

# Radical Potential: The Case for Including Queer Fandom in Museums

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates how museums in the United States could be stewards of queer fanart and queer fandom histories. It involved semi-structured interviews that used a phenomenological approach guided by research questions focused on trust between queer fans and museums and the educational potential of the inclusion of fanworks in museums. There were seven interviews and all participants were queer, involved in fandom, and interested in museums. Each conversation addressed five to eight questions from the research instrument sent to interviewees ahead of time. Results indicate that, although queer fans view museums with a critical eye and have many concerns about museums' potential acquisition and display of fan-created materials and accounts of fandom history, they have many of the same priorities as museum professionals—pronounced among them being resistance to the rise of fascism—and are favorable to the idea of museums helping preserve fanart and fan history in some capacity.

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## **Introduction**

### **What is queer fandom?**

Fandom, a term functioning alternatively as a collective noun referring to all the fans of a particular subject (e.g. television show, movie series, musical artist, etc.) and an abstract noun meaning the act of being a fan of something, is increasingly relevant to contemporary discussions of literature and popular culture (Gray, 2010). It is especially relevant to institutions like museums that combine academic rigor with public accessibility of information. Despite this fact, there is very little crossover between the fields of fan studies and museum studies. This lack of connective tissue is particularly relevant to discussions of queer (defined in this study as identifying with nonnormative genders and/or sexualities) fans and their practice of fandom. This practice tends to be transformative in nature as opposed to affirmational; in the context of fandom studies, the affirmational fan accepts media in its original form, while the transformational fan reimagines it according to their own desires (Hellekson & Busse, 2014). Fanfiction, fanart, and fanworks (an umbrella term that refers to any artistic creation made by a fan about the object of their fandom) are examples of transformative fandom, which is the type of fannish engagement on which this study focuses. To further specify, the focus of this study is queer fandom, defined here as transformational fannish activities engaged in by queer fans.

### **How does this relate to museums?**

Art and pop culture museums in the United States have the opportunity both to strengthen their educational, curatorial, and preservation work and to meet the needs of a historically maligned community that exists in a long line of ignored and disparaged communities by providing it with cultural legitimacy and material resources. While this may be true in the case of all types of fandom, it is particularly relevant to queer fans living in the United States, who are

especially in need of the cultural legitimacy and tangible support that U. S. museums can offer and who are uniquely well-situated to reimagine gender, sexuality, community, and narrative through their practice of fandom.

The reimagining that queer fandom can accomplish is especially useful to museums in the realm of exhibits. It has become increasingly apparent that museums need to shift away from traditional curatorial practices that present the museum as the academic and unimpeachable voice of authority on whatever an exhibit's subject may be. Respect for and relationships with communities have emerged as essential priorities. While many institutions have embraced these goals, there is much work yet to be done. Queer fans are ideal allies in this work because they exist in a long lineage of practitioners of collective critical discourse about texts. The type of discussion these fans and their predecessors have engaged in prioritizes the desires of disempowered subjects over the often repressive normative values that museums have, in many instances, been complicit in perpetuating.

Despite their colonial origins and history of complicity with hegemonic norms, U. S. museums have been transitioning to more collaborative models of operation since the 1980s (Morse, 2020). At its most basic level, this was a shift in American museum priorities from preservation to public service (Merriman, 2020; Weil, 1999). A museum's responsibility to its collections, once its primary reason to exist, is now part of a larger and more all-encompassing duty to the people it serves (Lonetree, 2012; Watson, 2007). This change in institutional ethos has also involved an acknowledgement of museums as political agents and a prioritization of historically neglected perspectives (Merriman, 2020; Morse, 2020). Many institutions have worked with (and continue to work with) minoritized communities in the realms of curation, preservation, and repatriation (Lonetree, 2012). The portrayal of neutrality and resistance to

decolonization that were once the norm of the museum field now reside only in a corner of it where the British Museum screams into an increasingly empty void as it defends the idea of the so-called universal museum (O'Neill, 2017). The idea of an institution that can justify its ownership of stolen artifacts by claiming to exist outside national boundaries in its cultural and intellectual value despite being located within the boundaries of a state that has been the seat of empire holds less and less sway as time goes on (Dine, 2021; Merriman, 2020).

As old ideas of objectivity fade, those at the forefront of improving museums as agents of social justice and care identify both obstacles to meaningful change and methods of navigating those obstacles (Hutchison, 2013; Morse, 2020). What has emerged is the importance of ongoing and non-hierarchical relationships between museums and communities that continually examine what raced, classed, and gendered power structures are operating within those relationships (Hutchison, 2013; Morse, 2020). It is vital that museum professionals acknowledge the validity and authority of knowledge sources outside the museum and academic field in a way that honors the centrality of care and emotion to museum work (Hutchison, 2013; Morse, 2020). As this paper will argue, the social and creative organization of queer fandom has the potential to function as a curatorial and archival methodology for those working with collections and exhibits. To explain that potential, it is necessary to look at the literature on the history of queer fandom and its relationship to museums. This study speaks specifically to a U. S. context in terms of both its participants and its recommendations while drawing on literature that exceeds that context to ground the work in the history of American fans and museums as well as the wider global context that both fandom and museums exist within.

## **Literature Review**

When one sets out to construct a timeline of the queer fan in relationship to museums, it is necessary to engage with the history of women's interaction with literature. More specifically, today's queer fans can trace their lineage back to women's periodicals in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as participants in largely anonymous discussions about texts that prioritize the desires of readers of disempowered genders (Hayles Gledhill, 2018). These periodicals emerged concurrently with European museums and offered women a space of discourse and knowledge production that was accessible to them in contrast to masculine social spaces like coffeehouses where literature circulated and women did not (Hayles Gledhill, 2018). From women in the 1700s reimagining the story of Joan of Arc to 19<sup>th</sup> century readers rewriting Jane Austen to female Star Trek fans of the 1960s using romantic and sexual narratives about Kirk and Spock to imagine an equal relationship between partners that was not available to them as heterosexual women, the lineage that led to today's fans is long, varied, and non-linear (Batchelor & Powell, 2018; Hellekson & Busse, 2014). Some have argued that the fan fiction history dates back to the premodern era; as Anna Wilson notes in "Fan Fiction and Premodern Literature: Methods and Definitions" (2021), "it is a cliché of primers on fan fiction to trace it back to authors like Milton, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Virgil, and Dante" whose works are derivative of pre-existing texts. This comparison is well worth making as it pertains to the differences in the level of cultural legitimacy afforded to fan fiction versus the western literary canon. The topic of legitimacy is quite relevant, as this thesis will discuss. However, the premodern context in which those canonical works arose was quite disparate from the contemporary fandom landscape in which queer fans currently exist. Much more analogous were the conditions surrounding Charlotte Lennox's publication of *Lady's Museum* in 1760, within a year after the British museum first opened (Carlile, 2018). The periodical circulated among British women who had either the

means to pay for a subscription or access to a recently established circulating library. It featured essays, poetry, letters, and other forms of literature and criticism written by Lennox and other, often anonymous women. This and other magazines of its kind functioned as venues for women's intellectual and popular discourse at a time when they were barred from many forms of participation in mainstream academia (and by extension museums). A significant part of these women's discourse concerned Gothic and Romantic fiction, which they read, wrote, and reviewed anonymously in parallel to 21<sup>st</sup> century fans' engagement with fanfiction (Hayles Gledhill, 2018). This anonymous engagement prioritized female pleasure, disrupting the "traditional and gendered value systems that dominated publishing" and presented women's reading as a pastime that should improve their moral character according to those traditional values rather than offer them any enjoyment, which itself was often characterized as immoral (Hayles Gledhill, 2018). Likewise, the disruption of normative values and perspectives via the creation and discussion of fiction is central to the contemporary queer fan's experience.

Unfortunately, another similarity between 18<sup>th</sup> century women's periodicals and 21<sup>st</sup> century fandom spaces is the lack of cultural legitimacy and material agency. These spaces of alternative knowledge production have not had the means to accrue cultural and financial capital the way museums have. Virginia Woolf vividly illustrates the legitimacy and agency available to museums in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) as she writes: "if truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where, I asked myself, picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth?" This assumption that museums are the paramount source of reputable information has endured (American Alliance of Museums, 2021); as has the existence of a group defined in terms of gender that produces and discusses literature that challenges normative values. The continuity between women writing fiction between the 1700s and 1900s and queer fans who produce

fanworks today is apparent when one examines Woolf's words next to the words of Henry Jenkins, one of the most prominent scholars in the field of fan studies. Woolf writes that "even a woman with a great turn for writing has brought herself to believe that to write a book was to be ridiculous, even to show oneself distracted" (Woolf, 1929). More than half a century later Jenkins observes that "fans of popular culture are often dismissed...and media fans in particular are frequently represented as displaying unhealthy, obsessive, even pathologic behavior" (Jenkins, 1992). The specter of the hysterical Victorian woman looms large over the whole lineage of queer fans; knowledge that is produced outside the societally sanctioned academic sphere has been routinely denigrated as lacking in mental acuity. Whether characterized as distracted or pathologic, art that does not abide by established hierarchies of sexuality and gender both in terms of its authors and its subject matter has been exiled from reputable establishments like museums, which habitually spotlight only the labor of highly socially visible and privileged individuals (Gray, 2010). This ostracization of the fan keeps systems of oppression intact, confining knowledge production to oppressive sociocultural hierarchies (Bunting-Branch, 2022).

In addition to being well-situated to democratize knowledge production, museums as educational institutions have much to gain from the epistemological approaches of fans engaged in transformational fandom. These approaches have the benefit of coming both from popular culture and from a place of love and intense engagement and as such may offer practical and theoretical frameworks for programming that is more interesting to younger demographics than traditional epistemological methodologies used in educational settings (Hellekson & Busse, 2014). Another significant benefit afforded to museums by understanding and incorporating fan perspectives, culture, and knowledge into practice is the relative lack of hierarchy that exists in fandom spaces. This lateral organization is the result of their structuring around a shared interest

rather than the identities of those who occupy fandom spaces (Allen, 2024). As informal education institutions, museums are the ideal entities for bringing the benefits of fannish epistemologies and practices to wider publics. Additionally, fans and museums are natural allies as parallel practitioners of archival, curatorial, and collecting-based work (De Kosnik, 2016; Cai, 2024; Hoebink et al., 2014; Keidl 2021). These two synergies combined suggest that Sophia Cai's concept of fandom as curatorial methodology can be expanded as a methodological intervention in museum practice in general. An impetus of profound care and critical love drives both curator and fan and only oppressive societal structures have prevented their alliance.

### **Study Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to illuminate the perspectives of queer museum visitors who participate and/or have participated in fandom regarding the possibility of museums including fanworks and fandom history in their exhibits and collections. The study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How much do queer fans trust museums as potential carriers of their communities' history?
2. How could the stewardship of fan archives build public trust with queer communities?
3. How could the incorporation of fan-created materials into exhibits increase a museum's educational potential?

## **Methods**

### **Study Design**

This study employs a phenomenological approach (rather than a case study or descriptive survey design) in semi-structured interviews to prioritize the lived and embodied experiences of queer fans. It is an apt design because of its focus on the subjective, particularly the

intersubjectivity that exists within communities. The type of intersubjectivity that exists in mainstream society serves to render queer fans and fan communities invisible and/or inconsequential. At the same time, intersubjectivity exists within queer fan communities, but it functions in a fundamentally different way because fan communities explicitly form laterally around texts and often values, many of which counter dominant paradigms. This contrasts with the implicit nature of social contracts and the ubiquitous presence of hierarchy in society at large. Given the complexity of all these dynamics, semi-structured interviews best served to gather qualitative data about how queer fans interact with museums.

### **Sampling & Participants**

For better and worse, the sampling of this study reflects both the personal nature of fandom and the relational character of the museum field in its reliance on the researcher's preexisting interests and connections. This led to most participants being individuals recruited via Discord, a social media application that allows the creation of invitation-only servers that users can separate into channels according to the topic meant to be discussed. The server that yielded five out of seven participants through preexisting social and academic connections is dedicated to a podcast about the television show *Supernatural* that is hosted by one fan who watched the entirety of the show as it aired from 2005-2020, one fan who is a prolific fanfiction author, and one person who was new to the series when the podcast began. A message briefly outlining what participation in the study would entail was posted in the academia channel of the server and those who were interested and qualified (queer and participants in fandom) responded to it. Potential participants then received more in-depth information about the study via Discord's direct messaging feature, which was then used to facilitate interview scheduling. One of the participants recruited from the server used the same messaging feature to facilitate an

introduction with a fandom friend who had expressed interest in the project and this friend became the sixth participant.

The only subject not recruited via Discord was a fandom content creator who was cold called via email. This participant was one of many creators contacted as the result of the relevance of their content to the study combined with their public discussion of their own queer identity. One of three recipients to respond to the initial email, this person was the only one with the interest and availability to participate. Scheduling for this interview took place over email and the interview took place over a video call that was recorded and transcribed.

### **Limitations**

Because five out of seven participants were gathered from the same Discord server and a sixth was contacted via one of the initial five, there are ways in which this study is limited to the perspective of one community. However, while all subjects recruited from the server are members of the *Supernatural* fandom, it is not their only fandom. Each person brought a different history of fandom experience to the conversation both in terms of the fandoms in which they had participated and in terms of how they went about that participation. This was partially due to a diversity of age, with participants ranging from being in their 20s to being in their 50s and consequently having a variety of perspectives on everything from online social interactions to the concept of canon. In addition to this variety, people had a wide range of physical and mental ability, giving each participant a unique perspective from which to approach issues of accessibility as they apply to both fandom and museum contexts. Where this study is more concretely limited is in terms of gender and race. The main queer fan perspective being represented is that of cisgender white women, who have historically been the most visible demographic in representations of transformational fandom (Duggan, 2020). This unfortunate

replication of the limitations of fan studies as a field speaks to a variety of factors at play, including the classed, raced, and gendered barriers affecting access to fandom and academia. Any future expansion on this research should take such barriers into account and involve contacting a much larger number of potential participants with much more reliance on connections and practices from the museum field in addition to personal relationships that researchers already have. Shared authority models of co-curation and non-extractive community engagement should characterize the entire process of potential future studies (Hutchison, 2013; Morse, 2020). For this study as it currently exists, the prevalence of white womanhood likely contributes to some homogeneity among responses and a higher baseline of trust for museums (American Alliance of Museums, 2021). The demographic homogeneity of participants also means that the study fails to expand upon the limited portrayal of those fans in academia by failing to represent the perspectives of fans who fall outside the racial and gender boundaries that define the most visible portrait of the transformational fan.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

In homage to artistic creativity's large role in fan culture, the research instrument included a request for the participant to create an art piece if they desired. This piece was intended to express how the queer fans interviewed felt about how museums do and/or do not show care towards queer fans. This request was part of the instrument both because of the significant role of artwork in fandom spaces and because fans, especially queer fans, are often more comfortable sharing their work than sharing their personal experiences. The idea was that the artwork would act almost as a buffer between interviewer and interviewee and create conversational ease on both sides by making the interview more like a typical fandom interaction. Only one participant (notably the only person interviewed while in the same physical

location) created an artwork and it did not feature much in the interview, but it did create a positive emotional rapport.

In addition to the request for participants to create an artwork, the research instrument consisted of eight open-ended questions (see Appendix B) and a request for participants to answer at least five of them. Interviews ranged from 20 to 90 minutes in duration and primarily took place over recorded and transcribed video calls. The one interview that did not take place via video call was conducted in-person at a local (to both the participant and the researcher) coffee shop and was recorded via handwritten notes.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

All data was qualitative and therefore analyzed with thematic content analysis and in vivo coding once responses had been roughly separated by interview question. Due to the loose structure and informal tone of the conversations, responses to questions did not always appear linearly after the questions themselves were verbalized by the researcher and a considerable amount of data had to be reorganized due to this and the interrelated nature of many of the interview questions. The reorganization involved the creation of a separate category for personal narratives shared by participants that related to the study purpose but not necessarily to a specific interview question. This allowed for more concise pieces of transcripts and pages of notes to be listed and analyzed as answers to questions.

### **Results**

#### **Q1: How much do queer fans trust museums as potential carriers of their communities' history?**

As one participant observed, the world of museums is not a monolith, especially when viewed from the outside. While those working in the museum field might be aware of values,

trends, and ideas that circulate across institutions, these elements are typically invisible to museumgoers, who made up 100 percent of those interviewed for this study. Participants were, by default, assessing museums through analysis of public facing material like exhibits and programming. This point of view might make differences between institutions seem more pronounced than they are; or, conversely, novelty museums run by individuals might appear to lay folks more like traditional museums than they do to museum professionals. Nevertheless, it is true that there are variances in size, purpose, topic, and institutional positionality across the field. Participants pointed out these differences and described how their level of trust varied accordingly, generally treating trustworthiness as a metric for the degree to which institutions can be relied upon to act ethically and display accurate information to the public. While this approach to the question of whether they found museums trustworthy was consistent across participants, the specific types of institutions (and often specific individual museums) they mentioned and how they used them to describe the complexity of their level of trust in a museum had a bit of variance. One participant described larger museums as less trustworthy than smaller ones because bigger institutions are more likely to have items of questionable provenance in their collections. Meanwhile, another participant highlighted small museums as being less trustworthy, citing a sense that interpretive information did not come from a reputable source in such institutions. However, the participant attributed this to a lack of resources rather than ill intent and highlighted tribal museums as the more trustworthy counterpoint rather than larger institutions. The same participant also highlighted the National Park Service as an outlier as a trustworthy governmental institution when it comes to presenting well-researched and factual information about the nature and provenance of items on exhibit. Yet another interviewee put the same emphasis on accurate interpretation based on rigorous research but focused on large

museums like the Smithsonian and the Metropolitan Museum of Art as trustworthy as opposed to novelty museums like The Toilet Seat Art Museum in Texas, which are not held to the same standard as institutions widely perceived as serious and academic. Another participant made a similar distinction, pointing to the Smithsonian as trustworthy and aligning museums that function as roadside attractions with unverified information found on the internet in their lack of credibility.

Still focusing on credibility but approaching trust-related questions from a slightly different perspective, the other two participants contextualized their trust in museums with their political stances, one referring to having been conditioned to trust museums as academic institutions dedicated to truth but being in the process of deconstructing that implicit trust and the other referring to a blanket distrust of institutions as part of a socialist leftist perspective. On a similar note, the same participant who pointed to larger institutions as less deserving of trust referred to having become more politically progressive in the past ten to fifteen years and posited this as the reason for her critical eye towards what historical narratives museums choose to tell and how. Also focusing on the historical accuracy of exhibit text, one of the participants who saw larger institutions as more trustworthy spoke about the importance of updating interpretive information to ensure accuracy, both keeping up with new scientific discoveries and reevaluating perspectives on history that were once accepted but now obviously have a skewed bias. The two participants who foregrounded their political perspectives made similar points, one stressing a public reckoning with the colonial pasts of museums as critical to trustworthiness and the other focusing on intersectionality in curation.

When discussing museums as possible repositories of fandom history, interviewees were very favorable toward the idea of that history being accessible but had significant concerns about

queer fans' identities being exposed without their consent in addition to concerns about fandom history being told accurately and with considerable care. Many participants also mentioned that there are already online archives of fandom history like Archive of Our Own (a website that primarily hosts fanfiction) and Fanlore (a website that stores fandom history), both run by the Organization for Transformative Works, a nonprofit organization established in 2007 by and for fans with the goal of giving fans control over their fanworks and preserving those works in addition to fandom history. However, some participants brought up the fallibility of online storage that has already resulted in the loss of much fandom history and one person referenced the issue of fanworks being used to train artificial intelligence when they are available on sites like Archive of Our Own. These acknowledgements did not necessarily translate directly to greater willingness to entrust museums with fandom history; they operated only as additional factors to be considered. One of the participants who mentioned the drawbacks of independent internet archives nevertheless expressed an appreciation for this mode of preservation that stemmed from dissatisfaction with how irresponsibly fandom topics are often covered when they appear in mainstream discourse. This person mentioned the 2020 New York Times article by Alexandra Alter titled "In a Fanfic Feud, Deep (and Kinky) Questions Emerge: What constitutes copyright in the crowdsourced, and lucrative, realm of erotica known as the Omegaverse?" as an example of the harm that popular media outlets and the like have done when describing fandom to a broader audience. The title alone sensationalizes fanfiction and those who write it and the article itself is no better. In its coverage of a legal dispute between two published authors who wrote fanfiction before they wrote original works, it characterizes fan fiction primarily as erotica that is increasingly produced for profit. While there is a discussion to be had about the rise in commercially published stories that began as fanfiction, it is disingenuous and harmful to fans to

describe “tactics at play throughout the fanfic industry” and “the often pornographic world of fan fiction” (Alter, 2020). Referring to fandom or fanfiction as an industry at all, let alone one that requires competitive tactics, is a fundamental misunderstanding of what fandom has been and continues to be for most fans. The hundreds of novels for sale on Amazon that Alter mentions are a drop in the bucket compared to the over 17 million stories on Archive of Our Own, even if one supposes that there are a thousand novels for every fanfiction trope. Moreover, less than half of those stories contain sexual content as indicated by their ratings, with Teen and General pieces of fanfiction combined making up a larger percentage than unrated, Mature, and Explicit narratives added together. Alter projects the centrality of profit and erotica in the legal dispute onto the entire realm of fanfiction, focusing on the most titillating aspects of disempowered communities rather than portraying them with accuracy or empathy. The participant who brought up the article stressed how common this kind of coverage is and expressed a desire for a fandom museum that approached fandoms and the material culture they create with an analytical and respectful perspective. Another participant mentioned instances of copies of fanfiction being uploaded when the author had taken the original off the internet, emphasizing how problematic it is to disregard fan creators’ wishes regarding their creations, even if the motivation behind one’s actions is appreciation for the work.

This focus on extending equal care toward queer fans themselves and the things they create was present across all seven interviews. Three participants expressed a desire for any narrative about fandom presented by a museum to focus on the fans themselves rather than the object of their fandom. Meanwhile, two other participants found that conceptualizing fandom history in museum was easiest for them when they imagined anthropological narratives about specific fandoms or the role of women in shaping media discourse through their participation in

fandom. Another interviewee compared not knowing anything about fan artists to the lack of historical record about people who produced illuminated manuscripts, framing this absence of knowledge as a distinct loss. The remaining participant showed her value of the fan as on par with fanworks through her foregrounding of her own experience as a tool with which to measure the accuracy of hypothetical interpretation about queer fandom in museums. Rather than saying that she would refer to research or experts to discern the quality of potential exhibit narratives about fandom, she focused on her positionality as the highest form of expertise in that situation, prioritizing the subjectivity of the queer fan.

The desire for fans themselves to be centered coincided with a focus on power dynamics and opposition to narratives originating from positions of consolidated power. One participant highlighted her perception of museums as an ivory tower versus the more lateral and democratic organization of fandom. She made this distinction when answering the question of what similarities exist between museums and fandom, prioritizing her alignment with fandom spaces over any potential alignment with museums as she had throughout the interview. Showcasing a similar alignment, another interviewee observed that much of history is lost to time except for what has been of interest to those with significant political and financial influence. She made this observation when describing the importance of preserving fandom history, characterizing that history as the history of “regular, everyday folk” and “not what the government is interested in or what...billionaires are interested in.” A different participant expressed a similar negative attitude toward mainstream sources of historical narratives, stating that “anything that has...government or public backing can never be inherently trustworthy” when discussing her level of trust in museums. Also discussing the trustworthiness of museums, another interviewee described disputes over provenance between individuals/communities and museums as “a power struggle”

where anyone wanting an item returned is always “jumping through [the museum’s] hoops” and never the other way around. These responses were consistent with an overall emphasis on the importance of acknowledging the disempowered positionality of the queer fan as opposed to the empowered positionality of museums when discussing any potential interaction between the two.

**Q2: How could the stewardship of fan archives build public trust with queer communities?**

Considering the power differential between queer fans and museums and those fans’ concerns about how their narratives are handled, it is important to emphasize the care of those narratives when discussing relationship building between the spheres of queer fandom and museums. When asked how their feelings toward a museum would change if it began including fandom history in its exhibits and collections, some interviewees said that they would feel much more favorably toward the museum. Meanwhile, others foregrounded concerns about fandoms being mischaracterized and queer fans becoming vulnerable to negative legal and employment outcomes like being the victim of a copyright lawsuit or losing or being declined jobs as the result of their work being visible in a more mainstream/public setting than a site that hosts fanfiction/fanart or an insular fan community that communicates through online servers. The split between perspectives was fairly even with three participants reporting solely positive feelings, two responding mainly with concerns, and two saying that their feelings would depend on the quality of the representation.

The issue of representation mainly applied to materials displayed in/by a museum and there was more positive consensus about the idea of simply preserving fan works and fandom history. One interviewee said that the existence of fan created materials and information about fandoms across time in museums would be helpful in its contextualization of what fandoms are and have been. She went on to say that fandom history fits into the larger narrative of history by

showing people's reactions to art, which she viewed as more illustrative of previous eras than the art itself. She also highlighted "the role of the middle-aged woman" in fandom and in the larger historical narrative that includes the intersection of art and culture that happens in fandom. She framed this role as one that has been ignored in mainstream discourse and went on to mention that she herself has a piece of material fandom history in her possession that otherwise would not have been preserved: her mother's journal of handwritten self-insert fanfiction about the Beatles in which the self-insert character converts John Lennon to Christianity. As frivolous as such an object might seem, it provides an informative look at the intersection of art and culture during that period in the United States in addition to being of significant personal value to its owner. As the participant expressed, the inclusion of that kind of material culture in a museum's collection would build trust with fan communities by recognizing their history as important. A different interviewee highlighted the importance of preserving this history with an anecdote showing what is lost when that preservation does not happen. An uncle of hers whom she had never gotten the chance to know recently passed away and she was able to find out that he had been a "dedicated member of the sci-fi and fantasy community" but could not locate any trace of the zines he had contributed to in the 80s and 90s. During this time and most of the participant's life, he and her father had been estranged due to several factors, paramount among them the fact that "the world just wasn't really ready to be kind to a gay autistic man." Mourning the loss of the potential connection between her and her uncle as two queer fans, she stressed that fandom history is part of history writ large and should be treated as such by museums to avoid future tragic losses of connection. Another participant pointed out that a benefit to museums being preservers of fandom history is the kind of institutional oversight that is available to them and not to fandoms. While stories, identities, and material culture might slip through the cracks of the informal

networks of fandom, the formalized structures of museums could ensure preservation and thus build trust with queer fans, especially if collections containing queer fandom related material were made accessible to the public to some extent.

**Q3: How could the incorporation of fan-created materials into exhibits increase a museum's educational potential?**

The idea of translating lessons learned in one's time in fandom to a museum context perplexed every single participant at first; they expressed finding the two contexts too disparate for them to be able to adequately imagine how they could combine in that way. Combined with the lack of literature that connects the spheres of fandom and museums, this suggests a deep separation between the two in public consciousness. However, the six participants who chose to answer the question despite their confusion were all able to generate unique conceptions of what they had learned from participating in fandom and how that lesson might exist in a museum. One of them spoke about learning from other fans via their insertion of their real-world expertise into their fanfiction as world-building for the narrative. This participant envisioned a translation of this kind of learning to a museum context in the form of displaying a particularly fannish way of contextualizing a topic: combining one's passion and expertise with storytelling. Another interviewee also focused on contextualization, referring to having learned how to understand the impact of historical context on art and literature as well as the process of curating one's media selections and discussing the relevance and meaning of pieces of media, which are different depending on one's perspective the same way that any interpretive choice made at a museum comes from a specific positionality. In this person's eyes, the critical thinking one learns to practice in fandom is no different from the critical eye one develops as a museum professional

and/or academic. A different interviewee similarly touched on interpretation by highlighting the unlimited potential of any piece of media as the biggest lesson learned in fandom.

On a different note, this person also mentioned learning that there is no such thing as a safe fandom, alluding to having learned to approach the social spheres of fandom with caution. Two other interviewees mentioned learning similar lessons, one referring to the proliferation of conspiracy theories that exists within fandoms and another mentioning having learned the dangers of putting people on pedestals, whether those people be themselves the objects of fandom or leaders within a fan community. Finally, the participant who was the most definitive in her dismissal of the idea of learning the lessons she learned in fandom in a museum spoke of learning a plethora of things in her time as a queer fan, including how to debate respectfully and how to respect one's elders in a community. A throughline in these five interviews was the social element of fandom, which did not translate easily in participants' minds to lessons that could be learned in a museum.

However, interviewees nonetheless saw educational potential in the inclusion of queer fandom in museums. Two participants mentioned the educational potential of fanworks in how they could show how all art exists in conversation with other art and Participant Four suggested a fanfiction exhibit that featured classics like Dante's *The Divine Comedy* (1321) and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) to convey a similar message about the iterative nature of creativity.

Participants also focused on using fandom to illustrate the multiplicity of art through the lens of interpretation. One made a parallel between the plethora of ways fans read source material and the proliferation of perspectives that a museum might showcase regarding a piece of art or a historical event. She expressed the need for a critical eye as well as the potential for

developing that analytical perspective in both spaces. Likewise, another person said that exposure to the outputs of fandom teaches people how to “engage more deeply with the media they consume.” These responses demonstrate the potential for museums to teach literacy and critical thinking through displays of queer fandom.

### **Discussion**

Overall, the queer fans interviewed seemed favorable to the idea of museums holding fandom histories, but none of the participants expressed an uncomplicated willingness to entrust museums with this duty. The experience of the queer fan involves a suspicion of institutions and a focus on and value of consent. This is true for a variety of reasons, prominent among them being the disempowered positionality of the queer fan. Not only does this demographic contend with the lack of agency that comes with belonging to minoritized sexualities, but it is also in the position of the fan, and “within the cultural economy, fans are peasants, not proprietors” (Jenkins, 1992). In addition to lacking agency, queer fans find themselves in opposition to dominant forces as it remains true that fanfiction “is a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk” (Jenkins, 1992). Participants were cognizant of the fact that they were the peasants/folk existing in opposition to the powerful landlords who own the myths that operate in the contemporary context. Thus, it is the values of consent and a mistrust of institutions that characterized their hesitation when it came to the museum field. Each of these deserves its own discussion and will appear in the following subsections.

#### **Relationship with Institutions**

Across the board, participants looked at museums as institutions with a critical and analytical eye, qualifying their statements about them according to how they perceived elements like positionality, intellectual rigor and honesty, and ethically responsible practices.

When discussing positionality, participants often mentioned the political aspects of what information museums present and how they present it. Three different participants mentioned Creationist museums—museums that present a version of natural history that relies on literal interpretations of the Bible rather than an acceptance of the scientific reality of evolution and presents the Earth as thousands rather than millions of years old—as primary examples of institutions lacking in all the factors that make a museum trustworthy, as they are entirely devoted to promoting a politically motivated worldview under the guise of explaining natural history. Interviewees acknowledged that all institutional choices are political; they differentiated Creationist museums as pinnacles of what not to trust due to the lack of intellectual honesty and rigor involved in the content they present.

A large part of the issue with Creationist museums from the perspective of queer fans is their religious bent, especially given that the religion in question is an American right-wing version of Christianity that is incredibly hostile to queer human rights and academic and scientific rigor. Judith Butler elaborates on how and why this hostility operates with regard to queer expressions of gender and/or sex, writing in their 2024 publication *Who's Afraid of Gender?* that “the Evangelical Right sees sex as part of a natural order (a version of science) that was created by God.” In this worldview, anyone who diverts from the supposed natural order of heterosexual men having power over heterosexual women is an aberration threatening all that is good; gender has become a signifier for this threat, a phantom against which right-wing Evangelicals can engage in righteous struggle (Butler, 2024). This specter is not unlike the space

queer fans and their foremothers have occupied in the public consciousness, as Butler shows in their account of the Right's approach to what it terms gender ideology; "devils and demons can only be expelled or banished, burned in effigy, which is why censorship, bullying, and pathologization become the key strategies for the anti-gender movement" (Butler, 2024). These are the exact tactics that people have used against queer fans and their predecessors (Penley, 2014; Jenkins, 1992; Woolf, 1929). The parallel is not merely symbolic; its origins lie in the approaches of different groups to engagement with texts. The fundamental difference between how right-wing Evangelicals interact with texts and how queer fans engage with them has to do with authority. For Christians on the right, "reading is submission to the authority of a text," which is why they refuse to engage with any text that involves critical thought about gender (Butler, 2024). Meanwhile, queer fans exist firmly in a context where "the interpretative power has shifted away from the author and even the text [and instead] resides in the process of reading and interpretation" (Hellekson and Busse, 2014). The dynamic nature of transformational fannish engagement, especially when practiced by queer fans to create queer content, is incompatible with a worldview that includes a static conception of gender and sexuality that it is blasphemy to question. Whether or not participants considered this incompatibility when answering questions about museum trustworthiness, they understand that they "inhabit bodies that are a legal, moral, and religious battleground" and that this puts them at odds with the political project to which Creationist museums belong (Penley, 2014).

### **Consent**

The perspective of the queer fan as represented by this study heavily features the importance of consent in all things; the potential stewardship of their fandom histories by museums is no exception. This population is all too aware of the risks involved when fan

creators and noteworthy members of queer fan communities are publicly identified. For one, there are legal concerns that may arise when the authors and owners of the media around which a fandom formed decide to take issue with the existence of fanworks. This has mostly appeared in museums through fans like those who run the Stars of the Galaxy museum—a fan-run museum in Germany that displays official merchandise from science fiction media either individually to showcase the craftsmanship of high-quality action figures or in dioramas arranged by fans that depict scenes from the source material. The museum evades legal consequences by preempting copyright concerns with meticulously careful language in their interpretation. However, the aggressive nature of U.S. copyright law and the relative lack of fanworks that have existed in museum settings suggest that caution around the legality of displaying fan created content is warranted (Keidl, 2020). Moreover, the way legal issues, prominent among them issues involving copyright disputes, tend to resolve in this country is that whichever entity has access to more funds and thus better legal resources will be the one to triumph. This puts fans in a very vulnerable position, as they are almost always individuals with limited financial means compared to the owners of the works that are the centerpieces of fandoms. Queer fans face unique challenges due to the increased scrutiny to which queer content is subjected (Butler, 2024). A large part of this scrutiny has to do with sexuality, which is a multi-pronged issue in this scenario. Firstly, it is true that a lot of fan content is sexual in nature, whether or not it is queer, and queer pairings between characters are the most popular in most fandoms. A literal queering of the source text is, after all, at the heart of the practice of fandom. Because of the relative lack of queer relationships in media (a result of societal homophobia in tandem with politically motivated censorship), to queer texts in a literary sense is often to make them queer in terms of sexuality as well. The extent of the presence of sexuality in queer fandoms makes the content

that those fandoms create legally vulnerable to censorship laws, which are currently on the rise in the United States. They are also in danger of being subject to the societal moral panics that accompany those laws. These legal and societal vulnerabilities are a particular danger to queer fans not just because of the sexual nature of some of the content they produce, but because of the perceived sexual and often predatory nature of content that features queerness in any way. One participant emphasized the risks involved for queer fans if their fanfiction is publicly linked to their professional lives. She noted that these risks are particularly high if the fanfiction is queer and/or sexual in nature. Another participant expressed a disbelief that a museum focused on topics of sexuality could exist in the southern United States. Due to all these factors, participants found it vital that any fanworks and/or fandom histories centering queer fans included in museum collections and/or exhibits be included only with the consent of the fans involved.

On a broader level, participants expressed the importance of an ethos of consent that exists within queer fan communities and described the relevance of that ethos to the museum context. In a particularly memorable moment, Participant Three said that “someone should tell the British museum about that” referring to the importance of consent and highlighting that particular institution’s egregious track record. This includes but is not limited to the refusal to repatriate artifacts and failure to credit a queer translator whose work appeared in an exhibition (Cuno, 2012; Kaur, 2023). The need (often neglected by the British Museum) for a museum’s stewardship of material culture and historical narratives to be contingent upon the institution’s relationship to the source community was woven throughout all the interviews. This through line reveals a continuity between fannish values and the ethical considerations that face museums. As the world of museology has begun confronting its colonial, extractive, and oppressive origins, the importance of source community agency has emerged as a critical priority (Lonetree, 2012;

Watson, 2007). Queer fans have a deep comprehension of why and how this kind of collectively distributed power matters. Sophia Cai illustrates this in her chapter of *Bangtan Remixed: A Critical BTS Reader* when describing the two online exhibitions that she curated using her positionality as a queer fan as a curatorial methodology (Cai, 2024). Her account heavily features collaboration with the artists whose work she displayed and highlights this fannish collaboration as an antidote to the “entrenched biases and vertical structures of power” that have long plagued curatorial work (Cai, 2024). From the K-Pop that inspired Cai to the classic rock that sits close to the hearts of *Supernatural* fans, the melodies and methods of fans are ideal for bringing communities and curators together.

### **Implications**

The results of this study suggest that museums wishing to engage with queer fandom would need to do so in much the same way they engage with cultural material from other marginalized groups, beginning from a place of understanding that fandoms are communities in and of themselves, each with its own culture, norms, and even sometimes history depending on the age of the fandom. What is consistent across many fandoms is a practice of collective discourse and creativity motivated by care that would be invaluable to museums, just as the legitimacy offered by museums would be indispensable to queer fans. To allow the two to benefit each other, the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of these communities and the art they create is a necessary first step. Part of acknowledging the legitimacy of queer fan communities is being open to building relationships with queer fans on their own terms. The participants of this study characterized it by engaging in specifically fannish ways, sharing recommendations of films and fanfiction in addition to their personal anecdotes about their unique histories with fandom. Despite the academic nature of the interviews, they resembled community building in many

ways. This centrality of community should characterize any future studies relating to the interactions between queer fans and museums.

On that note, there is a definitive need for more study in this area. This study was small and limited in demographics, especially considering the prevalence of highly educated cisgender white women as the focus in fan studies as a discipline. Like museums, some corners of fandom have been self-reflective enough to recognize the racist implications of the whiteness that has often dominated fan spaces (Lothian and Stanfill, 2021). Although recognition of such an entrenched and widespread issue is only a first step, the fact that fan scholarship already employs fannish ways of imagining more equitable futures (Lothian and Stanfill, 2021) bodes well for potential alliances between fandoms and museums in the United States as parallel institutions reckoning with and seeking to repair harm they have done. While fans have the generative power of imagining things being other than what they are, museums have practical experiences of trying, failing, and succeeding to engage in relationship-building with communities historically harmed by the museum field (Lonetree, 2012; Morse, 2020). The combination of these resources with an increased focus on the perspectives of fans and museum professionals of color not as outsiders but as people existing within spaces that have harmed them should characterize future work on the potential of queer fans and American museums as allies. To do this work well, it is necessary to take a relational approach that prioritizes respect and autonomy for those involved. Fans are motivated by care and the same should be true of anyone who wishes to work with them.

Additionally, the kind of care and creativity that queer fans practice is an indispensable tool in the field of museology, especially in the contemporary U. S. context where fascism threatens both the integrity of public discourse and the lives of queer individuals (Butler, 2024).

Part of the legacy that United States museums have inherited from their British predecessors is the repression of sexuality and many institutions have shied away from displaying the numerous ancient artifacts in their collections that depict sexual scenes (Frost, 2010). The absence of these Greek and Roman artifacts in exhibits represents a missed opportunity to educate visitors on the sociohistorical aspects of gender and sexuality, prompting them to reexamine their own understanding of the subjects (Frost, 2010).

The omission of sexual content from public display in museums, like many aspects of their oppressive legacies, dates back to the late 1700s, coinciding with an increasingly censorious European culture that placed Christian virtue in opposition to the pagan obscenity of Greco-Roman society (Frost, 2010). This history is relevant to the intersection of queer fandom and museums, as one participant demonstrated by bringing up the nineteenth century practice of covering the genitals on classical sculptures with fig leaves when discussing the political implications of what museums do or do not display (Frost, 2010). The topic came up because censorship is a pressing issue for queer fans, particularly in the current political moment in the United States. The interviewee pointed out that “queer identity is so prevalent in fandom, but it's also one of the first things to go on the chopping block as not safe for kids.” This person went on to ground the statement in the American political context by highlighting that Creationist museums are feasible to operate in the rightward leaning southern United States while the Museum of Sex could not exist in the deep South the way it is able to in New York. These observations, alongside the participant’s expression of grief over the Smithsonian being “forced to sing and dance along to fascist tunes,” contributed to an interview distinctly grounded in the sociopolitical conditions in the U. S. that threaten museums and queer fandom alike. This context looms large for this entire thesis as the threat is a serious one for everyone involved.

However, the same conditions that create the threat also create an opportunity for museums and queer fans to engage in powerful activism together. The same participant who lamented what the Smithsonian has been forced to do under the current political administration in the U. S. also said that, in addition to it being a hard time to be a museum professional, it is also “a more important time,” stressing the importance of “woke people doing history.” This perspective combines well with scholarship that highlights the “opportunity for a radical reimagination of art, artists, and audiences” presented by applying fandom as a methodology, which “enables a space of inclusivity, connection with personal joy, and empowerment during times of crisis” (Cai, 2024). The results of this study suggest that, beyond offering these things to queer fans, the inclusion of queer fandom content in museums has the potential to ground both queer fans and museum professionals in anti-authoritarian desire “that wants freedom and equality passionately enough to stay in the struggle” (Butler, 2024). Harnessing this radical potential to access such desire is vital to the future of U. S. museums as institutions seeking to embody and promote an ethos of care in a country whose politics increasingly support the opposite.

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## Appendix A

### Initial Contact Text

To whom it may concern,

I am a graduate student working on my thesis for my Master of Arts in Museology (museum studies) at the University of Washington and I humbly request that you agree to being interviewed as part of my research. My thesis is on queer fandom in museums; I am investigating how museums and queer members of fandoms might be able to benefit each other through the inclusion of queer fan-generated content in museum exhibits and collections. I am doing this investigation by interviewing ten to twelve queer fans who play some role in fandom history keeping—no role is too small; having enough participants is much more important than a strict definition of fandom history keeping. None of your information will appear in the publication that results from my research. I will be collecting and publishing information about age ranges, gender identities, and sexualities, but these will not be tied to anything identifiable. The article that results from my research will be published this spring in [\*MuseumsForward\*](#), an academic journal primarily read by museum professionals and academics.

If you are interested in participating in this research, please respond to this email at your earliest convenience. You may also respond with any questions you might have and I will be happy to answer them.

Best,

Devon Leigh (he/him/his, they/them/theirs)

Graduate Student

University of Washington – Museology

## Appendix B

### Research Instrument

#### Introduction

Hello my name is Devon Leigh, a graduate student researching for my thesis about queer fandom in museums. My thesis gathers the perspectives of ten-to-twelve queer fans whose responses will form the basis of my article to be published in *MuseumsForward*. Interviews will take place over video or phone calls according to your preference. I will take notes and, if you consent, record our conversations.

This interview will consist of five questions chosen from the eight listed below; you and I will decide together which to answer unless you would prefer to leave the decision to me. Please share any other thoughts you have that might be relevant to our discussion.

#### Interview Questions

1. Do you think of museums as trustworthy institutions? Why or why not?
2. What makes a particular museum trustworthy in your eyes?
3. What have you learned from your time in fandom? Do you think people could learn those lessons in museums? Why or why not?
4. Do you want to see fanworks in museum exhibits? If you do, how do you want them displayed?
5. Do you want to see fandom history in museums? If you do, what would you want it to look like?
6. How would you feel about storing fandom history in a museum's collections?
7. If an art, history, or pop culture museum began including pieces of fandom history in its collections and exhibits, how would that change your feelings about the museum as an institution? If it would not change your feelings, can you explain why?

8. What similarities, if any, do you see between the world of fandom and the world of museums?

**Preparation Instructions**

If you wish, please create a simple art piece in the medium of your choice that represents your thoughts and/or feelings about the relationship between queer fandom and museums. The purpose of this piece is to be a catalyst and anchor for the discussion we will have in the interview, but not part of the study's results. You may share your work with me but you are not required to do so and I will not be keeping any record of it if you do. I look forward to speaking with you!