IN FOCUS: Youth Culture

Introduction

by TIMOTHY SHARY and LOUISA STEIN, editors

We set out on this In Focus section with the general intent of bringing together scholars working in contemporary youth media studies. This is our own background, as Louisa has written extensively on teen television shows and the youth fan cultures that surround them, and Tim has examined youth in American movies going back to early Hollywood.[1] As we began considering established scholars in the field to solicit for contributions, we soon found evidence of the increasing attention to youth concerns beyond traditional film and television texts, as much recent scholarship has focused on children and young adults using and creating social media.

This increased attention to youth digital cultures should not have been a surprise given the state of the academy and, more so, the preoccupations of young people today. The youth population is indeed spending less time watching TV and going to movies and more time doing something—anything—on the Internet. When they are watching films and TV programs, they're often consuming that media online and then transforming their media engagement into authorship in digital venues, creating fan art and fan fiction, or offering reviews and critiques through social media networks. Increasingly, youth media engagement is also becoming more mobile because, for a variety of

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1 Sharon Ross and Louisa Stein, eds., *Teen Television: Essays on Programming and Fandom* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008); Stein, *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015); Timothy Shary, *Teen Films: American Youth on Screen* (New York: Wallflower, Columbia University Press, 2005); Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema since 1980*, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).

reasons, including the economics of access, young people depend on portable devices for media engagement.

Nonetheless, the lessons learned by decades of film and television studies in terms of youth representation and media effects remain germane to any questions raised about the use of these smaller-screen media. We still care about what access youth have to media and how it is affecting them (as the Payne Fund studies did more than eighty years ago); we still care about how youth are portrayed and what those images tell us about both the young population and the older producers (as various academic studies have done since the 1980s); and we are still captivated by youth media at large, which continues to evolve in progressively creative, political, and profitable ways. In today's ideological climate, young people, who are denied the right to vote until their late teens, nonetheless persist as change agents, working beyond their common interpellation as media consumers to become more engaged as cultural citizens through their own media authorship. These conditions raise the stakes of youth representation and media effect.

As the two of us evaluated our possibilities for contributors to this section, we realized that, although the media landscape has changed since we started our own studies of youth in the late twentieth century, many approaches to the subject have remained consistent. Yet at the same time, new questions arise as young people increasingly become authors of their own public media representations, building active cultures of sharing and of critique. As we research and engage with these evolving communities of young media consumers and authors, we must ask ourselves to reconsider our positions as scholars of contemporary youth media culture and history. What narratives about young people are we telling through our research, and how are we implicated in our own studies of the expansive and amorphous topic of youth media culture? We were very happy to find contributors who address film and television in their essays, while we also appreciated that any understanding of contemporary youth and their media (whether made *about* them or *by* them) must necessarily consider the high-speed nonlinear digital domain in which most youth now experience media. We hope that these essays continue the evolution of youth media studies, which have endeavored to understand the young populations vital to media industries, populations who are now becoming more empowered to use media for their own interest.   ✱

"Against a Sharp White Background": Toward Race-Based Intersectional Research in Youth Media Studies

by Mary Celeste Kearney

A century and a half after the Emancipation Proclamation, systemic racism continues to infect the United States of America and disrupt the project of democracy. While the effects of this malignancy are perhaps most visible in African Americans' unequal treatment in the criminal justice system, race-based inequity, oppression, and disenfranchisement appear throughout US society, including within academia and media culture. It is because of this pernicious problem that I advocate more attention to race and the greater adoption of the intersectional approach within youth media studies.

White youth are not the only young people to appear in media, nor are they the only young people to consume and produce media. Yet analyses of them dominate youth media studies to a degree far greater than their demographic numbers would suggest. Why this has happened has everything to do with the racial politics that inform our field and academia, politics that keep the majority of youth media scholars focused on the normative individuals at the center of the frame. To overcome this dynamic, white scholars need to pay more attention to the margins, where most people of color in media culture have long been relegated. Moreover, white scholars need to attend to white supremacy and other systems of normativity that govern youth media texts, as well as their production and reception, not to mention our own critical vision. The intersectional approach first conceptualized by feminists of color in the 1970s is essential to these endeavors.

The concept of intersectionality posits that human identities are multiple, overlapping, and interconnected.[1] Therefore, the experiences resulting from these social formations are complexly interwoven and impossible to study autonomously. Many people conflate intersectional analysis with attention to race and, more specifically, racial minorities. Yet all people have intersectional identities. The ultimate goal of such work is to understand how our intersected identities have an impact

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1 For an excellent overview of intersectionality as a critical method, see Patricia Hill-Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2016).

on our relations to power so that effective strategies for eliminating oppression and maximizing equality are developed and enacted. With regard to youth media studies, this means careful consideration of the interlocking identities of media characters, producers, and consumers so as to create more respectful and democratic media for, about, and by young people. In an effort to encourage youth media scholars to understand race-based intersectional analyses as both critically and culturally imperative, I explore this approach here via reference to some of my recent research.

In April 1964, *The Patty Duke Show* (ABC, 1963–1966), a popular teen-girl sitcom broadcast by ABC, included its first black character. The episode was "Leave It to Patty," and in it a heterosexual middle-class black girl appears as part of an audience for a high school rock concert (Figure 1).[2] I have watched this episode many times, and it was only recently that I noticed the black girl in this scene, which is somewhat odd given that *The Patty Duke Show*'s primary and secondary characters are all white. Why did I overlook her previously? Surely, my missing her had something to do the way in which the text positions the viewer's gaze. Like most TV sitcoms of that era, *The Patty Duke Show* was directed in

Figure 1. "Leave It to Patty," *The Patty Duke Show*, Chrislaw Productions, April 29, 1964.

such a way as to place the most important characters and actions in the center of the frame. Patty Duke is the star of the series, and the two characters she plays in it— "identical" cousins Patty and Cathy—are narratively and formally constructed as the series' central focus. Indeed, the writer, director, camera crew, and actors all worked together to ensure that viewers are looking primarily at these two characters. In contrast, the black girl in this episode appears in a nonspeaking extra role during only a few very short sequences that together add up to less than a minute.

Nonetheless, this explanation does not fully account for why I overlooked this black girl. My missing her is also profoundly related to my identity as a white person in a historically white supremacist society. Part of white privilege is the ability to be blind to people of color and ignorant of racial politics. How that privilege works for me is embarrassingly obvious when we consider that the black girl in this scene is not formally marginalized but rather given a prominent place next to the series' star—which means

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2   I deduce her sexuality from her reactions to the male musician whom she is admiring. I deduce her class status from her clothing, hair, makeup, and bodily comportment, which together suggest a politics of respectability encouraged for people of color invested in assimilation to normative middle-class whiteness.

it should be more, not less, likely for viewers to notice her. Moreover, as a black person positioned in front of a sea of white bodies, she stands out, a perfect visualization of Zora Neale Hurston's description of feeling black in a white society: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background."[3] And yet, despite this black girl's visual prominence in this scene, my privileged white gaze allowed me to not see her, over and over and over again.

Unfortunately, I'm not the only one to whom she has been invisible. Her name does not appear in the script or the broadcast version of this episode. I have also been unable to locate her name in any materials related to the production of *The Patty Duke Show*, including casting sheets. And, to my knowledge, no other scholar has mentioned her. Unnamed, uncredited, and unstudied, she has been lost to the histories of girlhood, blackness, and television—until now, that is.

In relation to my current book project about the first wave of American teen-girl media, this scene from *Patty Duke* has become a useful portal for critical inquiry into the representation of black girlhood in early television. I did not originally plan to study this particular text for my book. Like most girls' media from the mid-twentieth century, girl-centered TV shows were dominated by white subjects (most of whom were wealthy and straight also). Because of that, I had expected that my analysis of teen-girl TV shows from that era would focus on the normative white girls featured in them. Nevertheless, my seeing the black girl on *Patty Duke* cannot be undone, and it has led to numerous questions that have pushed me to think more carefully about minor characters and marginalized identities and thus to reconsider the scope, methods, and objectives of my book.

Digging deeper into this seemingly insignificant television episode has taken me to unexpected but productive places as I have explored the complex sociopolitical context of the early 1960s, a period when young black Americans' social power and media visibility were as topical as they are today. In fact, had I not delved further into analyzing this particular text, I would have forsaken a rich opportunity to learn more about the multiple, complicated formations of black girlhood in 1960s television and their significance for a nation struggling to overcome systemic racism in the face of segregationist resilience and white nationalist backlash. In other words, I would have missed a chance to learn from the past, which in turn can help me to better understand youth media today and to better assist in shaping a more respectful and democratic youth media culture for the future.

The intersectional approach is most useful for my study of "Leave It to Patty" because this text requires an analysis of age, gender, race, class, and sexuality in relation to one another to fully understand its representation of black girlhood. Studying just age or gender is not enough. This text also requires me to consider how the convergence of these identities creates particular meanings of black girlhood that circulate beyond the text and inform black girls' identities and experiences, not to mention the treatment of black female youth. In turn, intersectional studies require contextual analysis, that is, examination of the broader social formations of which these representations are part, formations that are differently oriented to systems of power both within and

3 Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," *World Tomorrow*, May 1928.

beyond media culture. Like the cultural studies approach, intersectional analysis necessitates moving beyond one's original object of study to examine its larger network of interrelated objects, discourses, practices, and institutions. Thus, in ways similar to studying media culture as a "circuit" (texts, production, consumption), intersectional analysis requires spiraling outward from the center to the margins to explore these power relations. Indeed, such similarly politicized approaches to critical inquiry align well in media scholars' tool kits and benefit any study when employed together.[4] Riffing on bell hooks's idea of the margin as a space of radical possibility for antioppression activists, I argue that media scholars should resist the centripetal pull to the center, embrace an intersectional form of cultural analysis, and explore the margins of texts (youth-based and otherwise) as places of radical possibility for progressive scholarship.[5]

My adoption of the intersectional approach has elicited numerous questions for my study of the black girl in "Leave It to Patty." Because they demonstrate the major themes and objectives of this particular form of critical inquiry, they are potentially useful for anyone wanting to learn more about how intersecting identities have an impact on media texts, as well as such texts' production and consumption. In other words, these questions demonstrate a useful model for conducting intersectional media studies, particularly through the lens of race. First are questions about textuality: How does the "Leave It to Patty" episode represent this minor(itarian) character, both narratively and stylistically, with regard to age, gender, race, class, and sexual identities? Within this text's diegesis, how do these intersecting identities enable or restrict this character's access to systems of power? How do these intersecting identities and their relation to privilege produce particular meanings of black girlhood? In particular, how does the text's intersectional construction of black girlhood compare to that of normative white girlhood as represented in this particular episode and the series as a whole?

Spiraling out from this particular character are questions about structure, specifically this TV episode's production, sponsorship, and distribution: Why did the writer, producer, and/or director of this episode decide to include a black girl at a time when most TV characters were white? How did popular ideas about age, gender, race, class, and sexuality inform creative decisions about this character and the actor who would play her? What were the social politics of these members of the production crew, and how might those politics have affected these decisions? Did these creative professionals meet resistance from anyone else on the crew or in the larger production company (Chrislaw Productions)? What were the social politics of the advertising team involved in the sponsorship of this episode and the series at large? Were any of the show's sponsors actively pursuing the black female consumer market? If so, how did their research on that market relate to popular ideas about black girlhood and thus perhaps the representation of the black girl who appears in this episode? Was the network that broadcast *The Patty Duke Show* involved in decisions to include a black girl in it? What guidelines about racial diversity and inclusion did the broadcasting

4   Julie D'Acci, "Cultural Studies, Television Studies, and the Crisis in the Humanities," *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Jann Olsen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 418–442.

5   bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Yearnings: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 145–155.

network have in place at that time, and how did those guidelines compare to actual practice? What challenges did writers and producers face as a result of this increase in racial diversity? What, if any, pressure to racially diversify the programs it aired was the network receiving from within the larger media industry or from black activists? Who within the industry was resistant or opposed to this change, and why?[6]

Of course, we must also consider who watched the "Leave It to Patty" episode and their specific reception practices: How did audiences, particularly black girls, respond to this text? How did critics receive it? How were such reflections influenced by the individual viewer's own intersecting identities, as well as popular ideas about age, gender, race, class, and sexuality? If there is no record of this episode's reception, why not, and how might that absence relate to the racial politics of this period?

Moving beyond this particular TV series, the next set of questions involves comparison with other cultural texts of that period that included black girls. In addition to applying the previous questions about the original text to these other texts, we might ask: How do other contemporary televisual depictions of black girlhood, whether fictional or reality based, compare to the representation of the black girl in the *Patty Duke* episode? How do concurrent portrayals of black girlhood elsewhere in popular culture (e.g., film, art, literature) compare to this representation? Given that the early 1960s was a time of considerable struggle on behalf of African Americans' civil rights, how do contemporaneous representations of black girlhood in the press compare to this fictional representation (Figure 2)? Finally, what does all this tell us about the intersections of blackness, girlhood, and media culture and their relations to power at this anxious moment of US history?

Like many other white Americans who have witnessed the increased racial oppression in our communities, my understanding of racial politics has been recalibrated over the past few years. Moreover, my critical vision has been further honed via my exposure to critical race theory and the work of feminists of color. Just as engaging with the scholarship of queer theorists like Alex Doty retrained my straight eyes to see queerly, I no longer see race the way I did, despite the ease of white sight (and white blindness) I

Figure 2. Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine, heckled by Hazel Bryan on September 4, 1957. Photograph by Will Counts for the *Arkansas Democrat*.

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6 Mary Beltrán has explored some of these questions in relation to contemporary TV culture. See "Meaningful Diversity: Exploring Questions of Equitable Representation on Diverse Ensemble Cast Shows," *Flow* 12, no. 7 (2010), https://www.flowjournal.org/2010/08/meaningful-diversity/.

have been afforded for more than fifty years.[7] Racial identities are far more apparent to me now, and I am interested in understanding the differences those social formations make in our media culture. Moreover, given our current sociopolitical climate, I feel an urgency to utilize my scholarship as a form of resistance while I work alongside others toward the much larger goal of ending oppression.

That said, I am fully aware that my focus on mediated black girlhoods and adoption of the intersectional approach for my research require not only my further study of race and its intersections with gender, age, and other components of identity both in youth media and in real life but also critical reflection on my racial privilege. I know that my analyses will likely differ from those conducted by people of color. And I realize that I might be criticized for coopting a topic best studied and discussed by black girls and women. But I have no intention of leading this conversation or controlling its directions. Rather, I have attempted to research and write about this topic from an ally position, and I do so in part because of the dearth of black feminist scholars in youth media studies. In other words, I am using my privileged racial status not to dominate this discussion but to help keep it alive and growing. Finally, I am not looking for compliments. My engagement here has come much too late. Rather, I am looking for more allies who will join me in this important work. The ongoing legacy of white supremacy and systemic racism in our larger society and their harmful effects on people of color both young and old demand it.   ✱

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7 Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

The New Old Face of a Genre: The Franchise Teen Film as Industry Strategy

by Elissa H. Nelson

Films like *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985) and *American Pie* (Paul Weitz, 1999), *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973) and *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), *Heathers* (Michael Lehmann, 1989) and *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004) are often the type that comes to mind when thinking about the teen film genre. The narratives usually revolve around the personal trials and tribulations of teenagers living mostly ordinary lives, with the occasional exceptional circumstance or, in the case of horror, supernatural situation, propelling the action. Allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the genre, definitions of the form often take an inclusive approach; that is, teen films can be considered those that feature teenage characters. Ranging from teen comedy to teen horror, teen romance to teen fantasy, this definition accounts for a variety of subgenres and genre hybrids.[1] The teen film is also a reliable production trend, often employed as a way to tempt the youth audience back to the theater when attendance drops. Every so often, a teen film will be a surprise box-office hit, leading to a production cycle of similar films over the following years.[2] Since the early 2000s, however, even though admissions and per capita ticket sales are down according to MPAA reports, it seems there haven't been many generic teen films released that have achieved box office success, and no batch of popular related titles appearing thereafter.[3] Small-scale films of the genre are still being released, but to less fanfare and with less frequency, prompting the question, where did the teen film go?

1 David Considine, *The Cinema of Adolescence* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1985); Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Stephen Tropiano, *Rebels and Chicks: A History of the Hollywood Teen Movie* (New York: Back Stage Books, 2006).

2 Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*; Shary, *Generation Multiplex*; Amanda Ann Klein, *American Film Cycles: Reframing Genres, Screening Social Problems, & Defining Subcultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

3 "Theatrical Market Statistics 2015," Motion Picture Association of America, http://www .mpaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/MPAA-Theatrical-Market-Statistics-2015_Final.pdf.

Upon closer inspection, though, another type of teen film has actually been quite successful, especially since the mid-2000s. As part of larger franchises, films like *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2004), the first in the series when Harry is a teen; *Transformers* (Michael Bay, 2007); *TMNT* (Kevin Munroe, 2007); and *Twilight* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2008) all feature teen characters in primary roles in large-scale films that tell epic stories. The films are part of series that follow high-concept formulas, build on already-known properties, and exploit synergy to promote related products in ancillary markets—all strategies previously used in blockbuster filmmaking more generally to attract wide audiences. What's notable is that these tactics are being combined with storytelling elements emblematic of the teen film, leading not to the dwindling significance of the genre, but rather to a new production cycle and another iteration of the form. As hallmarks of the convergent media era, these franchise teen films combine multiple styles and modes of filmmaking, and in the process, expand common perceptions of the genre.

Considering repeated filmmaking trends helps to contextualize the current moment. Historically, one of the strategies Hollywood relies on when there are threats of audience attrition because of competition from new media is to increase production of teen films. The hope is that by making films with young actors in lead roles and by telling their coming-of-age stories, two essential elements that are hallmarks of the teen film genre, the films will appeal to the most reliable audience segment: the youth demographic.[4] Indeed, the two most prolific periods of teen filmmaking occurred during the 1950s and the 1980s, and a smaller though notable production bubble appeared in the late 1990s.[5] There are four prominent similarities among these three time periods:

1. New entertainment technologies were starting to gain traction and were vying for the youth demographic's attention: television in the 1950s; home entertainment, including VHS and cable, in the 1980s; and new digital media, including DVDs and the Internet, in the 1990s.

2. The United States was in periods of sustained economic growth, and teens were perceived as having disposable incomes.

3. Although there were the occasional big-budget or prestige teen films produced by major studios, such as *Rebel without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985), and *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), most were lower-budget genre films that often focused on teens in everyday situations (or with horror films, in unusual situations, but still small-scale stories), often set around locations associated with teens such as high schools, family homes, shopping malls, and summer camps. Examples include *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (Gene Fowler Jr., 1957) and *Gidget* (Paul Wendkos, 1959); *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (Amy Heckerling, 1982) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984); and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie, 1997) and *10 Things I Hate about You* (Gil Junger, 1999).

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4 Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*.

5 Valerie Wee, *Teen Media: Hollywood and the Youth Market in the Digital Age* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010).

4. There was a fallow period of teen filmmaking, and then a few surprise box-office hits that spurred the production trend: *Rebel* and *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955); *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980) and *Porky's* (Bob Clark, 1982); *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995) and *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996).

As often happens, Hollywood falls back on familiar strategies, is risk averse, and follows trends of producing similar kinds of successful films until a couple of years after they're no longer popular (often attributed to the lag between changing tastes and the length of development-to-release production schedules). There's also an assumption that the youth demographic is the primary, though not sole, audience for the teen film and that films featuring characters who are similar in age to the target market will entice them to go to the box office.[6]

Currently, this dependable approach of using recognizable teen films to lure audiences into theaters, especially during the introduction of competing technological innovations—this time from digital distribution and mobile devices—seems on the surface to be faltering. The present period of transition is marked by a significant difference from the previous eras though; while both the iPhone and Netflix Instant Watch were introduced in 2007, and smartphones and streaming were widely adopted soon thereafter, the US economy went into a deep recession in 2008. Additionally, the paradigmatic teen film as it came to be codified in the 1950s and 1980s with everyday teens on journeys of personal growth appears to be scarce. These types of small-scale, small-budget genre films have not seen a surge in popularity, surprise box-office success, or era-emblematic titles in years. In fact, only three such films have made it to the top twenty-five of the year at the box office since 2007: *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007), *Superbad* (Greg Mottola, 2007), and *The Fault in Our Stars* (Josh Boone, 2015).[7] Instead, a prevailing production trend is teen characters in large-scale blockbuster films based on best-selling young adult novels (known as YA—a term often used as a designation in publishing), such as the *Harry Potter* (2001–2011), *Twilight* (2008–2012), and *Hunger Games* (2012–2015) series. All of the films in each of these franchises placed within the top-ten box-office hits of their respective years of release, and the films have achieved cultural significance, marked by media attention and the production of similar films like the *Divergent* (2014–2016) and *Maze Runner* (2014–2015) series. These high-concept, big-budget films feature teen protagonists, but, because of their scale and prominence, it's as though Hollywood has abandoned the familiar teen film format. In doing so, the coming-of-age tales of personal growth are merging with epic heroic journeys, expanding traditional understandings of the genre.

Notably, when conducting textual analyses of the blockbusters, we can actually identify a number of significant similarities between these films and the historically emblematic teen film. As I've argued previously, building on David Considine's and Timothy Shary's work that defines the genre as those films that feature teen characters,

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6   Louise Levison, *Filmmakers and Financing: Business Plans for Independents*, 8th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016).

7   All budget information and box-office numbers are from the website Box Office Mojo. Specific charts for yearly box office can be found at http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/.

additional qualifying factors are also evident, regardless of the teen subgenre or whether the films can be classified as hybrids between the teen film and more standard industry genres.[8] The genre is marked by teens who go through a coming-of-age process in which they question who they are and who they want to be, both as individuals and as part of a group. This process of becoming self-actualized occurs as they find an identity distinct from the previous generation, celebrate and survive adolescence, and recognize the significance of their current actions. Looking at the franchise films like *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and *Hunger Games*, all of the main characters are left to answer a quintessential teen film question: How can they survive and thrive in the problematic world the previous generation left them? As Harry, Bella, Katniss, and friends find, they must rely on themselves and their peer group to rebel against corruption and make their world better, all while finding suitable heterosexual mates, which indicates their present and future success at becoming well adjusted. The scale of their actions is considerably larger than in previous films, but as is characteristic of the genre, teens become the heroes of their own (everyday and extraordinary) lives.

Upon closer examination of all the teen films produced since 2007, it's also notable that, while the lower-budget teen films are not achieving top box-office grosses, they are still being produced. Many also follow the fad of adapting YA novels, and some are achieving distinction or moderate market success, including *Precious* (Lee Daniels, 2009), *17 Again* (Burr Steers, 2009), *Easy A* (Will Gluck, 2010), *Chronicle* (Josh Trank, 2012), *The Spectacular Now* (James Ponsoldt, 2013), and *The DUFF* (Ari Sandel, 2015). Although there are similarities between the teen films that enable them all to be categorized in the same genre, there are also apparent differences in the sheer magnitude of the productions that do indicate an adjustment of industry strategy. There is a remarkable difference between the reported production budgets of, for example, *Hunger Games: Mockingjay—Part 2* (Francis Lawrence, $160 million) and *The Fault in Our Stars* ($12 million), both released in 2015 and both based on YA novels, that speaks to the degree of contrast.

To understand why there is a shift to production of the franchise teen film, it's important to examine behavioral changes in the ways the targeted youth demographic is engaging with media. Since 2007, when streaming and smartphones were widely introduced, the youth market has spanned two generations: the tail end of the millennials, born approximately between 1980 and 2000, and the early members of the next generation, sometimes labeled Gen Z, Digital Natives, or iGeneration, but which has yet to have an agreed-upon, dominant label.[9] In reporting on the age brackets of twelve to seventeen and eighteen to twenty-four that make up the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA) most frequent (thus desirable, and heretofore reliable) audience, Nielsen has taken to calling those born after 1990 the "Digitals"

8 Elissa Nelson, "Teen Films of the 1980s: Genre, New Hollywood, and Generation X" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2011); Considine, *Cinema of Adolescence*; Shary, *Generation Multiplex*.

9 Alex Williams, "Move Over Millennials, Here Comes Generation Z," *New York Times*, September 18, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/fashion/move-over-millennials-here-comes-generation-z.html?_r=0; Caitlin Gibson, "Gen Z, iGen, Founders: What Should We Call the Post-Millennials?," *Washington Post*, December 3, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/gen-z-igen-founders-what-should-we-call-the-post-millennials/2015/12/03/38a102b2-99d2-11e5-94f0-9eeaff906ef3_story.html.

because of their "preferred mode of media consumption."[10] It is these very Digitals, however, whose moviegoing habits are causing concern. In 2007, the twelve to twenty-four age bracket saw 9.6 movies at the theater; in 2014, that number dropped to 7.1, marking a 26 percent decline.[11] According to MPAA Theatrical Market Statistics Reports, in 2007, twelve- to twenty-four-year-olds made up 38 percent of yearly admissions; in 2009 they dropped to 34 percent, and since 2013–2015, they've been at 30 percent.[12]

Even with these decreasing numbers and the increasing attendance among other ages, the twelve- to twenty-four-year-old bracket is still the largest audience segment. In 2015, they made up 18 percent of the population, but 30 percent of ticket sales and 32 percent of frequent moviegoers (those who go the theater at least once a month).[13] As such, figuring out what appeals to them is of paramount importance, and the Digital Generation has become "the most heavily researched demographic group in the history of marketing."[14] Sample market research reports from companies such as Nielsen, WPP (the marketing and advertising multinational that bought Teenage Research Unlimited in 2007), Deep Focus (the group that has been putting out the Cassandra Report, a study of youth trends, for nearly twenty years), McKinsey & Company, the NPD Group, and PricewaterhouseCoopers have all reported similar findings: the segment has tremendous competition from other media—including television, streaming, short videos, video games, and social media—for their leisure-time activities and dollars. In addition, they prefer interactive and participatory media, as well as mobile devices and social activities; they are used to instant and unlimited content; and they are cautious about spending money because of growing up during the recession.[15] This is also a generation perceived to be at ease on the Internet (despite the digital divide and varying levels of media literacy), and even though they have some concerns around piracy or "unauthorized content," including getting a computer virus and the poor quality of content, most film titles are easily accessible to them online soon after release.[16]

10 "Digitals and the Silver Screen," Nielsen, December 11, 2014, http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2014/todays-feature-digitals-and-the-silver-screen.html.

11 Ibid.

12 "Theatrical Market Statistics 2015." Additional reports from previous years, including "Theatrical Market Statistics 2011" and "Movie Attendance Study 2007," are archived by the author and are available upon request from the MPAA. Only the links to the reports from the most recent three years are kept active on the MPAA website.

13 Ibid.

14 Katherine C. Montgomery, *Generation Digital: Politics, Commerce, and Childhood in the Age of the Internet* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

15 "BrandZ Top100 Most Valuable Global Brands 2016," WPP, http://bbb8acc78e206af0905d-9f4f18b44dfb682fa492b2452bd55241.r1.cf5.rackcdn.com/BZ_Global_2016_Report.pdf; "The Pop Issue," Cassandra, June 19, 2014, https://cassandra.co/reports/2014/06/27/pop; Ian MacKenzie, Chris Meyer, and Steve Noble, "How Retailers Can Keep Up with Consumers," McKinsey & Company, October 2013, http://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/how-retailers-can-keep-up-with-consumers; "The NPD Group Connected Intelligence Application & Convergence Report," NPD, October 4, 2016, http://www.connected-intelligence.com/about-us/press-releases/video-calling-shopping-and-video-streaming-see-highest-smartphone-usage; "Consumer Intelligence Series: Media-Savvy Kids, Teens, Want Engaging Stories on Multiple Devices," PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2015, http://www.pwc.com/consumerintelligenceseries.

16 danah boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); Sharon Strover and William Moner, "The Contours of On-Demand Viewing," in *Connected Viewing: Selling, Stream-*

If teens do see a movie at the box office, they are generally going for the experience. Some films drum up interest because of advertising and word of mouth (especially on social media), and teens don't want to be left out of the conversation. However, when looking at deciding factors that bring the segment to the theater, specific films aren't as important as getting together with friends: according to Nielsen reports, teens are "spontaneous moviegoers" who go to the theater and then decide what to watch when they're there, and according to Cassandra reports, they are primarily interested in the "experience" of getting together with friends. These findings, along with the decreasing audience numbers and the overall fickle nature of the segment, have the industry worried. A fad one moment can be passé the next, which is especially problematic with the rapidity of word of mouth over social media and the long production gestation of films. On top of the quickly changing tastes of the youth demographic, there are also wider shifts in audience habits because of digital distribution. As noted in *Variety*, "efforts to grow the moviegoing audience require a significant change in thinking among those in the industry. . . . And in a battle that unites theater owners and studio execs, the fight to keep younger generations going to the movies—instead of consuming entertainment in their homes or via mobile devices—remains a significant concern and top priority."[17]

Even more reliable and profitable than the teen film as a production trend used to entice large audiences is the high-concept blockbuster. Since the period Thomas Schatz labels "the New Hollywood," beginning in the 1970s with *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) and *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), growing with *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989), and expanding exponentially since then into "Conglomerate Hollywood," blockbuster films with huge budgets are actually a way to mitigate risk.[18] Making a high-concept film, as Justin Wyatt defines it, with "the hook, the look, and the book," or a film that uses sophisticated marketing, has high production values, and has a built-in audience from using already-known sources, is a way to ensure that large audiences will buy tickets and related ancillary products to recoup the budget and increase revenues.[19] Often these films—for example, superhero movies featuring characters like Batman, Superman, the X-Men, Spider-Man, Iron Man (yes, lots of "men")—are perceived to appeal to teenage boys, which, following American International Pictures' "Peter Pan syndrome" marketing plan, will bring in the widest audience because younger kids and girls will all want to watch what the older male teens watch. But with budgets

ing, & Sharing Media in the Digital Era, ed. Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson (New York: Routledge, 2014), 234–253.

17 Andrew Stewart and Alexandra Cheney, "CinemaCon: Hollywood Tested by New Distribution Models," *Variety*, March 24, 2014, http://variety.com/2014/film/features/new-distribution-models-create-tug-of-war-between-studios-theaters-1201144965/. The problem is not unique to movies; other traditional media are facing challenges in their attempts to keep youth audiences engaged with so many new media options vying for their attention. For extended discussions of this point as it relates to television, see the essays in this In Focus section by Valerie Wee and Faye Woods.

18 Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1–36; Schatz, "Seismic Shifts in the American Film Industry," in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, ed. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2012), 32–52.

19 Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

over \$100 million and additional marketing costs, the films also need to appeal to wider segments and growing international markets. Indeed, as MPAA reports indicate, females and older audiences are making up larger portions of moviegoers. Looking back, then, at Doherty's claims in *Teenagers and Teenpics* that teen films of the 1950s marked a juvenilization of the industry, his argument is actually more sound as it applies to blockbuster filmmaking generally, not just to teen films.[20]

When John Fithian, president of the National Association of Theatre Owners, stated in 2014 that "there are a lot of old rules that don't make sense anymore," he was pointing to challenges from digital distribution, the changing demographics of the audience, and the studios' moves away from producing midrange-budget films.[21] However, in analyzing historical trends of successful industry strategies, it is less the case that the old rules don't make sense, and more that the old rules are being combined in new ways. Instead of making teen films and high-concept blockbusters to entice audiences with story and spectacle, the two production modes have merged into the franchise teen film.

The franchise teen film is marked by the fusion of industry strategies. Teen film qualities, such as adolescents as primary characters in coming-of-age stories, are adapted so that the protagonists are not just heroes of their own lives; rather, they are heroes for entire generations. In addition, the genre is mixed with the blockbuster production trend of films with large budgets and large-scale action-adventure plots, high-concept films that build on familiar intellectual properties, and franchise films that develop sequels, prequels, and spin-offs around familiar characters that studio executives say are ones "people want to come back and see over and over again."[22] Following the logics of the contemporary media landscape, the productions are also illustrative of convergence culture and transmedia storytelling. The *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and *Hunger Games* franchises are all exemplary, as are films in the *Transformers* (2007–) and all three *Spider-Man* (2002–2007, 2012–2014, 2017–) series. Even lower-budget teen films are trying to follow (with modifications adjusted for scale) the franchise strategy by using familiar YA novels in the hope of augmenting success with an already-known property. While not as successful as the blockbusters, in terms of either box office or ancillary market cross-promotion, the following are just a sample of recent teen films that are all literary adaptations: *Spectacular Now*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, and *The DUFF*, as well as *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist* (Peter Sollett, 2008), *I Love You, Beth Cooper* (Chris Columbus, 2009), *Kick-Ass* (Matthew Vaughn, 2010) and *Kick-Ass 2* (Jeff Wadlow, 2013), *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Stephen Chbosky, 2012), and *Paper Towns* (Jake Schreier, 2016).

All these films may be about teens, but, importantly, they remain relevant and inviting to broader audiences. Just as for the blockbuster, although the initial target market for YA source material is the youth demographic, the books have cross-generational appeal.[23] Arguably, cross-market appeal as a media production strategy is widespread.

20 Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*.

21 Quoted in Stewart and Chaney, "Hollywood Tested."

22 Marc Graser, "Universal Veers from Superhero Trend for a Monster Plan," *Variety*, August 21, 2014.

23 Pamela Paul, "The *Hunger Games* Target: Who Is the Audience for This Tense and Gritty Critique of Media Culture?," *International Herald Tribune*, March 15, 2012.

Pixar family films attract children and older audiences, and even teen films are made to work on multiple levels.[24] Analyses of marketing campaigns for 1980s teen sex comedies and slashers reveal that they were targeted to wider markets than commonly thought to include both male and female audiences.[25] The idea of the expanded target market is also especially noticeable considering that most of the top-grossing teen films of the 1980s were rated R or restricted to viewers under seventeen.[26] Since 2000, the film industry has more stringently enforced rating restrictions.[27] This contributes to the shift in a majority of films being released with a PG-13 rating, and further indicates the intention of attracting as wide an audience as possible. Interestingly, a common assumption is that the primary audience for teen films is teens themselves. Although it is difficult to pinpoint audience segmentation statistics for specific films, what is apparent is that teens continue to be one of the most significant audience segments. Even though their numbers as a percentage of the moviegoing audience are decreasing, the trick is still finding what appeals to them without alienating others.

As Rick Altman notes in *Film/Genre*, different genres are mixed to create marketable forms, and as Schatz points out in *Hollywood Genres*, genre films get repeated because they address relevant contemporary cultural issues and because Hollywood will keep making the types of films audiences go to see.[28] Of course, production cycles also run their course, and trends grow stale.[29] A few YA adaptations of varying budgets but with similar themes have not done well recently, as the box office of *I Am Number Four* (D. J. Caruso, 2011), *Beautiful Creatures* (Richard LaGravenese, 2013), *Ender's Game* (Gavin Hood, 2013), *The Host* (Andrew Niccol, 2013), and *Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials* (Wes Ball, 2015) can attest. The most damning evidence comes from news about *Ascendant*, the last film in the dystopian sci-fi *Divergent* series, slated for release in 2017. After two initial successes, the third film in the series, *Allegiant* (Robert Schwentke, 2016), did so (relatively) poorly at the worldwide box office—with $179 million versus $297 for *Insurgent* (Robert Schwentke, 2015)—that the last film is slated to be released as a direct-to-TV movie, with the hope of a television series spin-off to follow.[30]

With the franchise teen film, Hollywood has adopted not so much a new tactic but rather more of the same in a different guise. Blending two production modes that are used to attract the youth demographic and that have cross-generational appeal, the franchise teen films mark a concerted, sophisticated strategy that builds on previous successes by merging the teen film with the high-concept blockbuster. Labeling this production approach the "franchise teen film" leaves room to consider

24 Ibid.

25 Richard Nowell, "'Between Dreams and Reality': Genre Personae, Brand *Elm Street*, and Repackaging the American Teen Slasher Film," *Iluminace* 24, no. 3 (2012): 69–100.

26 Nelson, "Teen Films of the 1980s."

27 Gabriel Snyder, "Don't Give Me an 'R,'" *Variety*, February 27, 2005, 8.

28 Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999); Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System* (New York: Random House, 1981).

29 Klein, *American Film Cycles*.

30 Nico Lang, "The Fall of 'Divergent': The Final Film Will Bow on TV—Here's Why It Matters," *Salon*, July 24, 2016, http://www.salon.com/2016/07/24/the_fall_of_divergent_the_final_film_will_bow_on_tv_heres_why_it_matters/.

how frequently lower-budget genre fare adapts familiar YA source material also. In 2017, as the trend appears to be winding down, Hollywood, market researchers, and audiences will continue to look to the youth demographic for word of the next big (bigger? smaller?) thing. At this point, it's still too soon to tell whether we are at the tail end of a production cycle or whether this marks a convergent-era, hybrid strategy with more lasting staying power.

In addition to familiar coming-of-age narratives and themes, each generation of youth also has its own distinctive traits represented on-screen by teen characters. Likewise, the types of films associated both with this demographic and with specific time periods change. One of the many reasons studying film through the lens of genre is so fascinating is because genre films address enduring issues in contemporary terms. At the intersection of industry practice and cultural relevance, their continued production is predicated upon audience preferences, and as a result, genres adapt. The heroes of the present generation of youth films are positioned as needing to balance personal growth along with being saviors and the hope for a better world; as such, the current productions offer both similarities to and differences from the past that speak to industrial shifts and modern societal concerns. Whether these franchise teen films will alter our conception of the teen film as a genre remains to be seen.   ✱

Youth Audiences and the Media in the Digital Era: The Intensification of Multimedia Engagement and Interaction

by Valerie Wee

Youth audiences in possession of disposable income, and the time and inclination to spend it, have long been a demographic valued by the media industries, both as the consumers of media content and as the "product" sold to advertisers.[1] However, the generations born after 1995 into capitalist, technologically advanced, first-world environments—who have grown up with digital entertainment interfaces offering heightened opportunities for interaction, participation, and control over their preferred entertainment experiences—are abandoning traditional, industry-regulated forms of

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1 Elissa Moses, *The $100 Billion Allowance: Accessing the Global Teen Market* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000).

media consumption.[2] These developments signal an era of upheaval for legacy media, which are being forced to grapple with rapidly evolving audience behaviors, an expanding range of competing (online) entertainment options, and the intensification of (digital) piracy, all of which are challenging the traditional ways in which entertainment is being produced, delivered, accessed, and consumed.

How have the growth and widespread adoption of digital technologies altered how contemporary youth audiences use and consume entertainment media? How are legacy media responding to the challenges of targeting and attracting youth audiences who are increasingly distracted by an expanding range of new media entertainment options? Within the limits of these few pages, I restrict my discussion to contemporary youth's evolving interactions with entertainment media and detail how two specific youth-oriented television series—*Glee* (Fox, 2009–2015) and *Scream* (MTV, 2015–) have attempted to co-opt new media's heightened potential for interactivity and fan engagement to more effectively target youth audiences.

The emergence of new digital media technologies has directly disrupted the analog status quo. While the structures and practices of "old" legacy media are built on a notion of mass communication, in which content and information is linear and flows from a single source to many recipients, new media's open, largely unregulated structure and low barriers to entry offer the opportunity for content and information to flow from many sources to many recipients. In addition, there is a perception that the new media environment allows content producers and distributors, and media users, consumers, and audiences alike to freely interact and to mutually and simultaneously participate in both the creation and the consumption of media content.[3] Where analog media ensured that entertainment content was historically encountered and consumed on regulated schedules, in specific venues and spaces, via distinct devices and technologies, while offering identifiably disparate experiences, digital's promise of cross-media "convergence" is dissolving the barriers between different forms of media and their content, and ensuring that multiple forms of media entertainment can be enjoyed across an expanding range of multipurpose digital communication devices.[4]

In the digital age, computer, tablet, and mobile phone screens are supplanting the traditional movie and television screen. Digital devices afford media consumers greater independence, choice, and agency with regard to how, where, and when they consume their entertainment, easily circumventing broadcast or release schedules imposed by content providers or distributors, nullifying traditional audience-measuring systems, and disrupting the once-stable advertising model.[5] Increasingly, youth audiences in the

2 Don Tapscott, *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998); Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). It is important to acknowledge, however, that such a vision of youth as technologically savvy, engaged, and empowered individuals in the digital age is a problematic one that fails to recognize the complexities resulting from the digital divide. Furthermore, such "digital native" discourses may not be representative of all youth and may describe only a small segment of the youth population and their behaviors.

3 Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008).

4 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*.

5 Michael Strangelove, *Post-TV: Piracy, Cord-Cutting and the Future of Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

twenty-first century are accessing their media at the touch of a button (or touchscreen), free from geographical or temporal constraints.

Significantly, while a 2015 study of US tweens (eight- to twelve-year-olds) and teens (thirteen to eighteen) offers positive news for the entertainment industries, revealing that youth continue to spend significant amounts of time accessing and enjoying media—nine hours for teens and six hours for tweens daily, with television watching and listening to music dominating their activities—the survey also notes developments that point to the erosion of traditional media's control over youth media consumption habits. Where television viewing is concerned, teens reportedly spend "only half (50 percent) of all [their] TV and video-viewing time watching TV programming on a TV set"; the other 50 percent of the time they spend on digital devices and mobile gadgets—in fact, US tweens spent 41 percent of all their screen time on mobile devices, as compared to 46 percent for teens.[6]

Furthermore, the statistics for traditional television viewing reveal startling declines in younger demographics. A study of the contemporary state of television reported that between 2011 and 2016, traditional TV viewing (i.e., "linear TV viewing on set-top boxes, either live or DVR time-shifted") had fallen by nine hours per week for viewers aged eighteen to twenty-four, reflecting a notable 38 percent drop.[7] The numbers are equally dire when younger audience behavior is incorporated: viewers aged twelve to twenty-four spent 36.2 percent less time watching broadcast television than they did five years ago. In November 2016, Screen Media Daily cited an Accenture report that "viewership for long form video content, such as movies and television on a TV screen . . . declined by 13 percent globally over the past year and by 11 percent in the United States . . . with fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds abandoning the TV screen at a rate of 33 percent for movies and television shows and 26 percent for sporting events."[8] Essentially, the amount of time youth are spending watching on-air television, and perhaps equally crucially, advertising, has been steadily declining as they transfer their attention to digital (and often, mobile) devices. In fact, nineteen- to twenty-five-year-olds spent notably more time streaming video content (39 percent) than watching on-air television (29 percent).[9]

These shifts can be traced to a range of online entertainment content that has been steadily drawing audience attention away from legacy media while encouraging notable transformations in the way audiences conceptualize, interact with, and consume entertainment. Netflix's streaming video distribution platform, launched in 2007, has had a notable impact on how viewers consume their media entertainment, offering subscribers unlimited access to a wide range of old, contemporary, and original Netflix-produced films and television series, all commercial-free and accessible on a range of (mobile) devices, anywhere, and at any time. Simultaneously, Facebook

6 "The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens," *Common Sense Media*, November 3, 2015, https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens, 15–21.

7 "The State of Traditional TV: Q2 2016 Update," Marketing Charts, October 5, 2016, http://www.marketingcharts.com/television/are-young-people-watching-less-tv-24817/.

8 "TV Viewership Sees Double-Digit Decline, According to Accenture," *Screen Media Daily*, November 26, 2016, http://screenmediadaily.com/tv-viewership-sees-double-digit-decline-according-to-accenture/.

9 "State of Traditional TV."

(launched in 2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter (2006), Tumblr (2007), and Instagram (2010), alongside other social media platforms popular with youth, have further redefined the entertainment experience. These platforms foreground connection, engagement, and interaction as primary features of their social network–oriented interfaces. They offer entertainment experiences and content grounded in notions of fragmentation, immediacy, and intimacy, and they have played a role in encouraging media self-production. Indeed, as Allison McCracken's piece in this issue highlights, young people are using social media not merely to consume entertainment but also as a vehicle for action, political engagement, and identity formation. These digital innovations have supported and encouraged content users or consumers to develop increasing expectations of playing a greater role in determining not just their entertainment experience but also their sense of self and their place in and view of the world at large.[10]

This new media landscape is forcing television content producers and networks to find ways to actively exploit social media portals that offer heightened opportunities for active engagement and participation in a bid to better connect with this digitally focused cohort. Notably, the Common Sense Census reveals that 45 percent of thirteen- to eighteen-year-olds use social media "every day."[11] Increasingly, media texts hoping to effectively attract and retain youth interest are actively engaging and interacting with youth on the digital platforms to which they are migrating.

Fox and MTV, two youth-focused networks, directly and overtly cultivated teens on social media and deliberately exploited the interactive opportunities that characterize contemporary digital platforms and their interfaces in their efforts to promote both *Glee* and *Scream*, respectively.[12] In these instances, the networks actively engaged in exploiting fan labor, a strategy aided by the advent of digital and social media.[13]

In launching the youth-directed *Glee* and its subsequent multimedia spin-offs, Fox's strategy focused on engaging and interacting with youth on social media sites (including Facebook and Myspace). The process began with the *Glee* television series. During the show's launch in 2009, Fox invited youth (via social media) to compete for the title of "Biggest Gleek" by helping promote the show to their peers on social media.[14] Then, *The Glee Project* (Oxygen, 2011–2012), an *American Idol*–type singing competition spin-off, invited ordinary youth to compete for a starring role on the *Glee*

10 Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009); Daniel Chamberlain, "Media Interfaces, Networked Media Spaces and the Mass Customization of Everyday Space," *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

11 "Common Sense Census," 21.

12 Early experiments on adopting web-based platforms for engagement and promotion originated in the late 1990s, when youth-focused networks turned to digital media to target the then-emerging millennial youth cohort. Valerie Wee, *Teen Media* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010).

13 Suzanne Scott, "Repackaging Fan Culture: The Regifting Economy of Ancillary Content Models," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 3 (2009), http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/150/122; Sharon Ross, *Beyond the Box* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

14 Valerie Wee, "Spreading the Glee: Targeting a Youth Audience in the Multi-Media, Digital Age," *Information Society* 35, no. 5 (2016): 1–12; Louisa E. Stein, *Millennial Fandom* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 25–76; Alice Marwick, Mary L. Gray, and Mike Ananny, "Dolphins Are Just Gay Sharks: *Glee* and the Queer Case of Transmedia as Text and Object," *Television & New Media* 15, no. 7 (2014): 627–647.

television series. During the competition, various social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, offered heightened participatory opportunities by serving as forums for discussion and interaction among the contestants, *Glee*'s cast, and the viewing public. The commitment to acknowledge fans and foster engagement and participation even transcended social media to shape the content of *Glee 3D* (Kevin Tancharoen, 2011), the *Glee* concert film, which deliberately showcased the personal stories and endorsements of selected *Glee* fans by interspersing these fan-focused segments between the concert performances.[15]

More recently, the launch of MTV's television series *Scream* also centered on engagement, participation, and interaction over social media. In October 2014, MTV teased *Scream*'s first season on Twitter and Snapchat by inviting fans to call a mysterious number that revealed the show's premiere date. Closer to the premiere in June 2015, MTV targeted teens with another exclusive online experience, this time with an invitation to play a "Choose Your Own Murder" interactive game in which viewers attempted to escape a killer via a first-person-point-of-view online game interface. MTV then encouraged these viewers and players to promote the experience to others on social media.[16] *Scream*'s second season premiere was publicized with a *Scream* live event in May 2016, on Friday the thirteenth, when fans were invited to an online interactive event accessible via Facebook Live, YouTube, and Periscope, which allowed fans to interact with one another across these platforms and on mobile devices while tuning in to the promotional event occurring live at MTV's TRL studios. Online participants watched blood spatter on-screen as a masked murderer ran amok during a "fifteen-minute murder spree" during which members of the studio audience disappeared and/or were killed off.[17] A few days later, another Facebook Live promotional event occurred featuring a teaser trailer, an exclusive clip from the new season, and a Q&A session with one of the series' stars, Tom Maden.[18] Significantly, these promotional events explicitly blend the online experience with "liveness," thus foregrounding the idea(l) of scheduled (or "appointment") entertainment—traditional characteristics of on-air television. MTV's supervising producer of video and digital production, Kim Thai, acknowledged an explicit focus on using new media to engage with and interact with their youth targets: "We're always trying to look for that thing to engage with our audience. . . . [I]t was all of us leaning into knowing the user behavior and knowing the specifics that came from that actual fan base." Notably, MTV has a director of digital strategy and fan engagement, Matt McDonough, to oversee the increasingly important promotional strategies revolving around exploiting digital opportunities and engaging (with) fans.[19]

15 Valerie Wee, "'Who Is the Biggest Gleek?': Traditional Media Targets the Digital Youth Generation," *Iluminace* 27, no. 1 (2015): 63–76.

16 Jason Lynch, "To Promote Its New Scream Series, MTV Is 'Killing' Its Audience," *AdWeek*, June 19, 2015, http://www.adweek.com/news/television/promote-its-new-scream-series-mtv-killing-its-audience-165402.

17 Proma Khosla, "How MTV Got Away with Live Streamed Murder Mayhem," *Mashable*, May 17, 2016, http://mashable.com/2016/05/16/scream-live/#Alvlj2EprZqC.

18 Robert Workman, "MTV's 'Scream' Social Media Promotions Are Killing It," *[a]List Frontline Marketing*, May 17, 2016, http://www.alistdaily.com/social/mtvs-scream-social-media-promotions-killing-it/.

19 Khosla, "How MTV."

The commitment to engagement and interaction also motivated the adoption of digital and social media to cultivate youth audiences' perceptions (and expectations) of directly interacting with creative personnel and celebrities, and in some cases even "participating" (however marginally) in the industrial creative process itself.[20] For instance, *Glee* creator Ryan Murphy and the series' stars regularly participated in "Twitter chats" with the show's viewers and fans. In fact, random exchanges between celebrities and fans over a range of social media became common, with creative personnel involved in the production of film and television shows regularly updating fans on the creative process by tweeting filming updates, posting on-set Instagram photos, or even inviting fans to comment online about what they hoped to see on-screen.[21] While fans were not given any real influence over the creative process or decisions, offering them a heightened sense of involvement encouraged audience commitment and a sense of ownership over the show.

These examples reveal some of the activities adopted by the television industry to exploit digital communications opportunities to build an "intimate" relationship with youth and ultimately co-opt fan labor. Using digital and social media to cultivate the heightened, if ultimately illusory, impression of "exclusive" interaction and two-way engagement between those directly involved in media production (i.e., the series' creators and performers) and the digitally savvy youth who consume the texts has obvious benefits for the media industries. The strategies described here clearly serve a distinctly corporate and industrial (and by extension, commercial) function, as focused attempts to target youth audiences by cutting through an ever-expanding array of media and entertainment distractions.

The implications and consequences for younger audiences who develop expectations of engagement and interaction with the entertainment they consume are more complicated. Even though youth audiences are increasingly straying from traditional sites and (plat)forms of consumption, and turning to alternative means of accessing content, they are not necessarily encountering more diverse content, nor are teens necessarily responding to the media messages in critically challenging ways. Rather, most remain primarily interested in consuming professionally produced films and television shows.

There are clearly pleasures and potentially meaningful experiences to be found in engaging and interacting with such media, and many may discover a sense of identity and solidarity in a specific shared context or community of fans (the community of avid, self-professed "Gleeks" is one example).[22] At the same time, these digitally focused promotional activities inevitably nurture in young people the specific habits and ideologies that support the dominant, corporate-constructed discourses and behaviors that revolve around the consumption of mainstream media texts and, by extension, the inherent values and messages structured around capitalist, consumerist concerns.

20 Elizabeth Ellcessor, "Tweeting @feliciaday: Online Social Media, Convergence, and Subcultural Stardom," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 1 (2012): 46–75.

21 Wee, "Spreading the Glee," 7–8.

22 Wee, "'Who Is the Biggest Gleek?,'" 63–76.

In the instances detailed here, the forms of engagement and interaction with fans are determined by the industry and serve industrial as well as capitalist and commercial needs and values. Fan activities are carefully (and when necessary, legislatively) circumscribed, and there remains little room or industry tolerance for fan behaviors and critical perspectives that do not fit within a narrow, industry-approved range of creative engagements.[23] Clearly, youth audiences and their labor are being co-opted into the production, promotion, and marketing of the youth-targeted multimedia text in ways that confirm Mark Andrejevic's assertion that these forms of labor do little to contest traditional media relations, as this work ultimately, and essentially, "[reinforces] social and material relations."[24]

Ultimately, it remains difficult to determine where the line lies between corporate acknowledgment and celebration of fans, and the exploitation of their work and creative activities for promotional and commercial gain. Despite claims that the digital age has ushered in a new era of interactivity, engagement, audience creativity, empowerment, and agency, in the scenarios I have examined the media industry's relationship with fans primarily remains one of top-down manipulation.

The potential and means to profit from digital technologies and social media remain primarily experimental for legacy media, even as the media ecosystem continues to evolve—a point that Faye Woods's examination of the BBC's attempts to engage youth via its online streaming video-on-demand iPlayer (also found in this issue) further illustrates. For tech-savvy youth audiences, the boundaries of the entertainment experience are becoming increasingly blurred, such that consuming the actual entertainment text, participating in the promotional event, and interacting with and helping disseminate the marketing message all come together in a heightened communal, multimedia environment. Young audiences today no longer appear to distinguish between different forms of screen media content. Film, television, streaming video, live online events, social media posts—all appear to be merging into a singular entertainment experience that is increasingly available anywhere and at any time. The promise of such unlimited access to multiple forms of media entertainment can obstruct the distance and objectivity crucial for any form of critical perspective and ideological interrogation. That being said, McCracken's piece on how millennials are using social media for social criticism and political engagement offers an alternative, more optimistic view of how digital media can serve young people in ways beyond that of industry-encouraged media consumption. Regardless, it remains increasingly crucial that young viewers and media consumers be trained and encouraged to critically interrogate, evaluate, and challenge the media they consume, love, and promote. ✳

23 While attempts to encourage and exploit fan labor clearly benefit the media industry in key ways, fan activities are notoriously difficult to govern, often leading to tensions between both parties. Julie Levin Russo, "User-Penetrated Content: Fan Video in the Age of Convergence," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 125–130; Alexis Lothian, "Living in a Den of Thieves: Fan Video and Digital Challenges to Ownership," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 130–136.

24 Mark Andrejevic, "Watching Television without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans," *Television and New Media* 9, no. 1 (2008): 43.

Streaming British Youth Television: Online BBC Three as a Transitional Moment

by Faye Woods

In the summer of 2016, two UK lectures by high-profile television executives highlighted television's ongoing struggle to engage with youth audiences. Shane Smith—CEO of the US-based multiplatform media company Vice Media—gave a contentious MacTaggart Lecture to the assembled British media industry at the 2016 Edinburgh International Television Festival. In it, he charged that linear television was neglecting "the interests and needs of the world's youth."[1] These comments echoed those of former BBC television executive Liz Warner, who had argued that television was failing young audiences in a BAFTA lecture the previous week. Warner claimed that British television was "getting boring, old and boring" and needed to assert itself more forcefully in the digital media realm to compete, a space that Smith has long marketed himself and Vice Media as mastering.

In February 2016, the BBC had taken a decisive step in this direction by closing its digital youth channel BBC Three as a linear channel, relaunching it as an online-only channel. This new BBC Three was a "platform neutral" brand hosted on the BBC's streaming video-on-demand platform iPlayer, with an increased investment in short-form content spreading its British youth television brand across YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and other social platforms.[2] This expansion of its short-form content meant that BBC Three was no longer only competing with established providers of British youth television on digital channels E4 and ITV2; it was also competing for attention with international media brands such as Vice, a former magazine turned US-based global media brand with twelve digital channels and more than seven million YouTube subscribers, which

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1   Jasper Jackson and Mark Sweney, "Vice's Founder Thinks Television Is Failing Young People—Is He Right?," *The Guardian*, August 28, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/aug/28/vices-founder-thinks-television-is-failing-young-people-is-he-right; Liz Warner, "Liz Warner: BAFTA Television Lecture," BAFTA, July 8, 2016, http://www.bafta.org/media-centre/transcripts/liz-warner-bafta-television-lecture.

2   Hannah Gannagé-Stewart, "TV Rejects Millennial Malaise," *Broadcast*, September 1, 2016, http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/news/tv-rejects-millennial-malaise/5108930.article.

marketed itself as a fleet-footed media disruptor able to reach an elusive youth audience.[3] British youth television has always been constructed through a transatlantic dance with US youth media, a push-and-pull relationship, drawing formally on US teen TV, yet defining itself against it in its assertion of national distinction.[4] BBC Three's move online indicated a new phase for British youth television: one marked by greater international competition, where a defined British voice and perspective marked its distinction within a global youth media flow. Yet without attention and investment, this distinction could potentially be swallowed up in the torrent of global media content targeting youth audiences.

Smith's charges over television's neglect of the world's youth were typically bombastic and provocative; however, his words perhaps struck a chord for a British industry playing catchup in an international digital media market dominated by US companies while also dealing with BBC Three's controversial move online and associated budget cuts. The move online was accompanied by a raid on the channel's finances to bolster a huge shortfall in the BBC's overall budget; BBC Three's programming budget was cut by £45 million to £25 million, a move that hampered its investment in original British youth programming. The move formed part of a history of the BBC cutting youth-focused provisions to shore up funding of mainstream programming, a series of decisions that have progressively damaged the corporation's reach to and relationship with youth audiences, the license-fee payers of the future.[5] A continually cash-strapped BBC frames these decisions as a choice between investment in niche or mass audiences, and the corporation is quick to point out that youth audiences view BBC One programming in large numbers.[6] Yet BBC Three plays an essential role in bringing the world to British youth and capturing their own experiences, struggles, and investments. This responsibility is essential for a public service broadcaster (PSB) like the BBC, as the requirement to reach youth audiences is written into the public service objectives set by the 2003 Communications Act.[7]

The corporation had presented the channel's move online as reaching out to this audience, a response to shifting viewing patterns and a pathfinder for how traditionally dominant broadcasters could pursue youth audiences drifting quickly away from linear

3 Jane Martinson, "The Virtues of Vice: How Punk Magazine Was Transformed into Media Giant," *The Guardian*, January 1, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jan/01/virtues-of-vice-magazine-transformed-into-global -giant; Peter White, "Vice: The Story So Far," Broadcast, August 24, 2016, http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/news /vice-the-story-so-far/5108676.article.

4 Faye Woods, *British Youth Television: Transnational Teens, Industry, Genre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 52–55.

5 Ibid., 52. The BBC is a public service broadcaster funded by the license fee—£145.50 as of 2017—that is required to watch and record live television in the United Kingdom. In 2016 the license fee was extended to cover both live and on-demand viewing on iPlayer.

6 Christopher Hooten, "More Young People Are Watching *Planet Earth 2* Than *The X Factor*," *The Independent*, December 1, 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/planet-earth-2-ii-young-viewers-x-factor-bbc-itv -david-attenborough-vieiwng-figures-ratings-a7449296.html; Hannah Gannagé-Stewart, "BBC Youth Viewing Drops 18% after BBC3 Closure," Broadcast, August 22 2016, http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/news/bbc-youth-viewing -drops-18-after-bbc3-closure/5108618.article.

7 "Communications Act 2003," Legislation, 2003, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/21/contents.

television.[8] Research by Ofcom saw live viewing fall to one-third of total viewing (36 percent) among sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds in the United Kingdom in 2015; however, the reach of broadcast TV among those aged sixteen to thirty-five stayed stable at 82 percent, given broadcasters' streaming video-on-demand (SVOD) services, particularly the BBC iPlayer and All4 from Channel 4.[9]

The iPlayer became the primary home of this streamlined online-only BBC Three, whose brand was tightened to focus primarily on documentary and comedy and stripped of its popular, yet often criticized, US animation imports and factual entertainment programming (e.g., *Don't Tell the Bride* [BBC Three / BBC One / Sky One, 2007–], *Sun, Sex and Suspicious Parents* [BBC Three, 2011–2015]). Comedy and documentary were genres in which British youth voices could be strongly articulated and that enabled the channel to assert its national distinction within the permeable multinational boundaries of the digital media ecosystem while also legitimating its space in the wider BBC and as a product of the license fee. As Inge Ejbye Sørensen has argued, "[b]oth the BBC and Channel 4 use documentary as one of the main genres with which to promote their brands, differentiate themselves from their competitors, and demonstrate their commitment to serious, public service programming."[10] BBC Three has a decade-long, often ignored history of documenting youth experience through factual programming, sharing territory that cool kid on the block Vice has touted as distinctive to its own brand and that Smith argued was absent from linear television.[11]

Vice was a constant presence in the discourse surrounding the lengthy development of BBC Three's online-only identity, where it was held up as the holy grail of reaching youth audiences.[12] BBC Three controller Damien Kavanagh later expressed frustration at the press's constant pitching of the companies as rivals, arguing that the attention of the youth audience was not a "zero-sum game."[13] Yet Vice and BBC Three were intertwined, particularly given the latter's stronger embrace of short-form and digital, with 20 percent of its budget devoted to such content; the move formed a cornerstone of its transition into a platform-neutral brand. Vice's former head of development, Max Gogarty, was hired to lead the channel's short-form division, indicating the influence of the company in this field.[14] During its linear lifetime, BBC Three had been a constant target of press and political critique over its content and its status as a PSB channel, and this press-built rivalry with Vice was indicative of

8 Warner, "Liz Warner: BAFTA Television Lecture"; Jake Kanter, "BBC Eyes Online-Only Future for BBC3," Broadcast, March 5, 2014, http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/bbc-eyes-online-only-future-for-bbc3/5068278.article.

9 Alex Farber, "Live TV Loses Young Viewers," Broadcast, July 14, 2016, http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/live-tv-loses-young-viewers/5106719.article.

10 Inge Ejbye Sørensen, "Channels as Content Curators: Multiplatform Strategies for Documentary Film and Factual Content in British Public Service Broadcasting," *European Journal of Communication* 29, no. 1 (2014): 34–49, 36.

11 Gannagé-Stewart, "TV Rejects."

12 For more detailed discussion of this process, see Woods, *British Youth Television*, 46–57.

13 Gannagé-Stewart, "TV Rejects."

14 Damian Kavanagh, "BBC Three: Where We Are," About the BBC, June, 26, 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/aboutthebbc/entries/c9a425fb-df7b-454e-b83b-34a139acc4e2.

how the online-only BBC Three was pitched into the global media ecosystem.[15] In a spreadable media economy based on shares, likes, and click-throughs, the social platforms of YouTube, Twitter, Snapchat, and particularly Facebook have ascended as powerful spaces for sharing news and media content.[16] To reach its youth audience in the spaces they frequent, the platform-neutral BBC Three is increasing its presence in these spaces via short-form and digital content. In doing so, it now competes with the international media brands—including Vice and BuzzFeed—that have an established foothold on the "noisy highway" of the online content ecosystem.[17]

BBC Three is still negotiating this extension of its established comedy and documentary brand, experimenting with how to punch through the crowded market and lower budgets of short-form and digital content. This will require the BBC Three brand to build audience relationships that counter the aura of establishment the BBC brings as a PSB corporation, the suspicion that "a channel emblazoned with the BBC logo—however it is animated—will never quite be cool."[18] It is still finding its own voice in the struggle to produce eye-catching and spreadable content, as well as working out how to draw viewers with factual content that looks beyond Vice's "edgy" subcultural gaze and how to use the flexibility of short-form to develop new comic voices. After its first year as an online-only channel, it continues to grapple with the challenge of breaking through in a crowded digital marketplace, balancing this with the ethics and accountability of a public service broadcaster.

Short-form video's ability to function as "spreadable media" facilitates BBC Three's expansion of its boundaries beyond iPlayer, as it reaches out to its target audience in their social media habitats.[19] Short-form's spreadability enables it to play a dual role as original content and promotional paratext.[20] Original short-form factual and comedy content is produced for viewing on and sharing via social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. Promotional short-form video seeks to draw the audience back to the branded home of iPlayer, with platform-exclusive long-form factual and comedy "unbundled" into shareable short-form promotional paratexts.[21] Here programs are broken down into "fragmentary, yet self-contained, segments," trailers, clips, or edited extracts ("cut-downs") hosted on Facebook or Twitter.[22] These serve as potentially viral promotional objects and as intact shareable texts themselves. Yet we might question

15   Ibid., 46–57.

16   Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Robert W. Gehl, "A History of Like," *New Inquiry*, March 27, 2013, http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/a-history-of-like/; John Herrman, "Mutually Assured Content," *Awl*, July 30, 2015, http://www.theawl.com/2015/07/in-no-charts.

17   Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson, *Promotional Screen Industries* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015), 33.

18   Katherine Rushton, "BBC3: Search for the Secret of Youth," *Broadcast*, June 18, 2009, http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/bbc3-search-for-the-secret-of-youth/5002614.article.

19   Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*.

20   Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

21   Max Dawson, "Little Players, Big Shows: Format, Narration, and Style on Television's New Smaller Screens," *Convergence* 13, no. 3 (2007): 231–250.

22   Ibid., 234; Hannah Gannagé-Stewart, "BBC Three's First Rating Revealed," *Broadcast*, April 7, 2016, http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/news/bbc3s-first-ratings-revealed/5102341.article.

how much this short-form content is connected with the BBC in audiences' minds when it is accessed on the platforms of multinational media companies, beyond the branded frame of the BBC iPlayer and its ideological connections to PSB and the license fee.

Ofcom's 2014 review of public service broadcasting across television, radio, and online raised questions over how far "young people distinguish public service content from other content," which suggests that public service broadcasters need to balance this multiplatform reach-out to youth audiences with a stronger articulation of their brand identities.[23] As Cathy Johnson and Paul Grainge point out, "In the new economics of attention it is not just the amount of time that people devote to media content that is at stake, but also the quality of that attention. . . . Content is not simply about ratings and viewing hits, in this sense, but also the depth of involvement, interest and feeling (or affect) that audiovisual forms can inspire."[24]

At its heart the affective audience relationship BBC Three needs is one built on trust and value, of belief in the BBC, "entwining viewers' emotional connections and experiences with brand connections and experiences."[25] This relationship builds future license-fee payers, so when the BBC cuts the budgets of youth-focused services it damages its own future.

One way BBC Three can build youth relationships and define itself within this crowded mediascape is by developing and supporting diverse voices. Vice executives noted that the company solidified its own footing in the United Kingdom following the 2011 London riots, when "young people were very, very angry and didn't feel that media companies were delivering them a realistic, true or honest vision of what was going on."[26] Diversity—in gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability—is slowly becoming a central concern of the British television industry both in front of and behind the camera, with campaigners influencing the development of internal policies that take small steps to counter the stark lack of diversity on screen and in industry personnel.[27] BBC Three can be at the forefront of this, using its budget and brand to develop factual and in particular drama and comedy content that counters its past tendency toward white male voices (which have dominated its comedy pipelines in particular). Two of BBC Three's biggest audience and critical successes in 2016 came from white female creators exploring the psyches of young women. In April 2016, *Thirteen* (2016) was BBC Three's first drama to debut on the "platform neutral" brand, and by August it was the year's most-requested program on iPlayer to date, drawing

23 Ofcom, "Public Service Broadcasting in the Internet Age," July 2, 2015, http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/con sultations/psb-review-3/.

24 Grainge and Johnson, *Promotional Screen Industries*, 27.

25 Jennifer Gillan, *Television Brandcasting: The Return of the Content-Promotion Hybrid* (London: Routledge, 2014), 4.

26 Creative director Alex Miller, qtd. in White, "Vice."

27 Jasper Jackson, "BBC to Consider Producers' Diversity Record When Commissioning TV Shows," *The Guardian*, October 17, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/oct/17/bbc-producers-diversity-commissioning -tv-guidelines.

three million requests. Dark comedy *Fleabag* (2016–), meanwhile, saw its British critical acclaim extended internationally with its acquisition by Amazon Instant Video.[28]

As Mary Celeste Kearney notes in her contribution to this In Focus, white youth are not the only consumers and producers of media. Short-form's smaller budgets and space for innovation and risk taking can further these steps and offer a pipeline for BAME (the standard terminology used in British politics and the creative industries to refer to "Black Asian and Minority Ethnic") creative personnel—including executives, writers, directors, actors, and a range of other production roles —who struggle to gain traction in the industry. Here BBC Three has the opportunity to offer the "meaningful diversity" sought by the Tumblr users discussed by Allison McCracken, also in this In Focus.[29] One of BBC Three's most high-profile short-form commissions has been the anthology series *Five by Five* (2017) from British actor and producer Idris Elba's production company Green Door, which pairs emerging and experienced acting and creative personnel. A key role of BBC Three could be the support and development of British BAME creative personnel currently working in independent web series—an area underdeveloped in the United Kingdom in comparison to the United States. The seeds of this were sown in 2016 when BBC Three produced a short-form series from Kayode Ewumi continuing his popular YouTube mockumentary *Hood Documentary* (2015), and a new episode of Cecile Emeke's *Ackee & Saltfish* (2015) web series in its Comedy Feeds strand of online pilots.[30] Providing a BBC platform for a breadth of British youth voices needs to be a central role of BBC Three.

Liz Warner's stark critique of the British television industry characterized BBC Three as "a bold foot forward yet to work."[31] BBC Three exists at present as a transitional moment in British youth television and in "traditional" broadcasters' relationships with youth audiences as a whole. The youth media landscape is grappling with unanswerable questions about its future, ones that, at present, BBC Three struggles to grasp itself. How can it help to build affective relationships that tie its brand, and the BBC itself, to youth audiences? What is the role of the BBC brand—and the value of the license fee—for an audience that defines itself by its international, boundaryless media consumption? With a demographic accustomed to accessing content for free (legally or illegally) or through international subscription-based libraries of content from a wealth of sources (including the BBC itself), what support is there for the breadth of services that a public service broadcaster like the BBC is required to fund from the license fee?[32] BBC Three plays a role in maintaining the increasingly shaky

28 Hannah Gannagé-Stewart, "BBC3 iPlayer Requests Jump after Online Launch," Broadcast, August 23, 2016, http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/news/bbc3-iplayer-requests-jump-after-online-launch/5108645.article.

29 Mary Beltrán, "Meaningful Diversity: Exploring Questions of Equitable Representation on Diverse Ensemble Cast Shows," *Flow: A Critical Forum on Television and Media Culture* 12, no. 7 (2010), https://www.flowjournal.org/2010/08/meaningful-diversity/.

30 Bim Adewunmi, "You Should Be Paying Attention to Kayode Ewumi," *BuzzFeed*, January 26, 2016, http://www.buzzfeed.com/bimadewunmi/keep-it-locked-yeah.

31 Warner, "Liz Warner."

32 This includes not only television content and the infrastructure that carries it, across a range of terrestrial and digital channels, but also radio stations, the website and iPlayer, the world service, industry training, and free license fees for pensioners.

social contract between the British citizen and the license fee. As BBC Three moves further into the spaces of multinational media brands to reach its target audience, will the thread that connects the viewer with the license fee–funded BBC be pulled ever thinner in the process? These remain questions that the British television industry is unable to answer at present with BBC Three serving as a pathfinder for the BBC and the industry as a whole. But it cannot do this without investment, and the swinging cuts to its budget fundamentally harm BBC Three's presence and central role in the recent growth of British youth television. The BBC needs to invest in its relationship with the license-fee payer of the future, or its future may be cast in doubt. ✳

The Reelness: Queer Film Festivals and Youth Media Training

by Andrew Scahill

I n 1977, a group of young queer artists gathered one night in the San Francisco LGBT Community Center to screen their films for one another against a plain white bedsheet. Marc Huestis recalls how he proposed the screening after meeting several like-minded artists developing their films at Harvey Milk's Castro Camera shop. As an afterthought, the young directors made the screening public, calling it the Gay Film Festival of Super-8 Films.[1]

What happened next is a bit of gay history: the evening sold out, with standing room only. More screenings were added and more artists introduced; that initially modest event would become the Frameline Film Festival (http://www.frameline.org), which now sprawls over a week and a half and is held at five separate venues. In 2016, the Frameline Film Festival screened 115 films for eighty thousand audience members, and queer film festivals can be found annually in approximately 240 cities worldwide. The queer film festival emerged alongside other identity-based film festivals as a particular mode of media activism, community formation, and independent cinema exhibition.[2] Queer scholars have noted queer film festivals' place as a battleground for and against representation, and festivals' programming evidences conflicts within the LGBT community over

1 David Wiegand, "Marc Huestis Grew Up Wanting to Be Either an Actor or President: Now the Filmmaker and Camp Presario Is Using His Showmanship to Promote Peace," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 16, 2003.

2 Skadi Loist and Ger Zielinski, "On the Development of Queer Film Festivals and Their Media Activism," in *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festivals and Activism*, ed. Dina Iordanova and Leshu Torchin (St. Andrews, Scotland: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2012), 49–62.

the past fifty years—battles over gender and racial diversity, bisexual and transgender inclusion, "positive" representations, and resistance to commodification.[3]

However, despite their youthful origins, little attention has been paid to the function of queer film festivals as a space of intergenerational dialogue. Queer youth media training programs, such as the Generations Filmmaker Workshop at Frameline (San Francisco), the Queer Youth Media Project at the Austin Gay and Lesbian International Film Festival, Reel Queer Youth at Three Dollar Bill Cinema (Seattle), and the Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project (Los Angeles), take as their ethos that media literacy and production allow for queer youth to enjoy self-expression and community not found in majority culture. I spoke with several organizers, instructors, and participants in these programs, and in what follows I argue that queer youth media training provides a unique space of self-expression for queer youth. It also connects past to present, as the queer film festival continues to be a space in which young queer voices can be heard by adult queer culture.

Far from being a passive experience, the combination of collective engagement, critical reception, and grassroots organizing constitutes a counterpublic sphere. Patricia White has referred to the queer film festival as "a crucial forum for self-representation," and this is particularly potent for young people, who often lack the critical resources to represent themselves.[4] Rather, as Lori McIntosh notes, "children must fit themselves into undeniably adult constructions of queerness."[5] Those representations, in which the child is simply awaiting activation as a queer adult, forgo the liminality of becoming for a teleological "always-was." Film production from queer youth offers the possibility of voicing from within exploration, fluidity, and transience.

Surely Internet forums such as YouTube, Vine, Periscope, and even Snapchat provide an outlet for queer youth to produce and distribute images of themselves in unprecedented ways.[6] But utopian assessments should always be tempered by a

3 For a more extensive look at this conversation: Richard Fung, "Programming the Public," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5, no. 1 (1999): 89–93; Martha Gever, "The Names We Give Ourselves," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Min-ha, and Cornel West (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 191–202; Roya Rastegar, "The De-Fusion of Good Intentions: Outlet's Fusion Film Festival," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 3 (2009): 481–497; Elana-Larisa Stanciu, "Urban Space and Queer Identities: The LGBTQ Film Festival as Heterotopia," *Analize: Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies* 17, no. 3 (2014): 159–177; and Ger Zielinski, "On the Production of Heterotopia, and Other Spaces, in and around Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 54 (2012), http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc54.2012/gerZelinskiFestivals/.

4 Patricia White, "Introduction: On Exhibitionism [Queer Publicity: A Dossier on Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals]," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5, no. 1 (1999): 73.

5 Lori McIntosh, "'My Film Will Change the World . . . or Something': Youth Media Production as 'Social Text,'" in *Everyday Youth Literacies: New Critical Perspectives for New Times*, ed. Kathy Sanford, Theresa Rogers, and Maureen Kendrick (Singapore: Springer, 2014), 67. For a consideration of adult representation of queer youth, see Bertram J. Cohler and Phillip Hammack, "The Psychological World of the Gay Teenager: Social Change, Narrative, and 'Normality,'" *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 36 (2007): 47–59; Ben Gove, "Framing Gay Youth," *Screen* 37, no. 2 (1996): 174–192; Gilad Pavda, "Edge of Seventeen: Melodramatic Coming-Out in Queer Adolescence Films," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 1, no. 4 (2004): 355–372; Christopher Pullen, *Queer Youth and Media Cultures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); and Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child; or, Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

6 For a more extensive look at this conversation, see Patricia Lange, *Kids on YouTube: Technical Identities and Digital Literacies* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014).

consideration of the "participation gap" in social media spheres and the risks of publicly performing "out" queer identity. In her study of YouTube videos produced by LGBT youth, Lauren S. Berliner also notes the commonality of certain narrative templates in content, which she distinguishes as "pedagogical" and "performative."[7] The former is typified in antibullying and suicide prevention campaigns such as the It Gets Better Project.[8] Berliner and others note that such templates ultimately limit youth creativity and require young people to conform to adult scripts of "progress" through visibility and homogeneity.

What, then, can queer youth media training offer to young people not found through social media or junior high or high school film programs? One benefit is a "safer space" in which young people can express their sexual or gender identities without repercussions from instructors or other students.[9] Much of empowering young people employs the rhetoric of "true voice," and yet for queers in a majority-culture space, "speaking the self" can require potentially dangerous acts of self-disclosure. Further, many media training modules reproduce the male-dominated and auteur-driven modes of Hollywood production. In her book *Girls Make Media*, Mary Celeste Kearney notes that the "masculinization of filmmaking roles, technology, and education" has traditionally prevented girls from taking up filmmaking as a mode of expression and communication.[10]

This masculinist environment would come as no surprise to Reel Queer Youth (RQY) participant Jackie Moffitt, who recalls experiencing such extreme homophobia in his high school film class that he was forced to leave school. But at RQY, says Moffitt, "the sense of community and the celebratory atmosphere is just as important as the program itself."[11] RQY program coordinator Danny Tayara was once a student in the RQY program and knows firsthand the importance of a queer-defined space. "I really can't explain the variety of ways this program and Three Dollar Bill Cinema have changed my life," says Tayara. "As a queer young person, I was shy, afraid of rejection, afraid to speak, and afraid to be myself and share ideas. I believe I wouldn't have been given the necessary gentle space to share my ideas anywhere else."[12]

As Moffitt and Tayara note, queer youth media training programs take more interest in collaboration and exploration than in the "success" of a final product.

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7   Henry Jenkins, Katie Clinton, Ravi Purushotma, Alice J. Robinson, and Margaret Weigel, "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century," *Building the Field of Digital Media and Learning* (Chicago: MacArthur Foundation, October 19, 2006); Lauren Berliner, "'This Is about Way More Than Bullies': User-Generated Video, Narrative Multiplicity, and LGBTQ Identity," in *Documenting Gendered Violence: Representations, Collaborations, and Movements*, ed. Lisa M. Cuklanz and Heather McIntosh (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

8   The It Gets Better Project (IBGP) was created in 2010 by columnist Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller to encourage LGBT people and allies to post testimonials of hope for young queer people struggling with discrimination, harassment, and depression (http://www.itgetsbetter.org).

9   I use the term "safer space" as a way of acknowledging that no space is without risk. This sentiment is echoed by Curran Nault, who says that "all spaces are dangerous. These programs [QYMT] give students some creative tools to navigate through the danger" (personal email exchange, November 28, 2016).

10 Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls Make Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 206.

11 Jackie Moffitt, personal email exchange, November 23, 2016.

12 Danny Tayara, personal email exchange, December 1, 2016.

One could say that this is a hallmark of queer youth production: in 1983, the UK's Channel 4 developed a radical community video project in which twenty-five queer youths were given media training and access to video equipment to document their lives. The result was the Grierson Award–winning film *Framed Youth: The Revenge of the Teenage Perverts* (Trill Burton, Jeff Cole, Rose Collins, Nicola Field, Toby Kettle, Pom Martin, and Jimmy Somerville, 1983), which also served to launch the career of pop star Somerville and filmmaker Isaac Julien. *Framed Youth* is an experimental collage of interviews, freeze frames, news clips, and behind-the-scenes footage in a communal style that Thomas Waugh deemed "collaborative vérité."[13] Such a focus on collaboration and even play deconstructs assumptions about the singularity of authentic voice and advocates a space of multiliteracy, what Elisabeth Soep calls a "crowded talk."[14] Such a multivalent mode reproduces the site of mentorship: the queer film festival, where a kind of crowded talk forms the landscape of queer representation year to year.

Filmmaking, then, becomes not just a mode of self-expression in queer youth media training but also a space in which identity is destabilized and explored. Susan Driver has noted that "growing up and coming out queer is not merely a personal process of identity but involves a cultural process of reassessing, embracing, refusing, and combining media representations."[15] Curran Nault, the former programming director at the Austin Gay and Lesbian International Film Festival and artistic director of OUTsider Fest, notes that many queer youths "have not yet settled on a gender or sexual identity (and perhaps never will). In this manner, the programs are less about finding an authentic voice, and settling into something, as they are about diving into, and swim about, the possibilities."[16]

Many of the organizers stressed the importance of exposing students to a greater legacy of queer filmmakers for young people to "swim out" in possibilities. Mike Vass, who teaches a queer youth workshop with the MIX NYC Queer Experimental Film Festival, emphasizes the power of exposing students to "the histories of queer filmmaking and film studies, which expands understanding of the uses to which cinema could be put: personal, political, activist-oriented, aesthetic."[17]

Queer film festivals have always, in that way, served as a type of cultural pedagogy. Although audiences are self-selecting, a range of diverse voices materializes at these events. As Eric O. Clark writes, "Gay and lesbian film and video festivals are among the few sites where different queer interests and communities interact (for the price of a ticket). They are also crucial sites of queer pedagogy, classrooms of queer

13 Thomas Waugh, *The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 209. See also Ieuan Franklin, "Talking Liberties: *Framed Youth*, Community Video and Channel 4's Remit in Action," in *Queer Youth and Media Cultures*, ed. Christopher Pullen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 115–131.

14 Elisabeth Soep, "Beyond Literacy and Voice in Youth Media Production," *McGill Journal of Education* 41, no. 3 (2006): 197–214. See also Erica Rosenfeld Halverson, "Film as Identity Exploration: A Multimodal Analysis of Youth-Produced Films," *Teachers College Record* 12, no. 9 (2010): 2352–2378.

15 Susan Driver, *Queer Girls and Popular Culture: Reading, Resisting, and Creating Media* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 2.

16 Curran Nault, interview, November 28, 2016.

17 Mike Vass, personal email exchange, November 27, 2016.

images."[18] In addition to introducing young filmmakers to a legacy of filmmaking at the margins, they also serve as sites where young people can have their voices heard by queer adult culture. Such practices create an intergenerational feedback loop: queer adults investing in and mentoring young people and young filmmakers speaking their experience to adult culture. The young filmmaker Sonje Olson speaks of being brought to tears when screening her film *Diner-Mite Gal* (2015) for a room full of queer people at the OUTsider Festival: "I was filled with an indescribable feeling. By enjoying my film, not only did the audience validate my skills as a filmmaker, they validated my queer identity."[19]

Queer youth media training programs promote both a legacy and a future for queer filmmaking and encourage the proliferation of voices within mainstream filmmaking. As a hopeful sign of things to come, Olson and her film collective the Quiver took first prize (and $1,000) with their latest collaboration *The Peanut Gallery* at the 2016 iYouth Fusion Festival. If queer film festival programming represents the ongoing struggle over LGBT representation, then youth training modules represent a community's investment in the power of self-representation as a mode of political action.   ✱

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18 Eric O. Clark, "Queer Publicity at the Limits of Exclusion [Queer Publicity: A Dossier on Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals]," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5, no. 1 (1999): 91.

19 Sonje Olson, personal email exchange, December 4, 2016.

Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement

by Allison McCracken

The meme shown in Figure 1 is one of the most reblogged posts from the popular blog *Savedbythe-bellhooks*, which is largely devoted to juxtaposing stills from the popular US television teen program *Saved by the Bell* (NBC, 1989–1992) with the words of black feminist scholar bell hooks in order to create awareness of intersectionality.[1] This is how a typical Tumblr post looks, with "notes" in the bottom left-hand corner indicating the number of "likes" and "reblogs" and several "tags" to identify the creator's or reblogger's intent. Savedbythe-bellhooks was created by white millennial Liz Laribee, a childhood fan of the show, to "do the work of an ally" by educating other white users of the site, and it exemplifies this platform's convergence of popular culture, socially critical discourse, and peer education (Figure 1).[2]

For several years, the social media and microblogging platform Tumblr has been central to fannish passions and creative production among youth, especially girls, people of color, and LGBTQ-identified fans, who have found a home on the platform. Tumblr has been most widely known, however, for enabling the formation of counterpublic spaces for marginalized millennial communities and progressives ("social justice warriors"), which have long been openly supported by Tumblr founder and CEO David Karp.[3] Scholars have long argued

1 "Black women felt . . . ," meme post, *Savedbythe-bellhooks*, February 2, 2015, savedbythe -bellhooks.tumblr.com/post/109864930563. In this essay, I am referring to Tumblr as a platform with a capital "T"; specific blogs on the platform are called "tumblrs" with a small "t." Here I refer to them as blogs. The individual blogs named in this article are those that have been publicized beyond the platform or are critical or community blogs run by groups of moderators. Because many Tumblr users are vulnerable people, I have chosen not to cite or quote other individual blogs in this piece. Although Tumblr-specific ethical research standards are still being developed by scholars, I would point readers to ongoing conversations in fan studies discussions and practices for guidance in this area, such as Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson, "Identity, Ethics, and Fan Privacy," in *Fan Culture: Theory/Practice*, ed. Katherine Larsen (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 38–56. Fan art is credited and reproduced with permission.

2 See interview with Liz Laribee by Kiara Collins, "An Exclusive Interview with the Creator of 'Saved by the bell hooks,'" *Blavity*, September, 2015, http://blavity.com/blavity-feature -saved-by-the-bell-hooks-2.

3 See Valeriya Safronova, "Millennials and the Age of Tumblr Activism," *New York Times*, December 21, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/style/millennials-and-the-age-of-tumblr-acti vism.html?_r=0. Since the 2016 presidential election, Karp and Tumblr corporate have
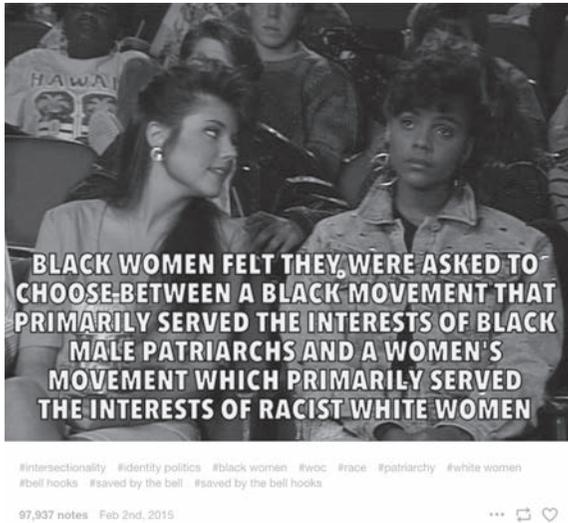
BLACK WOMEN FELT THEY WERE ASKED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN A BLACK MOVEMENT THAT PRIMARILY SERVED THE INTERESTS OF BLACK MALE PATRIARCHS AND A WOMEN'S MOVEMENT WHICH PRIMARILY SERVED THE INTERESTS OF RACIST WHITE WOMEN

#intersectionality #identity politics #black women #woc #race #patriarchy #white women
#bell hooks #saved by the bell #saved by the bell hooks

97,937 notes Feb 2nd, 2015

Figure 1. Tumblr post featuring a meme by creator Liz Laribee for her popular blog http://savedbythe-bellhooks.tumblr.com/.

for the progressive political potential of fandom's "participatory cultures," and Tumblr's design and user base facilitates this integration.[4] Young people's experience of media on Tumblr is one of acculturation; their engagement is inevitably affected, to varying degrees, by socially critical users—often self-identified as both progressives *and* fans—speaking from their own lived experience and through shared popular discourses of feminism, antiracism, queer or gender studies, and postcolonialism. For many youth, Tumblr has become an alternative, tuition-free classroom, a powerful site of youth media literacy, identity formation, and political awareness that often reproduces cultural studies methods of media analysis. Tumblr's design makes today's progressive youth subcultures "on the ground" visible to us; the platform's interface collapses the boundaries between affect and social critique, leveling cultural hierarchies of "quality" regarding media products and instead keeping the political stakes of media investments upfront. As teachers of young people, it is vital that we understand how these new youth subcultures are engaging with media in order to contextualize these current practices for them (historically, politically, culturally) in informed ways. In my discussion, I describe Tumblr's specific appeals for young people, especially marginalized or devalued groups, and demonstrate the intersection of popular culture, cultural critique, and public education for youth on the platform.

These Tumblr "Youth." In recent decades, young people have increasingly turned to the Internet and social media for personal expression, to hang out with their friends, and to engage in the broader public sphere. As danah boyd has pointed out, teen adoption of "public" social media as personal or "private" spaces is not as contradictory as it may seem. Access to the public sphere in traditional ways has decreased substantially

been more public about the platform's alignment with specific social justice issues such as racial equality and reproductive rights. "About," *Action on Tumblr*, retrieved April 5, 2017, https://action.tumblr.com/about.

4   See Henry Jenkins, Sangita Shresthova, Liana Gamber-Thompson, Neta Kliger-Vilenchik, and Arely Zimmerman, eds., *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Serena Hillman, Jason Pryck, and Carman Neustaedter, "'alksjdf;lksfd': Tumblr and the Fandom User Experience," *Proceedings of the 2014 Conference on Designing Interactive Systems* (DIS 2014), Vancouver, Canada, June 21–24, ACM Press (2014): http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?doid=2598510.2600887; Melanie E. S. Kohnen, "Tumblr Pedagogies," in *A Companion to Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. Paul Booth (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell), forthcoming.

for youth during the past two decades, while surveillance by parents and institutional authorities has greatly increased. Teens' use of social media is a reflection of their need to find new ways to achieve privacy and assert some control over their personal space.[5] Social media platforms provide teens with both personal and social spaces that are not easily policed by their parents, and they employ a variety of platforms to achieve different kinds of private spaces. While texting and Snapchat allow teens easy ways to continue to socialize with the friends they see every day, many teens use Tumblr as an individualized personal space and/or as a space to connect with a wider public beyond their immediate environment, one in which they adopt pseudonyms to interact (or not) with other online users. The authors of a recent major study of youth in the digital age, *The Class*, discuss the issue of privacy by citing Tumblr as their primary example, quoting a teen who views her blog as a "space for self not even seen by her close friends."[6]

At the same time, social media has become an alternative means of education and broader public interaction for many youth. In an era in which traditional educational institutions have faced the narrowing of their curriculum in the areas of critical thinking, the arts, sex education, and progressive politics, it is in social media's spaces of community and contestation that many young people develop their critical skills, engage in creative work, and construct a sense of themselves as desiring individuals and social actors. Tumblr, in particular, provides youth access to a cross-generational, diverse liberal public sphere for commiseration, shared pleasures, education and mentoring, political activism, identity development, and other kinds of socialization. For marginalized or at-risk youth especially (e.g., LGBTQ teens), access to an online public for information, acculturation, and support has been vital to their survival since the 1990s.[7] Tumblr's spaces can also be conflicted and challenging as well as supportive, as many young people are introduced to new ideas and interactions in an often highly charged atmosphere. Such contested environments can and often do provide extraordinary opportunities for productive discussion and learning, although they can also reproduce social inequalities or become toxic in a variety of ways. Nonetheless, for many vulnerable youth today, Tumblr's liberal and often progressive environment makes it their best option for an online "private" public space.

The fact that Tumblr users are bonded primarily by common, passionate affective and progressive interests rather than solely by age group is an essential aspect of the platform for many of its young users. Culturally and discursively, however, Tumblr users as a whole remain associated with "youth," a perception that is continually reinforced by existent demographics and media coverage. Most demographic agencies

5   danah boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 54–76; Siân Lincoln, "Young People and Mediated Private Space," in *Mediated Youth Cultures: The Internet, Belonging and the New Cultural Configurations*, ed. Andy Bennett and Brady Robards (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 42–58; S. Craig Watkins, *The Young and the Digital: What the Migration to Social-Network Sites, Games, and Anytime, Anywhere Media Means for Our Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 4.

6   Sonia Livingstone and Julian Sefton-Green. *The Class: Living and Learning in the Digital Age* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 90–95.

7   Stephen Tropiano, "'A Safe and Supportive Environment': LGBTQ Youth and Social Media," and Bryan Wuest, "Stories Like Mine: Coming Out Videos and Queer Identities on YouTube," in *Queer Youth and Media Cultures*, ed. Christopher Pullen (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 46–62 and 19–33, respectively.

report that "youth" users well exceed 50 percent of the platform total, although data reports such as those by the Pew Research Center define "youth" very broadly: teenagers (15 percent) and the millennial age group, between age eighteen and thirty-four (41 percent).[8] Like other discussions of Tumblr "youth," this categorization belies both the intra- and intergenerational mentoring that is an important aspect of the cultural functioning of the platform. The Pew report also notes that Tumblr users are equal numbers of male and female, and are demographically poorer, proportionally less white, and more urban than users of other major platforms such as Facebook and Pinterest. Again, however, the limitations of such measuring tools misrepresent the many Tumblr users who identify across clear-cut gender, racial, and geographic delineations and ignore other major distinguishing factors of this subculture. For example, young Tumblr users are especially likely to identify on spectrums of gender identity and sexuality and to explicitly eschew gender binaries and sexual norms. Many users also identify most strongly with their varied ethnicities, religions, citizenship, fandoms, and (trans)national status (only half of Tumblr users are US-based, and transcultural and transnational awareness and education are important to many). Tumblr users have also helped popularize new identifiers among youth generally, such as "neurodivergent" and "fat-positive."[9] As a result of their exposure to a variety of identity categories, political positions, and affective material across generations, many Tumblr youth have become sophisticated media consumers and producers who are critical of and resistant to existing institutional norms, social and cultural hierarchies, and narrow definitions of identity and behavior.

Why Tumblr? Although Tumblr users are no less subject to the kinds of broad corporate, state, and socioeconomic constraints that affect all social media users, Tumblr gives young people an online space of their own in ways that other platforms do not and offers greater protection regarding user identity and content. User engagement on Tumblr involves two components: the "dash" (for "dashboard") and the user's individual blog (their "tumblr.") The dash is similar to a Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram feed in which users scroll through the posts of their chosen followers and "like," comment on, or share (reblog) them. A user's reblogged post (with any likes or comments or hashtags they add) goes back into the general dash feed, but it also goes to the user's personal "tumblr"; this blog functions as a visible digital scrapbook, diary, or virtual bedroom space users create and "curate" by both reblogging and posting original material that evokes strong feelings for them.[10] Although their posts are publicly visible, Tumblr's users are pseudonymous, which makes it much harder for families, employers, friends, and other institutional authorities to police them; as a result, many youth feel a greater sense of security and privacy on Tumblr than on

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8   "Demographics of Tumblr," Pew Research Center, August 17, 2015, http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/19 /mobile-messaging-and-social-media-2015/2015-08-19_social-media-update_05/.

9   Nick Walker, "Neurodiversity: Some Basic Terms and Definitions," *Neurocosmopolitanism*, http://neurocosmopo litanism.com/neurodiversity-some-basic-terms-definitions/.

10   Alex Cho, "Queer Reverb: Tumblr, Affect, Time," in *Networked Affect*, ed. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

other platforms.[11] Users control the content of their individual blogs and they can block followers they don't want. These features make it difficult to *publicly* troll users and disrupt their Tumblrs (private messaging is the primary form of harassment). Tumblr is also a democratizing platform, with no demonstrable or algorithmic hierarchy among its users; unlike platforms such as Twitter, the number of followers each user has is private information, and the circulation of individual posts (reblogs, or reposts) is so circuitous that their origins are often obscured, in contrast to the promotion of "liked" posts on other platforms such as Reddit or Facebook.[12] As a result, young Tumblr users are not automatically marginalized or disparaged because of their age or unpopular opinions, as is common in more public spaces, and users are also able to hide gender, national, religious, and racial designations that are used to silence and harass them on other platforms.[13] Finally, individual users decide whether they want to "tag" (identify) their posts in any way, thus making it more difficult for outsiders to track, data mine, monetize, and, indeed, study them.

In addition, Tumblr's interface allows young users to have more control over design and content creation than other social media platforms and access to a larger variety of content to reblog, including sexually explicit material. Users make decisions about the general appearance of their own blog as well as its contents. In this way, Tumblr is most similar to older online spaces such as Myspace and LiveJournal, and it also fits within a longer history of the customized affective bedroom spaces (often devoted to pop idols) so central to teenage girl culture.[14] On Tumblr, users can post their own original creative work (e.g., art, GIFs, commentary, video, audio) and reblog a range of materials, including mainstream and alternative media, personal testimonies, commentary and critique, art and fashion, music, educational material, and resources. An "ask" function, if turned on, allows other users to ask questions and receive specific advice from the blog "mod" (moderator). Tumblr's lack of censorship regarding sexual content is also a key aspect of its appeal for adolescents and young adults and another important way it differs from other mainstream platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. On Tumblr, young people can create erotic material and engage in

11 I'm using the term "pseudonymous" to indicate the fact that users are employing a disguised identity on their blogs, adopting names or phrases that are not immediately identified with them. See Bryce J. Renninger, "'Where I Can Be Myself . . . Where I Can Speak My Mind': Networked Counterpublics in a Polymedia Environment," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 9 (2014): 1–17.

12 Cho, "Queer Reverb," 46. Some Tumblr communities do, however, promote the posts of certain members, creating their own "star" members.

13 It is important to note that although more socially vulnerable youth, such as people of color, Muslims, and some immigrant groups, often prefer Tumblr to other social media, Tumblr still limits their ability to interact in the platform's public sphere in various ways; for example, any public self-identification on their part can provoke harassment, but not identifying themselves can also be silencing and limit community. See Rukmini Pande, "Squee from the Margins: Investigating the Operations of Racial/Cultural/Ethnic Identity in Media Fandom" (PhD diss., University of Western Australia, 2017), 222–229.

14 Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, "Girls and Subcultures," in *Feminism and Youth from Jackie to Just Seventeen*, ed. Angela McRobbie (London: Macmillan, 1991), 12–25; Lincoln, "Young People"; Louisa Stein, "Tumblr Fan Aesthetics," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, eds. Suzanne Scott and Melissa Click (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

discussions of sex and sexuality that have become formative for many.[15] As a result, Tumblr has become a center for a variety of pornographic material (visual, aural, written, alterative), as well as for the kinds of nonnormative sexual or queer expression, identity formation, education, and support that are otherwise publicly unavailable for youth and/or can put them at risk. Tumblr is the platform of choice, for example, for queer and nonbinary youth, which has resulted not only in a tremendous amount of LGBTQ community support but also in the opportunity for these youth to create very specific sexual or gender identities for themselves beyond and between these categories.[16] The impact of these young people's intervention in contemporary gender and sexual politics is being increasingly acknowledged by the mainstream media and the professional organizations that serve them; according to Planned Parenthood's social media community manager Chelsea Perugini, feedback from Tumblr youth in part prompted the organization's adoption of gender-neutral language.[17]

Because Tumblr is a visual medium fueled by affective investments, most Tumblr users employ a variety of popular culture forms and vernaculars to express themselves and their developing politics and identities. Some such blogs are run by groups of moderators devoted to specific intersections of popular culture and politics (and/or social marginalization) about which they offer advice and counsel; examples include *Racialicious* (race and pop culture), *Fandomhateswomen* (misogyny and racism in media generally and within fandom), and *Aroacehogwarts* (community support for asexual and aromantic *Harry Potter* fans). Most blogs are authored by individuals rather than groups, however, and such points of intersection vary by degrees. For example, one such user might identify as "nineteen, bisexual, multifandom," so tying the self to a single point of nonnormative identity, while another nineteen-year-old user might identify along multiple points of difference: "mixed race, non-binary, queer, neurodivergent, Slytherin, cosplayer." Such declarations of identity are quite typical among Tumblr youth, a fact that is made visible in the offline social spaces in which they converge, such as fan conventions that serve feminist and queer youth (some of which, like LeakyCon and GeekyCon, are sponsored in part by Tumblr). Attendees at these conventions publicly multiply identify through a string of badges or armbands, and they provide other evidence of ways that Tumblr's particular "consciousness-raising" context is affecting young people, especially those entering fandom for the first time. At the 2014 LeakyCon, for example, one gay teenager noted, "I joined Tumblr because of [*Glee*] and it was a whole new world. I learned a lot of things, not just about gayness, but feminism and equal rights and all that stuff I didn't know. Without *Glee*

15 See Cho, "Queer Reverb"; Renninger, "Where I Can Be Myself"; Marty Fink and Quinn Miller, "Trans Media Moments: Tumblr, 2011–2013," *Television and New Media* 15, no. 7 (2013): 611–626; Stephanie Selvick, "Androgynous Social Media and Visual Culture," in *Queer Youth and Media Cultures*, ed. Christopher Pullen (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 170–181.

16 For coverage of young people's sexual or gender identity creation on Tumblr in the popular press, see Tim Murphy, "Identity-Free Identity Politics," *New York Times*, October 27, 2015.

17 See ibid. Perugini is quoted in A. J. O'Connell, "Inside Planned Parenthood's Push for Gender-Neutral Language," *The Establishment*, June 15, 2016, https://theestablishment.co/inside-planned-parenthoods-push-for-gender -neutral-language-c275b9c07259#.jruq1gelf.

and without Tumblr, I don't know I would be as comfortable with who I am."[18] As I have written elsewhere, the structure of these fan-designed youth conventions also replicates the convergence of fandom, social critique, and alternative education found on Tumblr.[19] They combine panels focused on feminist, queer, and antiracist media analyses with those focused on disability and mental health issues, LGBTQ identities, sexism in media industries, rape culture and sexual education, and human rights work opportunities.

Representation Matters. Given the centrality of identity formation for Tumblr youth and their marginalized and/or radicalized social positioning, it is not surprising that media representation is a chief concern and the subject of much of their sophisticated criticism, creative production, and pleasure. In their media critiques, Tumblr users foreground a "personal is political" framework, eschewing hierarchies of "quality" and prioritizing the affective, social, and cultural aspects of media products. They frequently celebrate texts that are designated as low or marginal culture but serve their interests: pulp and genre fictions (e.g., fantasy, horror, musical, romance), web and animated series, podcasts, and non-American productions. Their priorities are very much in the tradition of media activists and scholar-fans from nondominant social groups; feminists, LGBTQ persons, the working classes, and people of color have long recognized the political import of media representation. As scholar Rebecca Wanzo has observed, for example, "in the case of African Americans, love and hate of cultural productions are often treated as political acts."[20] Scholar-fans such as Alexander Doty, Susan Douglas, and Kristen Warner have situated many of their media analyses within their own lived experiences of social inequality, and they have evaluated texts according to their representation of and reception by marginalized or devalued communities.[21] As a result, scholarship like theirs has been central to initiating and perpetuating the erosion of institutional hierarchies around the legitimation and inclusion of mass and low cultural forms as valuable objects of study and as primary sources. In terms of the latter, media reception scholars currently contextualize their work by drawing on a wide range of materials, including gossip columns, tabloids, sitcoms, pop music, teen magazines, and online chats, tweets, and GIFs. Such analyses

18 Participant testimony, LeakyCon fan convention, Orlando, FL, July 31, 2014.

19 Allison McCracken (with Louisa Stein), "LeakyCon Portland: Where the Fangirls Are," *Antenna: Responses to Media and Culture*, 2013, http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu/2013/07/29/leakycon-portland-where-the-fan girls-are/; "From LGBT to GSM: Gender and Sexual Identity Among LeakyCon's Queer Youth," *Antenna: Responses to Media and Culture*, 2013, http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu/2013/08/06/from-lgbt-to-gsm-gender-and -sexual-identity-among-leakycons-queer-youth-leakycon-portland/; "DashCon Discourses: Through a Feminist Lens," *Antenna: Responses to Media and Culture*, 2014, http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu/2014/07/16/dashcon -discourses-through-a-feminist-lens/; "Redefining 'Public' Education: Reflections from GeekGirlCon," *Antenna: Responses to Media and Culture*, 2014, http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu/2014/10/23/redefining-public-education -reflections-from-geekgirlcon-seattle-october-11-12/.

20 Rebecca Wanzo, "African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 20 (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0699.

21 Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with Mass Media* (New York: Random House, 1994); Kristen Warner, *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

have also become a central aspect of cultural studies scholarship and pedagogy more generally across the humanities.

Tumblr users offer similar kinds of in-depth analysis of representational politics and draw from a similar mix of materials. In many ways, the platform gives users considerable advantages over scholars in doing reception work. Because Tumblr is a free, public forum, its subcultures bring a broader range of voices and lived experiences to discussions of representation and its cultural meaning than many college classrooms can provide. Tumblr's design also permits an array of diverse materials to be gathered together, both on a user's dash and in a more curated form on a user's own blog, reflecting that user's specific point of view. The platform's media-savvy users bring their own skills and interests to their evaluation: creative visual and audio production, fluency in visual culture and remix practices, detailed textual analysis and critical commentary, educational and historical perspectives, personal testimonies, and related resources. Finally, Tumblr also offers its users an immediacy of reception that is invaluable in assessing the social impact of events as they unfold. For example, actor Carrie Fisher's death on December 27, 2016, generated the equivalent of a cross-generational media studies or star studies seminar on Tumblr. Fisher was the number-one star discussed on Tumblr for two weeks after she died, according to Tumblr's own in-house (public) data reports, Fandometrics.[22] She was celebrated not only as a feminist icon for her appearances in the *Star Wars* franchise but also for the way she used her celebrity to critique sexism and fat-phobia, to share her own history of mental illness and addiction, and to advocate for the mentally ill. As is typical, Tumblr users responded to this event by sharing resources regarding mental wellness, body positivity, and women's health, including a widely reposted guide to recognizing signs of women's cardiac arrest (Fisher had a heart attack in flight). On Tumblr, Fisher's death simultaneously became an affective, educational, and activist cultural moment. The most popular GIFs combined Fisher's social critiques with her trademark humor, such as the following interview excerpt from 2016 (Figure 2), which had garnered 232,517 notes by the end of the day that Fisher died.[23]

"Meaningful Diversity." Tumblr users' prioritization of minority representation was evident in the disconnect between mainstream critical evaluation of the film *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (Disney, 2014) and their reaction to it. While critics' generally positive reviews focused either on the film's formal qualities or how well it fit within the *Star Wars* franchise, Tumblr users widely celebrated it because a substantial number of the film's leading roles went to people of color, who played the radical rebels who were willing to risk (and lose) their lives to save the world from imperialism. Many Tumblr users are very critical of the way minority groups, especially people of color, are largely voiceless and often function as window dressing in media texts. For example, voice actor (*Welcome to Nightvale*, 2012–) and Venezuelan American Dylan Marron's well-publicized blog

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22 See "Celebrities, Weeks Ending January 3 and January 9, 2017," Tumblr Fandometrics, retrieved April 5, 2017, https://thefandometrics.tumblr.com/search/celebrities.

23 GIF set of Carrie Fisher being interviewed by Stephen Colbert, with 268,168 notes, Tumblr, accessed April 12, 2017, at Tumblr.com.

Everysinglewordspoken highlights the marginalization of people of color in popular films by providing video cuts of the dialogue spoken only by people of color (usually reducing a two-hour film to a few minutes or seconds).[24] Likewise, Eritrean American writer Rahawa Haile's *Gilmoreblacks* blog streams screen shots of largely decorative black characters in the predominantly white show, all with the same notation: "role: endure."[25]

In noting these inequities, Tumblr users frequently call for the equivalent of what media scholar Mary Beltrán has termed "meaningful diversity," in which characters of color are given backstories, developed personalities, community, key roles moving the story forward, and knowledge of themselves as social minorities facing structural oppression.[26] *Rogue One* fulfilled these requirements for Tumblr users. Fans focused, for example, on the close relationship between two Asian-marked characters (played by Chinese actors Donnie Yen and Wen Jiang), which was widely read as gay and celebrated as one of the few such relationships between men of color in a

Figure 2. GIF set of Carrie Fisher being interviewed by Stephen Colbert on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (CBS, November 21, 2016).

24 Dylan Marron, "Every Single Word Spoken by a Person of Color in [Mainstream Film Title]," accessed April 5, 2017, https://everysinglewordspoken.tumblr.com.

25 Rahawa Haile, "Gilmore Blacks," accessed April 5, 2017, https://gilmoreblacks.tumblr.com.

26 Mary Beltrán, "Meaningful Diversity: Exploring Questions of Equitable Representation on Diverse Ensemble Cast Shows," *Flow: A Critical Forum on Television and Media Culture* 12, no. 7 (2010), https://www.flowjournal.org/2010/08/meaningful-diversity/.

popular film. Likewise, Tumblr users lauded the central role of the defecting pilot, Bodhi Rook (played by British Pakistani actor and hip-hop artist Riz Ahmed), in part because his defection ultimately resulted in the destruction of the Death Star in the franchise time line. The combined affective and political power of Bodhi's centrality to the series mythology was marked by many widely reposted GIFs of the character featuring his lines "I brought the message" and "I'm the pilot." Finally, the political weight that personal testimonials can carry on Tumblr was most poignantly exemplified by twenty-seven-year-old student "riveralwaysknew," who recounted the delighted reaction of her Mexican father to the fact that Mexican actor Diego Luna was both the colead (with white female actor Felicity Jones) of a popular film and had retained his Mexican accent. Her post went viral when it was forwarded to Luna by a Tumblr user and he retweeted it, resulting in a barrage of mainstream coverage, support, and commiseration.[27]

When media texts do not directly offer developed minority representation, Tumblr users create it. They develop queer readings of texts in character art, GIF sets, or through fan fiction; thus, Captain America Steve Rogers of the *Marvel* universe is considered bisexual because that's how Tumblr users largely read and portray him. Users also frequently reconceptualize well-known white characters as people of color by "race bending," and "fan casting," in which famous roles played by white actors are recast with famous actors of color. For example, the *Harry Potter* character of Hermione is commonly portrayed as black across Tumblr (her race is not specified in the books, although she is played by a white actress in the films).[28] More recently, the character Rey from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, portrayed by a white actor in the film, has been reimagined as a brown or black girl, as in this fan-art creation by Amber L. Jones (Figure 3).

Tumblr fans also frequently post photos of themselves engaging in cosplay that queers otherwise straight characters or, if the cosplayers are people of color, depicts canonically white characters as nonwhite.[29] They encourage one another to diversify representation in their fiction and fan-fiction writing, and many blogs offer advice and resources about how to responsibly write characters of different races, ethnicities, religions, sexualities, genders, and nationalities, as well as those who are disabled or neurodivergent.

Representational concerns on Tumblr are not without intense conflicts, which are instructive because they reveal the fault lines in this convergence of affective investment and progressive politics. Tumblr reveals how media reception is always in process, shifting in relation to a user's identity, age, education, and many other factors.

27 See Matthew Rodriguez, "One Powerful Family Story Reveals Why Representation Matters," *Mic.com*, January 23, 2017, https://mic.com/articles/164162/one-powerful-family-story-reveals-why-representation-matters-even-in-star-wars#.Ilw1MIIM1. Original post: "I took my father . . . ," riveralways knew (aka "perls"), accessed January 2, 2017, http://riveralwaysknew.tumblr.com/post/155327892192/i-took-my-father-to-see-rogue-one-today-ive.

28 For discussion of Steve Rogers as bisexual and race bending, see Kohnen, "Tumblr Pedagogies." For discussion of black Hermione and fan casting, see Elizabeth Gilliland, "Racebending Fandoms and Digital Futurism," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 22 (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2016.0702.

29 Probably the best-known such site is the crowd-sourced tumblr *Cosplayingwhileblack*, which is devoted entirely to celebrating cosplay by and within the black community: http://cosplayingwhileblack.tumblr.com, accessed April 5, 2017.

But there are continuing, more so-cially fixed factors of identity and inequality, such as race, legal sta-tus, nationality, religion, and abil-ity, which often separate users who can shift out of progressive politi-cized media reception from those who cannot. On Tumblr, this divide is often most keenly felt and ex-pressed around race. For example, although users as a whole strongly support racially diverse representa-tions, the intersectional feminism of *Savedbythe-bellhooks* remains challeng-ing for many white fans when their affective investments and antiracist politics are at odds (a central source of tension within fandoms generally, beyond Tumblr).[30] This is a com-mon critique fans of color make to and about white fans, and their ex-pressions of frustration point to the larger political stakes of such divi-

Figure 3. "Racebent Rey" fan art in which the character Rey from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* is reimagined as a person of color (Amber L. Jones, thatdaggerstar.tumblr.com, 2016). Reproduced with permission.

sions and frequently solicit feelings of solidarity with other fans of color, who respond with their own examples.

Through such interactions, Tumblr offers young users an essential, largely protected "private" public space in which to express social critique and to learn from it, but it also extends that critique beyond the individual, where it can continue to live and resonate with others through reblogging. Because Tumblr foregrounds the relationship of affect, identity, and social justice in this way, its young users are more likely to be aware of and/or engaged in subcultural critical practices than they are in many other spaces, either on or offline. Tumblr users' emphasis on the political significance of representation, their shared and singular lived experiences of media, their leveling of cultural hierarchies, and their deinstitutionalized educational practices have greatly influenced my own understanding of media reception today and my approach to teaching media to young people. In today's current climate, such attention to youth media cultures seems especially vital. They are the pilots. They're bringing the message. ✱

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30 Neta Kliger-Vilenchik, *By Any Media Necessary*, 143–144. On the persistent racism in fan works, see Rukmini Pande, "'Yes, the Evil Queen Is Latina!': Racial Dynamics of Online Femslash Fandoms," in "Queer Female Fan-dom," ed. Julie Levin Russo and Eve Ng, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 24. http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2017.908.

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