produced and performed. Like Russo, I understand that “mobilizing this idiom in relation to the heterogeneity of fan activity risks imprecision and oversimplification” but agree that “it is irreplaceable as an abbreviation for disparities that we have collectively come to recognize as infused with gendered inequality.”

As the following chapters will explore, those who incorrectly insist that fan and geek culture has historically been and thus must remain a male-dominated space have had their viewpoint tacitly endorsed time and again by the culture industries in their hailing of a “fan” demographic. Because the growing cultural influence of fans has unquestionably been a byproduct of media convergence, the culture industries’ growing promotional dependency on fan labor within digital participatory culture is tempered by nostalgia for a past in which they need not be as attentive to the demands of fans. As I have argued repeatedly elsewhere, the media industry’s supposedly collaborationist embrace of fan culture over the past decade has cultivated a structured secondariness for female fans and their preferred modes of engagement, which in turn is used to rationalize fangirls’ dismissal and harassment by a small, if voracious, segment of fans. This vicious cycle is at the heart of this book’s consideration of the fan culture wars that have developed over the past decade.

While this project centers gender in its discussion of the claim to and contestation over fan identity, fan privilege and nostalgia impact all marginalized groups of fans. It is not my intent to avoid more intersectional work, and I explicitly address this fan-scholarly tendency and its impact on the feminist potentialities of both fandom and fan studies in the book’s conclusion. I also wish to be mindful of Rebecca Wanzo’s critique of the tendency to frame fans as “oppositional” consumers, thereby “valoriz[ing] people who have claimed otherness for themselves,
as opposed to having otherness thrust upon them.”

Though any study of bias against fangirls must acknowledge the fact that queer women and women of color are more vulnerable to attacks on or dismissals of their claims to fan identity, my decision to focus on how the mainstreaming of fan culture has impacted women generally was made for several reasons. First, the field of fan studies has from its inception characterized fan culture as a female-dominated and potentially feminist space. This emphasis has been rightly challenged as too limiting as the field itself diversifies and expands alongside the growth of digital fan culture, but gender remains central to the field’s enduring investment in exploring the production and circulation of transformative works (e.g., fanfiction, fanvids, fanart) within fan communities. Second, gender has been the most prominent axis of identity in constructions of the “fan” within the cultural imaginary, followed closely by race (specifically, whiteness). Accordingly, gender tends to be most actively utilized to either include or exclude people from fan subject positions, and/or to pathologize fans more generally via the feminization of the fan subject. Last, but certainly not least, while any fan who does not conform to the archetypal “fanboy” demographic has unquestionably felt the impact of both industrial and fan-cultural efforts to codify fan identity over the past decade, women have felt the brunt of these efforts most acutely. It is my hope that this book’s survey of androcentric fan culture and hegemonic fan identity writ large will be productive for future considerations of racism, ableism, ageism, sizeism, homophobia, xenophobia, and transphobia within fan communities.

This book examines the gendered tensions surrounding the mainstreaming of geek and fan culture through three interrelated lenses: fan studies’ legacy of focusing on female audiences and their practices, the media industries’ conceptualization and cultivation of a desirable “fan” demographic that serves their promotional interests, and fans’ coordinated performances of fan identity and attempts to deny others’ claim to the (sub)cultural category of “fan.” Thus, I am more interested in considering how various systems and stakeholders work to shape and validate an androcentric cultural conception of the “media fan” than
in ethnographically exploring the lived experience or creative production of individual fans or particular fan communities of practice. Relying predominantly on (para)textual and discourse analysis to consider how contemporary fan identities are mutually (and, often, narrowly) constructed by media industries, content creators, journalists, and fans themselves, this book begins unpacking the proliferation of misogyny within contemporary geek culture. To do this, we must situate the development of these conditions over the past decade within convergence culture.

Confronting the Convergence Culture Industry

Tracing the profound industrial, technological, and cultural shifts that accompanied media convergence in the early and mid-2000s, the 2006 publication of Henry Jenkins’s *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* was received by many scholars as a spiritual successor to his foundational fan studies work from 1992, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. And, indeed, fans featured heavily into Jenkins’s *Convergence Culture* narrative, as the audience segment that had most actively moved “from the invisible margins of popular culture and into the center of current thinking about media production and consumption” during this period’s development of digital tools and platforms to support participatory culture. Because convergence is simultaneously “a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process,” Jenkins was quick to note that media producers “responded to these newly empowered consumers in contradictory ways, sometimes encouraging change, sometimes resisting what they see as renegade behavior.” What remains unspoken in much of Jenkins’s account is how deeply gendered conceptions of “renegade” fan behavior are, and how frequently they are aligned with the transformative impulses of female fans. However economically motivated, or conditional, or even well-meaning the media industry’s embrace of fan culture may have been, what has emerged in convergence culture’s wake is a gendered politics of participation that is designed to privilege male fans and their preferred modes of participation.

*Convergence Culture* masterfully traced how industrial shifts, as well as the development of digital technologies and the resultant threat to
analog content and advertising models, necessitated the media industries’ move from a prohibitionist to a more collaborationist stance towards fandom and participatory culture. Jenkins himself acknowledged that these “empowered” or “elite” consumers, those who “exert a disproportionate influence on media culture in part because advertisers and media producers are so eager to attract and hold their attention,” are also “disproportionally white, male, middle class, and college educated.”19 

This emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between what kinds of fans or fan practices are “empowered” within convergence culture and how cultural conceptions of the “fan” are, in turn, wedded to desirable industry demographics and modes of engagement is at the center of this book’s exploration of gender bias within contemporary geek culture. Just as Jenkins called for a focus on the “cultural protocols and practices”20 of participatory culture, this book explores the fan-cultural gatekeeping protocols and the media industry’s gender-biased practices that have emerged out of the conditions described in Convergence Culture.

We obviously cannot equate all fan labor on digital platforms with exploited labor, or assume that fans are not deeply cognizant of the economic and promotional motivations precipitating the media industry’s conditional embrace of fan culture. Fans are, after all, incredibly skilled at evading and critiquing systems of capital and hegemonic culture, even as they play within the walled gardens of commercial media texts that do not always reflect their identities and values, or traverse platforms designed to curtail and commoditize the participation they purport to facilitate. It is tempting to extol the conditions of convergence for forcing media industries to revalue fans and cultivate more dialogic relationships between media creators and consumers. However, we need to remain critical of claims that media production has been democratized, or that legacy systems of cultural production do not continue to wield disproportionate power.

In order to begin exploring the after-effects of convergence culture and the gender-biased byproducts of these newly forged “collaborationist” ties between media producers and consumers in the digital age, this book focuses on the impact of the convergence culture industry on female fans. This portmanteau, my terminological play on Adorno and Horkheimer’s infamous 1944 missive, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” might seem cynical at best, and wholly
inappropriate for a book about media fan culture at worst. After all, the first wave of fan studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, like much of the feminist media studies of the 1980s and subculture studies of the 1960s and 1970s before it, was designed to directly speak back to the Frankfurt School’s hypodermic conception of media consumers as cultural dupes. In particular, Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of mass media audiences as mindless consumers of industry-sponsored ideology, incapable of distinguishing between fiction and reality, has come to function as a scholarly straw man within the field of fan studies. As Matt Hills succinctly summarized in his 2002 book *Fan Cultures*, cultural theorists and fan scholars routinely depict Adorno and his Frankfurt School compatriots “as elitists, as pessimists, and as ‘unsophisticated’ thinkers intent on demonising mass culture and denying any power or agency to its audiences.”

It remains essential that scholars foreground fan agency in their accounts of contemporary industrial efforts to contain or co-opt fan culture. At the risk of replicating the more polemical properties of their conception of “the culture industry,” however, I believe it is equally essential to revisit and revise Adorno and Horkheimer’s concerns to address the convergence culture industry’s gendered valuation of fan engagement.

Though written nearly sixty years apart, Adorno and Horkheimer’s and Jenkins’s texts grappled with similar seismic shifts in media culture, tracing the potential cultural impact of how emergent technologies were shaping industrial practices in the late 1930s and the early 2000s, respectively. While we obviously cannot neatly equate the Hollywood studio system output critiqued by Adorno and Horkheimer with the vast array of participatory digital media tools and platforms Jenkins championed, both works are at their core concerned with a moment of heretofore unprecedented *access* to media. For Adorno and Horkheimer, this access was to art itself through various forms of mass communication and entertainment (e.g., film, radio, etc.). Jenkins focused on access to the means of cultural production, through a growing array of user-friendly tools and technologies to produce, remix, and share media and network knowledge (photo and video editing software, wikis, etc.). Despite being similarly concerned with a historical moment of change for media industries and its impact on media consumers, these two deeply influential media studies texts are diametrically opposed in tone. Adorno and
Horkheimer decried the media industry’s tendency to “perpetuate the appearance of competition and choice,”22 while Jenkins fixed his attention on the “democratic potentials” of media convergence while remaining mindful of “the various barriers that block the realization of those possibilities, and look[ing] for ways to route around them.”23

One of the primary reasons fan scholars tend to dismiss “The Culture Industry” out of hand, or sidestep it entirely in their consideration of fan/industry relations, is that Adorno and Horkheimer’s homogeneous vision of the easily swayed mass media audience is antithetical to Jenkins’s foundational conception of fans as “textual poachers”24 and Convergence Culture’s subsequent framing of fans as “the most active segment of the media audience, one that refuses to simply accept what they are given, but rather insists on the right to become full participants.”25 I am in no way claiming, as Adorno and Horkheimer did of the culture industry, that the convergence culture industry succeeds in stamping out the audience individuality, or unilaterally accomplishes its goal to “intentionally integrate its consumers from above.”26 Texts remain polysemic, and media audiences and fans continue to subvert claims of “passive” consumption via their analytical interaction with media objects and their own transformative textual production (e.g., fanfiction, fanart, fanvids, etc.). The convergence culture industry, like the culture industry before it, may desire a more docile or commoditizable vision of fan engagement, but that does not prohibit fans from routinely resisting or circumventing these efforts.

Just as Adorno and Horkheimer emphasized the impacts of industrial and representational standardization on mass audiences, I am utilizing the term “the convergence culture industry” as an analytic to interrogate how industrial efforts to standardize the cultural category of “fan” have exacerbated longstanding gendered tensions within fan culture. Because fannish “authenticity” can be either biologically or demographically delineated (with women being less naturally capable of corporeally conforming to the stereotypical depictions of male, adolescent geeks, nerds, and fans) or gendered in terms of preferred forms of participation (e.g., collecting fan ephemera being coded as a historically “masculine” pursuit), what emerges is something of a zero-sum game for women who wish to traverse outside the boundaries of transformative or female-dominated fan communities into “mainstream” fan culture.
Female fans are subtly and structurally squeezed out of the prevailing conception of the “fan” within the cultural imaginary, either due to their lived identity markers or via the industrial devaluation of historically female-dominated forms of fan participation. When female fans are acknowledged, it is commonly through carefully cordoned off and definitively feminized fan objects (boy bands, YA franchises, romance novels) rather than as an essential and preexisting component of the burgeoning “fan” and “geek” demographic.

The “fanboy” may ultimately be an abstraction in this construct, but it has nonetheless become a core ideological product and weapon of the convergence culture industry. Fans have always been highly commoditized and commodity-driven consumers, but the convergence culture industry’s standardization and attempted massification of fans as a niche audience, coupled with the attempted “fanification” of mass audiences to adapt to participatory culture, has created conditions in which male fans and historically masculinized fan practices are privileged. Adorno and Horkheimer’s term ultimately sought to interrogate the systemic commercial drives of mass media industrialization and track the resultant “commodification, standardization, and massification” of media objects. The convergence culture industry functions similarly, systemically attempting to forward an industrialized vision of fan culture.

If Adorno and Horkheimer viewed the culture industry as cultivating a homogeneous audience and stamping out individualism, then the convergence culture industry attempts to reign in the least passive collective of consumers (fans), and to homogenize fandom itself. The convergence culture industry is equally concerned with discipline and control, but it must operate within the emergent (and decidedly more unwieldy and undisciplined) conditions of participatory digital media culture. Media industries operating within a convergence context need audiences to be active, to behave like “fans,” but they would prefer prescribed modes of activity that are promotionally beneficial and not ideologically challenging. The convergence culture industry’s systemic support of some fan identities and modes of fan engagement over others in no way forecloses the capacity of fans to subvert these models of prescribed participation. But, importantly, to be noncompliant often results in having one’s fannish authenticity called into question. Thus, a key distinction is that fans themselves are now working as the agents of the convergence culture.
industry, reinforcing these industrial predilections and routinely using them to alternately dismiss and harass female fans.

It is precisely because I am interested in how an androcentric conception of fan culture has become standardized that I am harking back to Adorno and Horkheimer’s term, rather than deploying more contemporary and flexible iterations from media industry studies like “the cultural industries” or “the creative industries.” The productive plurality of these terms may be inherently more useful for theorizing the complexity of our contemporary mediascape, and they certainly provide much-needed conceptual coverage for the more problematic facets of Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of “the culture industry.” I agree that contemporary iterations of the cultural and/or creative industries, and their relationship with audiences, are inherently “complex, ambivalent, and contested” spaces, and should be theorized accordingly. However, I am centrally invested in tracing how the convergence cultural industry, like the culture industry before it, strives to “hammer into human beings,” and fans specifically, a “concept of order,” even if it does not always succeed. This deep investment in maintaining the status quo is a direct response to the growing centrality of fans’ place within the creative industries and media fans’ increasing unwillingness to accept the culture industries as they are. It is driven simultaneously by industrial nostalgia for analog, less participatory general audiences, and fan-cultural nostalgia for a more exclusive and subcultural conception of fan identity.

In the conclusion of Convergence Culture, Jenkins frames himself as a critical utopian, a positioning that echoes fandom’s own “balance between fascination and frustration” with media objects. Jenkins makes a distinction between critical utopianism, which stresses empowerment, and critical pessimism, which is founded on the “politics of victimization. One focuses on what we are doing with media, the other on what media is doing to us.” It is not my intent to replicate Adorno and Horkheimer’s hypodermic views of media power; rather, my goal in exploring the convergence culture industry and its gendered impact on fan culture is to adopt a position of critical ambivalence and to acknowledge that marginalization and victimization do occur. If Convergence Culture justifiably focused on what fans were gaining from their shift from the margins to the mainstream, then this book catalogues the gender imbalance
that haunts the convergence culture industry’s conditional “empowerment” of consumers.

The chapters that follow take up many of the core concerns laid out in Adorno and Horkheimer’s initial essay on the culture industry, as well as Adorno’s 1963 addendum, “Culture Industry Reconsidered.” In updating these concerns, each chapter of this book is designed to address a specific set of symptoms of the convergence culture industry and explore its gendered ramifications for the mainstreaming of fan culture over the past decade, while remaining attentive to the transformative interventions of fans and fan scholars. Collectively, the chapters that follow suggest that misogyny within contemporary fan culture has flourished in part because the convergence culture industry has rendered fangirls an invisible or undesirable segment of the “fan” market. This is also a book about how fan culture’s shift from the margins to the mainstream and the convergence culture industry have impacted fan studies as a subfield of feminist media studies. The fanboy’s visibility is, in many cases, a byproduct of his compatibility with the more easily marketable or co-optable modes of fannish participation valued by the convergence culture industry.

Because this has, in turn, been perceived to threaten the feminist and subversive valences of the field, chapter 1 addresses the connection between the marginalization of female fans facilitated by the convergence culture industry and concerns about a potential decentering of female fans within fan studies. Calling for a need to reinvest in the questions of power that shaped the first wave of fan studies, chapter 1 homes in on two of fan studies’ structuring dichotomies: the “incorporation vs. resistance” paradigm, and the oft-critiqued divide between “affirmational” and “transformative” gendered modes of fan engagement. These binaries (much like “fanboy” and “fangirl”) may be essentialist, but they are also necessary to understanding the convergence culture industry’s incorporation of affirmational fan culture, and resistance to this from feminist fan scholars invested in transformative works and fan cultures.

Chapter 2 addresses the shifting journalistic and representational valuation of the fanboy within the convergence culture industry. Much as Adorno suggests that “the culture industry fuses the old and familiar into a new quality,” this chapter suggests that the convergence culture industry has fused longstanding fanboy pathologies with distinct strains
of hegemonic masculinity. In the process, it has written women out of the cultural narrative of fans’ ascendance as a power demographic, and helped determine who can easily claim (or dismiss others’ claim to) fan identities. The (in)visibility politics documented in chapter 2 sets the stage for chapter 3’s analysis of the rise of gendered boundary-policing practices and spreadable misogyny within fan culture, and reflects which modes of fan engagement are being celebrated or subsumed (chapter 4), as well as which fans are able to professionalize within the convergence culture industry (chapter 5). Collectively, these chapters consider why certain fan practices (and by extension, certain fans) have been embraced by the convergence culture industry, and how fanboys in turn exercise their status as a prominent “appendage of the machinery.”

Chapter 3 examines how “new hegemonic fandom” (to borrow a term from Matt Hills) and hegemonic masculinity intersect and are performed in physical spaces and across social media platforms. Focusing on how intra-fannish policing practices do not merely work to position some fans as “good” or “bad” but work to deny access to the identity of “fan” writ large, chapter 3 homes in on the “idiot nerd girl” meme that emerged in 2011, and contextualizes it within broader “fake geek girl” discourses that grew in volume and scale circa 2012. Surveying just a small sample of the spreadable misogyny circulating within contemporary fan culture, this chapter also actively considers how feminist fans intervene into these efforts to alienate women within geek culture. Moving from the localized efforts to contain fangirls discussed in chapter 3 to more systemic and structural concerns, chapter 4 investigates how media industries’ partial and conditional embrace of fan culture and participatory practices subtly colors perceptions of which fans are valued within a post–Web 2.0 media landscape driven by user-generated content. Because the convergence culture industry, like the culture industry before it, “endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises,” this chapter considers both the legal and the ideological “terms and conditions” that govern industrially sanctioned modes of fan participation. This chapter focuses on two key issues. First, it considers how fan labor has been industrially co-opted, contained, and commercialized through a series of test cases. Second, I will address the growing prominence and industrial reliance on enunciative forms of fan production, such as livetweeting and the emergence of fan aftershows like AMC’s Talking Dead.
This discussion of enunciative fandom will set the stage for chapter 5’s discussion of *Talking Dead*’s host, Chris Hardwick. Hardwick, the founder and promotional figurehead of Nerdist Industries, is used to explore how professionalization runs apace differently for fanboys and fangirls, as well as what types of fan identities and practices are most easily assimilated into industrial and promotional contexts. Hardwick, in his presentation as a “striking yet familiar” fanboy, and in his role as a prominent and promoted “moderator” of fan culture, perfectly exemplifies the potentially censorial dimensions of the convergence culture industry, in which “everything is directed at overpowering a consumer conceived as distracted or resistant.”

This chapter’s analysis of the androcentrism of archetypal forms of professionalized fan identity, “fanboy auteurs” and “fantrepreneurs,” builds on the prior chapter’s engagement with fan labor, addressing how female fans are received and scrutinized differently from their fanboy counterparts when attempting to leverage fan identities and labor into “professional fan” status.

Unlike the prior chapters, which survey the ways in which female fans and their creative practices have been marginalized or contained, chapter 6 contemplates the ways in which geek girls are hailed within the convergence culture industry. Analyzing the growing intersections between fan-oriented fashion and cosplay as a fan practice (e.g., constructing costumes inspired by fictional characters and embodying those characters in real-world spaces such as fan conventions), this chapter examines the broader politics of conceptually moving from poaching (as a mode of feminist intervention) to pinning (as a feminine curatorial practice on sites like Pinterest) as a fan practice alongside contemporary industrial efforts to route female fans towards neoliberal modes of consumer engagement. It would be easy to critique these postfeminist moments of fangirl outreach via fashion and beauty culture as yet another effort by the convergence culture industry to “[overpower] a consumer conceived as distracted or resistant.”

However, an analysis of “everyday” or “casual” cosplay merchandising trends offered by fancentric retailers (Her Universe, Hot Topic, etc.) and trompe l’œil dress designs that replicate male character costumes suggests a more complex negotiation of gendered fan identity. Building on existing research on fancentric digital retail spaces and literature exploring the subversive potentialities of cross-dressing and drag, I contend that these male character dresses
and their connection to “crossplay” (cosplay in which a fan embodies a character of a different sex) afford a space for fannish commentary on women’s capacity to fully embody a mainstream/masculinized fan identity.

The conclusion will contemplate the ongoing place of feminism within contemporary fan culture and studies through an interrogation of the conceptual limitations of gender as fan studies’ core axis of analysis, while reasserting the political project of first wave fan studies. Just as Adorno interrogated the ways in which the “consensus which [the culture industry] propagates strengthens blind, opaque authority,”39 the conclusion of this book will interrogate to what extent fan studies’ consensus approach to addressing identity primarily through gender, and the field’s ties to Western white feminism, potentially undermine its political capacity. The conclusion thus calls for more intersectional approaches in fan studies that actively consider how additional axes of identity beyond gender (race, age, sexuality, ability, etc.) shape fan identities and cultural conceptions of the fan within the convergence culture industry.

Collectively, these chapters call attention to efforts to standardize fandom and fan identity over the past decade, even as fan culture expands and diversifies at an exponential rate. The convergence culture industry’s desire for a universal (and, thus, a comprehensible and eventually manageable) conception of the fan echoes the culture industry, in which “individuals are tolerated only as far as their wholehearted identity with the universal is beyond question.”40 Fan scholars Kristina Busse and Mel Stanfill have both remarked on how identity impacts contemporary conceptions of the “fan,” acknowledging that though fandom continues to carry social stigmas that impact men and women alike, the stigmas themselves are gendered (fans are “feminized”)41 and raced (fans represent an “insufficient whiteness” because they are seen as lacking self-control).42 Though male geeks and fans might be culturally conceived as failing to behave “in a way consistent with constructed-as-white normative, middle-class, heterosexual masculinity,”43 Stanfill contends that white, heterosexual fanboys’ capacity to be recuperated into that category (and claim the privilege that accompanies it) is central. This also helps entrench a standardized, universal conception of fan culture that welcomes women as long as they are
willing to be “just one of the guys” (e.g., to not call attention to their individualized, identity-based responses to media objects).

MFGA: When Popularity Breeds Populism

My desire to revisit Adorno and Horkheimer’s formulation of the culture industry is also motivated by the fact that our current sociopolitical moment was presaged by the growing strains of bigotry and nativism within fan and geek culture over the past decade. It is important to remember that Adorno and Horkheimer, as Jews who fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s, had witnessed the media’s propagandistic potential first-hand. This historical and personal context is key to understanding Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of the culture industry and their concerns about its influence. In following the myriad and mounting instances of bias against female fans and performances of male privilege within fan culture over the past decade, it is easy to see how the “myth of nerd oppression” that “let every slightly socially awkward white boy who likes sci-fi explain away his privilege and lay his resentment at the feet of the nearest women and people of color” is part and parcel of the growing sociopolitical influence of the alt-right and men’s rights movements. Similarly to the ways in which Trump’s infamous campaign slogan resonated with his supporters, those fans at the forefront of the campaign to “make fandom great again” by actively targeting marginalized fans paradoxically do so by claiming a marginalized status themselves. Anyone paying attention to fan culture over the past decade is deeply familiar with the cognitive dissonance that marks so many emergent right-wing collectives, the desire to paint oneself as an oppressed group while literally embodying privilege.

The nostalgia of the “again” in this inherently regressive slogan is at the heart of its insidious appeal, evoking a desire to return to a cultural moment when white male supremacy remained (comparatively) unchallenged, civil rights movements had yet to gain traction, and diversity was not something that had to be dealt with. Lamentations about “mainstreaming,” and the accordant loss of “authenticity” and subcultural capital are, of course, nothing new, and the “Make Fandom Great Again” ethos underpinning the more overt or violent efforts to silence female fans or fans of color may be driven by a wide array of motivations. Still,
they frequently coalesce around a similar desire to retain a white-male-supremacist conception of fan identity and exemplify a more general pushback to the ever more visible and vocal displays of diversity in fan culture. Thus, while this book is not directly about our contemporary political moment, it does suggest that we can learn a great deal about the interplay between overt misogynistic displays and more covert efforts to alienate women within fan culture, and within culture at large.

I am not the first to make this connection. In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, a wave of think pieces sought to explain the motives of Trump voters and grapple with the growing influence of the alt-right. Because the alt-right movement is so closely associated with white nationalism and its accordant dissemination of racist, antisemitic, and antifeminist ideologies, many journalists and bloggers looked to the GamerGate controversy, and its deep roots within Internet trolling subcultures, for answers. Launched by an August 16, 2014, blog post from the disgruntled ex-boyfriend of game designer Zoe Quinn alleging infidelity with a game journalist in exchange for positive reviews of her indie game *Depression Quest*, GamerGate purportedly began as a set of discussions and demands around ethics in games journalism. The accusations were quickly debunked, but within days of the initial post Quinn had been targeted and threatened on social media and doxxed (her personal information such as phone number and home address published online for the purpose of real-world harassment). Those involved with the “movement” insisted that there was no misogyny underpinning their campaign for ethics in game journalism, but because the “movement” was initiated by painting Quinn as sexually pandering to and preying on game journalists, it quickly devolved into a widespread and vile digital harassment campaign that disproportionately targeted women in game development, as well as feminist gamers, scholars, and critics.

The complexity of GamerGate is perhaps best summarized in a *Deadspin* article by Kyle Wagner entitled “The Future of the Culture Wars Is Here, and It’s Gamergate”:

By design, Gamergate is nearly impossible to define. It refers, variously, to a set of incomprehensible Benghazi-type conspiracy theories about game developers and journalists; to a fairly broad group of gamers concerned with corruption in gaming journalism; to a somewhat narrower group
of gamers who believe women should be punished for having sex; and, finally, to a small group of gamers conducting organized campaigns of stalking and harassment against women. This ambiguity is useful, because it turns any discussion of this subject into a debate over semantics. Really, though, Gamergate is exactly what it appears to be: a relatively small and very loud group of video game enthusiasts who claim that their goal is to audit ethics in the gaming-industrial complex and who are instead defined by the campaigns of criminal harassment that some of them have carried out against several women. (Whether the broader Gamergate movement is a willing or inadvertent semi-respectable front here is an interesting but ultimately irrelevant question.)

Wagner’s assessment that the “movement” would ultimately be defined by its most vicious and sexist participants was correct. By the time the mainstream news media picked up the story in early September, GamerGate had become synonymous with critiques of the toxic masculinity of “gamer” fan identities.

Articles with titles like “What Gamergate Should Have Taught Us about the ‘Alt-Right,’” “GamerGate to Trump: How Video Game Culture Blew Everything Up,” and “Under Trump, Gamergate Can Stop Pretending It Was about Games” all point to the 2014 “movement” as a bellwether for the increasingly brazen behavior of the alt-right. Even the de facto journalistic home of the alt-right, Breitbart, acknowledged, “Leftists Think GamerGate Caused Donald Trump: Maybe They’re Right,” drawing on #Gamergate participant survey data to connect the dots between the “hardcore ‘gamer’ demographic and the economically disadvantaged voters who propelled [Trump] to victory in the rust belt.” Within this context, feminist fans and video game scholars (many of whom were actively targeted by GamerGate “activists”) decrying the rise of hegemonic and hypermasculine gamer culture must feel a bit like Cassandra, prophesizing the rising tide of antifeminist, xenophobic, and nationalist sentiments of the alt-right to deaf ears.

While the 2016 presidential campaign and its aftermath exposed deeply entrenched biases against an array of minority groups, this book focuses on the decade leading up to this cultural moment. Specifically, I would suggest that the “war on women” that has intensified within fan and geek culture over the past decade offers an illustrative space
to begin garnering an understanding of why Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again” ethos struck a chord with (predominantly white, straight, cisgendered) voters. This “war on fangirls,” in which women are routinely derided for critiquing hegemonic media representations or calling for more diversity within the culture industries, or dismissed as “fake geek girls” (thereby foreclosing their access to the identity of fan and attempting to silence them), has accompanied the mainstreaming of geek and fan culture.

We can view GamerGate as a boiling point within geek culture, the culmination of nearly a decade of simmering and subtle messaging that female fans are an encroaching force that needs to be repelled. Likewise, we can view GamerGate as a moment of convergence between growing strains of misogyny within geek culture and the growing influence of the alt-right in culture at large. Not only is there a great deal of demographic overlap between the two “movements,” but they share spaces of origin and organization (e.g., platforms like 4chan and Reddit, characterized by the ability to post anonymously), are rooted in similar complaints about “PC culture,” and utilize similar strategies of harassment (e.g., organized barrages of sexist and racist slurs on social media, doxxing). GamerGate, and the sustained harassment responding to feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian’s “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” video essay series in 2012 that set the stage for it, are unquestionably the most visible and violent manifestations of the sort of gender bias against female fans that this book surveys. Though these are extreme examples, the underlying sentiments and discursive strategies permeate “fake geek girl” accusations and corresponding efforts to dismiss and degrade female fans. Whether in digital or real-world spaces, female fans are routinely required to defend and authenticate their fannish credentials at best, and at worst subjected to out-and-out harassment.

I am ultimately more interested in cataloguing and contemplating less spectacular examples of how this gender bias in fan and geek culture is established, sustained, and performed by a variety of stakeholders. The political right’s “war on women” may manifest most spectacularly in misogynist performances (e.g., Trump’s now-infamous “grab her by the pussy” Access Hollywood tapes) but is arguably more damaging when slipped quietly into legislative policy (e.g., expanding efforts to block access to abortion). Likewise, this book’s consideration of the “war on
fanganirls” that has developed over the past decade focuses on the more subtle, yet ultimately more pervasive and pernicious efforts to alienate women from geek culture and fannish identities. This is accordingly not a book about what actual fans have done and continue to do, but a consideration of the myriad, subtle ways in which fan entitlement is bred. Thus, my core concern is to explore how the convergence culture industry has modeled and sanctioned a narrow, frequently gendered, vision of fan identity and participation over the past decade and how the resultant entrenching and exacerbation of fanboy privilege has, in turn, promulgated misogynist boundary-policing practices within fan culture.

Is it as simple as suggesting that none of this is new, and what has shifted is not only the visibility of fan culture but also the visibility of misogyny within fan culture? Perhaps. To contemplate the default masculinization of fan identities, we might reach back into the annals of the earliest movie fan magazines. In just its third month of publication, in April 1911, *Motion Picture Story Magazine* featured a poem by La Touche Hancock entitled “The Motion Picture Fan” (figure I.1). This “hero of the motion picture day” is presented as the archetypal affirnationsal male fan, celebrated for his attention to technological detail (“Should he discourse on shutters / weigh every word he utters”) and his professionalism (“he’s businesslike and handy”). This “dandy” cinephile “without...
a trace of yellow” certainly resonates with the paternalistic and often pervasive instances of “fansplaining” within contemporary geek culture. After all, as the poem goes, “So on ad infinitum, you’ll find there’s not an item, / On which he will not have his little say.” Alternately, we might date fandom’s “War on Women” to the 1920s, and the underrepresentation of female fans in the letters columns of science fiction magazines like *Amazing Stories*. Had those early fan spaces been networked and tagable, we might be more mindful of the long history of fan privilege.

Though I contend that this contemporary “war on fangirls” is a product of the convergence culture industry, made visible though the metemetic flow of content across social media platforms, even these limited historical examples suggest that this war is also deeply rooted in analog media biases. These biases range from what Charlotte Brunsdon has called “the historical connotative femininity of mass culture” to the generic “pink ghetto” described by Janice Radway. As both media fandom and fan studies are most conceptually tied to television, we must acknowledge that historically the notion of the “passive” spectator, the “other” people helpless before the television set are implicitly feminine. Likewise, we might consider the boom in fancentric superhero, science fiction, and fantasy media properties through Derek Johnson’s claim that contemporary media franchising models work to revalue “feminized” serial narrative forms through masculinized industrial and economic logics in order to maintain the connection between masculinity and cultural legitimacy.

Fandom’s war on women thus draws on media industries’ historical devaluation of female audiences and longstanding conceptions of space (real or virtual) as mapping and maintaining gendered structures of power. Adorno contends that “what parades as progress in the culture industry, as the incessant new which it offers up, remains the disguise for an eternal sameness.” I would make a similar case for the convergence culture industry, which disguises its eternal desire for an audience it can easily monetize and control through its limited and deeply conditional embrace of fan culture. There are other, decidedly more hopeful narratives this book might have told about how these same industrial, technological, and cultural conditions have helped foster fan activism. Though the growing power of fans within our contemporary mediascape may well be a mark of progress, it also frequently resists
a progressive vision of fan culture. The multivalent forms of nostalgia that this book explores—industrial nostalgia for analog audiences and minimal economic imperatives to engage participatory fan cultures, fannish nostalgia for subcultural exclusivity, fan-scholarly nostalgia for an equally exclusive (albeit decidedly more progressive) focus on female fan communities and transformative practices—collectively emerge from the convergence culture industry’s efforts to standardize an androcentric vision of fan culture.