Lucia Blanchet's Response
Online and Offline Fan Communities Roundtable, Flow Conference 2008

In discussions of "fandom," it is generally requisite to reference Henry Jenkins's canonical book *Textual Poachers.* So I will do that right off the bat, considering his pre-Internet case study as a historical document—historical in the way that it records a certain moment in fan studies while also serving as an important piece of community genealogy for a still-existing fandom formation. I say this not because "media fandom" is an entirely cohesive community or to imply that all media fans are remotely interested in (or friendly towards) academic studies of fandom. Certainly, as Jenkins himself and many other scholars have noted, creative re-workings of popular media narratives such as those documented in *Textual Poachers* are becoming increasingly "normal" ways of engaging with media texts—the simple fact of "active" engagement once championed as transgressive is in many cases now encouraged by media producers as part of viral and other marketing schemes.

What do we do then with the fact that there still exist numbers of people (mostly women) who self-identify as "media fans?" who see a subcultural lineage between print *Star Trek* 'zines once distributed at fan conventions and the digitally-edited fanvids and online published fan fiction that they produce and consume today. One could suggest that although affectively significant to participants, media fandom has been "used up" as a significant object of study just as many of its practices have been co-opted by the dominant media culture. The practices perhaps, but the sensibilities? For despite the fact that the comparatively easy availability of "fannish" content made possible by the Internet means that many people can partake casually without being "fannishly socialized," media fandom still also functions as an "imagined community" of sorts—to bastardize Benedict Anderson's term—one with group mores and internal conflicts.

To illustrate, one day a year or so ago I woke up and went about my morning routine—tooth brushing, cat feeding, coffee brewing, email checking—and when I scrolled down my live journal "friends list," I was greeted with post after post of bloggers attempting to prove their own status as "real" people: citing other members of the online fandom community that they had met in "real life" who could therefore attest to their existence. Bleerily, I clicked over to the Fandom Wank website (media fandom's collectively authored trashy tabloid, pernicious den of rabble rousers, or public stockades, depending on your outlook) to find out what all the fuss was about. As a detailed post including evidentiary hyperlinks and IP addresses soon informed me, someone involved in the slash fandom for the television show *Smallville* had invented a multiplicity of alternate online identities (sock puppets) with which he/she was performing an elaborate play of deception that, among other crimes, involved attempts to swindle fellow fans out of lip gloss and trinkets via sympathy for a feigned miscarriage— the posts I had seen before were community members responding to this exposed break in protocol.

The aforementioned anecdote exemplifies the value placed on "authenticity" in online self representation within this community, as well as some of the mechanisms in place to police, disseminate information, and uphold standards. Of course, as my fellow panelist Kristina Busse has explored (elsewhere) and queer theorist Judith Butler would agree, all self representation both on and offline involves levels of performance. And in her discussion of homologies between the fan fiction genre of "real person fiction" and interactive self representation within the fannish blogosphere, Busse contributes to the growing number of commentators on cyberculture who insist that we focus on congruencies between online social networks and face-to-face ones. Contemporary media fandom, as an "online" community that predated the Internet and also continues to involve offline fan conventions

offers a unique opportunity in this light. Obviously, fans who do not attend conventions will have a different experience of media fandom participation that those who do, but I would contend that such embodied interactions have a symbolic reverberation within the larger community as well as a "real" effect on individuals. For example, relationships formed or strengthened at conventions or other offline encounters are then on public display in the content of fannish live journals and blogs, which are, after all, forms of serialized life writing. Furthermore, this sense of accountability is strengthened by debate and interpersonal discord as well as social ties, producing a discursive space in which there are stakes. But the borders of this "space" *are* fluid, and according to some, embattled.

I look forward to discussing these and other issues of continuity and discontinuity, as well as the significance of the inherently "offline" components of *all* online communities (i.e. people).

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Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. New York: Verso, 1983.

Kristina Busse. "My Life is a WIP on my LJ: Slashing the Slasher and the Reality of Celebrity and Internet Performances," In *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, Hellekson and Busse (eds.), London: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2006: 207-224.

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