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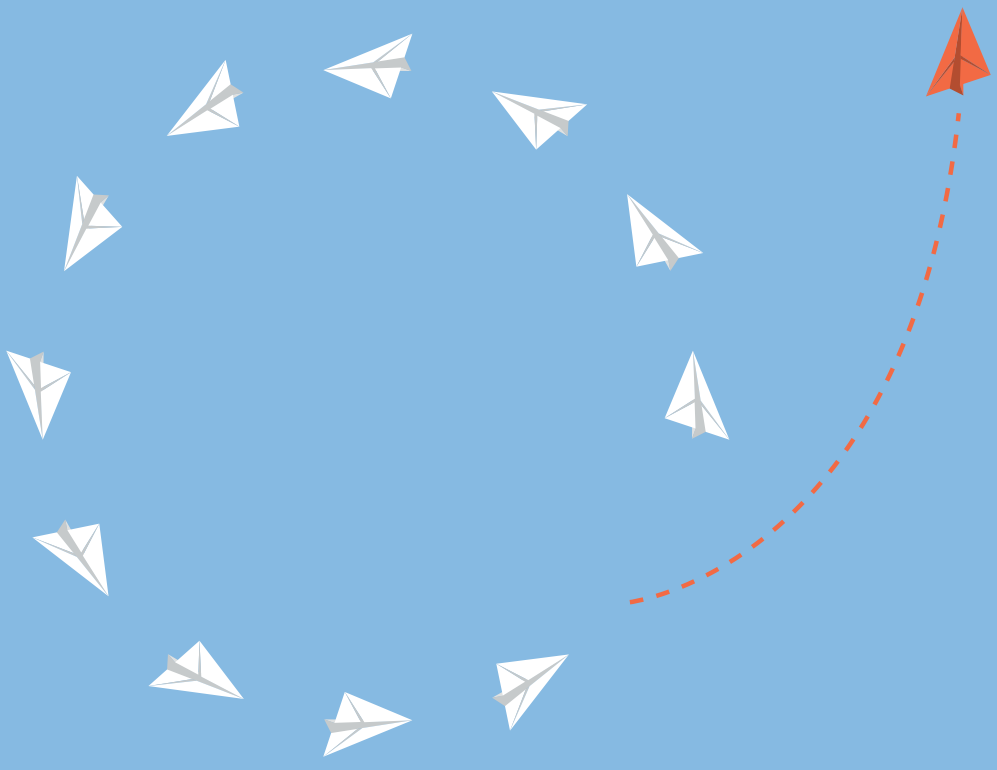

Sophie Charlotte van de Goor

Theoretical Perspectives on Fan Scholarship in the Franchise Era

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Table of Contents

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Introduction

Why Study Fan Scholarship?

This book is positioned in the field of fan studies, but it is not about fans or a specific fandom. Instead, this book focuses on the conceptualisation of fans and fandom and on how our current understanding of fans and fandom came to be. It focuses on how fan scholars (scholars who are also fans, but not necessarily in fan studies) shape our understanding of fans and fandom through their practices, and what this tells us about the dominant assumptions and beliefs in fan scholarship, or *dispositions*. In a series of chapters, each dealing with its own theory, this book explores foundational assumptions about fandom as a community; as a space of difference; and as a subversion of mainstream values. It challenges foundational beliefs about how to study fans/as a fan (fan scholar *positionality*) and how to use theories and methodologies (*provisionality*). In other words, in this book we look at fan scholarship, not at fans.

What do I mean when I say fan scholarship? I refer to accounts from the field of fan studies. Fan studies is a field concerned with studying fans, fandom, and practices associated with being a fan. In the past decades, fan studies has become a "rich and thriving" discipline (Bennett 2013, 113) with a peer-reviewed *Journal of Fandom Studies*. While accounts mostly examine phenomena relating to cultural identities, participatory cultures, or affect and pleasure (see Hellekson 2009, 5), they are built on the implications of studying things *as a fan* and the insights this identity can bring. Fan studies scholars largely come from traditional Humanities backgrounds, such as media studies; cultural studies; audience reception studies; sociology; and human geography.[1]

However, there are also accounts that do not place themselves within fan studies, and which come across more as fannish theories recoded as

1 E.g., Grossberg 1997; H. Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002; Jancovich 2002; S. Murray 2004; Jindra 1994; Sandvoss 2005b; Cottingham 2012; Livingstone 2004; Costello and Moore 2007; Tushnet 1996; Leonard 2005; Schwabach 2016; Barnett 1998; Dittmer and Dodds 2008; Couldry 2005; Booth 2010; Lewis 2002; Wann et al. 2001; Hirt and Clarkson 2011; Baym 2007; Fiske 2010.

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academic work, or "fan-scholar" accounts. "Fan-scholars," as Matt Hills (2002) explains, are fans who use academic jargon and analysis to write about their fan theories and objects of fandom in academia. Its inverse, the "scholar-fan" (now popularised as "aca-fan"), is the scholar who is also a fan, but who studies topics according to academic principles with their fannish positionality as a method and transparently accounted for (4–19). As we see throughout this book, many accounts come across more as "fan-scholar" works than as "aca-fan" works. Indeed, many accounts do not account for their fan identity at all (no pun intended). I do not believe these accounts should be ignored or "othered" (as not-fan studies), because as I show in this book, they also structure beliefs about fans, fandom, and how to study them/as a fan. In other words, when I say "fan scholarship," I refer to all accounts (aca-fan and fan-scholar) published as academic works that structure these beliefs. When I say fan scholar (no hyphen), I refer to anyone who studies fans, fandom, or as a fan.

Where do we begin then? For fan studies, its academic origin is often ascribed to the early 1990s works of Lisa Lewis' edited collection *The Adoring Audience*, Camille Bacon-Smith's (1992) *Enterprising Women*, and especially to Henry Jenkins' (1992) *Textual Poachers*. As Daniel Cavicchi (2018) notes, "a large part of fandom's history involves understanding how people have talked about audiences" (27), and the works of Jenkins and Bacon-Smith were ethnographic studies that addressed fans and fan cultures specifically, seriously, and with the explicit intent to legitimise fandom as a topic of academic study. They countered the stereotype of the fan as isolated and antisocial (Jenkins 1992, 287; Jensen 1992, 15), by positioning fans as part of contemporary media culture and emphasising fandom's communal and social aspects. The question these early 1990s works addressed was: "why should we study fans?" In the first edition of the edited collection *Fandom*, Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and Lee Harrington (2007) surmise that

> studies of fan audiences help us to understand and meet challenges far beyond the realm of popular culture because they tell us something about the way in which we relate to those around us. (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007, 11)

Fifteen years after the works of Bacon-Smith and Jenkins, Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington argued for an evolution in fan scholarship by constructing the history of fan studies into three waves. For them, the first wave also begins with *Textual Poachers*, describing this as the "fandom is beautiful" wave (2007, 1) where fan cultures are portrayed in a loving manner,

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emphasising togetherness and community. The second wave abandons this celebratory portrayal and instead focuses on how fandom is becoming part of the mainstream, more broadly accepted, and more visible in established culture (2007, 6). The third wave, within which the original 2007 *Fandom* placed itself, builds on notions of modernity and no longer treats fandom as only an object of study, but as a means through which to study aspects of modern life (2007, 6). Six years later, Paul Booth (2013) adds a fourth wave to this evolutionary track, which he describes as "a turn from analysing *fans* to analysing *fan studies*" (222–23, emphasis in original), arguing that fan studies is under scrutiny by other disciplines.

With his fourth wave, Booth turns the question "why study fans?" into: "why study fan studies?" For me, the beginnings of an answer lie in the categorising of fan scholarship into evolutionary waves itself, which already reveals inconsistencies. In the latest edition of *Fandom* (2017), Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington place their book in a fan studies 4.0 (fourth wave), adding that in the past decade fan studies has learned that

> fan practices and affective attachments take many different forms across a wide spectrum of contemporary culture and far beyond what we have historically considered "popular." (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2017, 20)

This might be the case, but when considering fan *scholarship*, we will see that this wide spectrum is still analysed with phase one assumptions about fans and fandom (beautiful, other), and still upholds the superiority of fan scholars over non-fans. Booth bases the fourth wave on the fact that contemporary fan studies includes new/more fans in its research (as participants but also as researchers) which brought a revision of some first wave celebratory conceptualisations (2013, 222–23). He is correct, but fan studies as a field seems unable to acknowledge contemporary fan scholars and their practices, theoretically and methodologically speaking. Seminal work such as Matt Hills' (2002) *Fan Cultures* already focused on fan scholarship, its theoretical frameworks and methodologies, and its relation with fan identity, already calling many assumptions about fans and fandom into question.

I began to ask myself: what does fan studies as a field want to accomplish, and what has it accomplished in the past decades when, despite hundreds of publications, *Textual Poachers* and *Fan Cultures* are still core texts for fan studies theory and method, and most of their critiques are still valid? It is from discussing these questions with other scholars that the idea for this book was conceived. In 2002, Hills notes that

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> cultural studies may be keen to critique and remake the world, but it has become amazingly adept at ignoring its own power relations, its own exclusions … and its own moral dualisms. (184)

Indeed, academic work aims to add to the body of knowledge, to build understanding, and to consider new pathways and phenomena (this is the essence of science). It should not ignore new information when it is inconvenient or isolate itself from undesirable ideas. However, this appears to be exactly what fan scholarship is doing.

For example, the fans under study are often young to middle-aged Anglo-Americans portrayed as a "community."[2] These communities are rarely contextualised in relation to other communities, other fans, other cultures, or ideologies, creating the illusion of a universality of fandom and fan practices, while the studied practices are often the same, highly visible and easily documented ones such as fanfiction.[3] Additionally, accounts often revolve around one popular, Anglo-American media text and rarely comparatively address multiple texts or non-popular or non-media objects. Finally, the abovementioned fans and fandoms are often uncritically positioned as subversive through hit-and-run mentions of theory, without unpacking how or why, while the insider positionality as a fan is unchallenged as the best way to study fandoms.[4] In other words, over the decades, fan scholarship generally seemed uninterested in people and practices that did not fit its preconceptions of what fandom should be, and appeared uninterested in acknowledging its role in structuring understanding about fans, fandom, and how to perform fan scholarship.

To clarify, I do not claim that repeatedly using the same methods or frameworks invalidates accounts, nor that being a fan precludes the ability for provisional academic engagement. I am saying that by isolating itself from diverse views and theories, fan scholarship limits its ability to create understanding about fans and fandom. As we see in this book, fan

2 E.g., J. Brown 1997; Baym 2000; Brooker 2002; Coppa 2006; Busse 2007; Kirby-Diaz 2009; Booth 2010; Booth and Kelly 2013; J. Brennan 2014; Burke 2015; Zubernis and Larsen 2018.

3 E.g., Russ 1985; Penley 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992; Lee 2003; Sabucco 2003; Carruthers 2004; Jung 2002; Williamson 2005; Bury 2005; Busse 2005; 2007; Woledge 2006; R. Black 2006; Coppa 2006; Thomas 2007; 2011; Tosenberger 2008b; Hellekson and Busse 2014; Hodges and Richmond 2011; Jamison 2013; Garcia 2016; Floegel 2020.

4 E.g., H. Jenkins 1992; Fiske 1992; Thornton 1995; Hodkinson 2002; Jancovich 2002; Turnbull 2003; Baulch 2004; 2005; Bury 2005; Rambukkana 2007; Williams 2010; Bode 2010; Bronwen Thomas 2011; Sullivan 2012; Wilkinson 2012; Coker 2013; Hadas 2013; Geraghty 2014; Stein 2017; Zubernis and Larsen 2018.

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scholarship in its current form is immature as an academic discipline, uncritically reproducing popular media and brand discourses about fans, fandom, and even society (Hastie, 2008: 74). Additionally, fan scholarship often confirms (and naturalises) established, neoliberal value systems and ideology (including its beliefs about consumership, sexuality, gender, and acceptable fan practices). Last but not least, the majority of fan scholarship does not engage with the large bodies of scientific work in other fields on the same topics they study, nor do they concern themselves with methodology or positionality. As a result, many accounts come across as limited and poorly researched, adding little to the body of knowledge.

This cannot be all that fan scholarship has to offer. My idea for this book began to take shape; I wanted to know what caused this disciplinary trend and how we could move forward from this cycle. I also realised that a general answer might be impossible, as we all have different goals and aims when studying something. Scholarly positionality plays an important role in what we disclose and downplay. However, since fan scholarship lacks transparency abouts it claims, goals, and methods (a methodological immaturity), we can only infer. As such, in this book I explore the practices we can see in fan scholarship, and what they tell us about dominant beliefs and assumptions about fans and fandom. Additionally, this book offers a variety of theoretical tools to allow scholars to engage with their own claims, goals, and methods, and transparently work towards a better understanding of fans, fandom, and their topic of study. Some theories might appear a bit milquetoast at first, while others might seem too radical. I hope they bring much discussion.

What I Am Talking about When I Am Talking About "Fandom"

This book is not a set-up for a definition of fan or fandom. A single definition of "fandom" does not exist, although the "academic definition" of "fandom" appears to revolve around a fan/non-fan binary where the fan is othered from mainstream practices through social organisation (Gray et al., 2007: 4). Indeed, as Nancy Baym already pointed out,

> those who study "fandom" disagree on its definition. At the least, most would agree it involves a collective of people organized socially around their shared appreciation of a pop culture object or objects. (Nancy Baym 2007, online)

Indeed, in *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins (1992) speaks of "organized fandom" as

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> an institution of theory and criticism, a semistructured [sic] space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated, and negotiated and where readers speculate about the nature of the mass media and their own relationship to it. (Jenkins 1992, 86)

However, when Baym (2000) cites this definition in *Tune In, Log On*, she ascribes it to the overall definition of "fandom" (17). In other words, social and communal fan practices are presented as an essential part of the meaning of the term "fandom"; aside from that, the organised aspect of fandom is also still implicit. For example, Stephen Reysen and Nayla Branscombe (2010) still speak of a personal connection between a fan and fan-object as a "fanship," and the connection between a fan and other fans as "fandom" (177).[5] However, the term "fanship" appears to have been lost. Recently, at a stretch, the term fandom in relation to media is considered to indicate the same fan-practice (Pearson 2012; Stein 2010) or a community of practice (van de Goor 2015). Alternatively, Hills (2002) prefers to use the term "fan culture," to emphasise the fact that anything fannish is culturally constructed and should be engaged with it in its cultural context (I agree). However, it seems that "fandom" has overtaken this term in popularity.

"Fandom," then, refers more to the socially organised aspect of fan practices than it does to non-social or non-communal fan identities, but it should not be confused with the word "community." After all, a fan's identity may not be based on observable, communal practices, and they can consider themselves part of "fandom" even if they do not actively socialise or seek out others (Hill 2014, 11–13). There are some definitions that take this into account. For example, in *Fans*, Cornel Sandvoss (2005b) emphasises the "emotional" aspects of fandom, speaking of individual "emotional significance" (12) and an individual emotional "involvement" (138) with an object of affection, noting that

> the clearest indicator of a particular emotional investment in a given popular text lies in its regular, repeated consumption, regardless of who this reader is and regardless of the possible implications of this affection. (Sandvoss 2005b, 7)

Similarly, Mark Duffett (2013b) in *Understanding Fandom*, focuses more on the mediated aspect of fan practices, suggesting "media fandom" is

5 This terminology and distinction is based on the work of Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby (1995) in *Soap Fans*.

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> the recognition of a positive, personal, relatively deep, emotional connection with a mediated element of popular culture. (Duffett 2013b, 2)

These definitions allow for individual meaning-making and come closer to aligning fandom with practices that are not necessarily only fan-object-related. However, the heavy connotative emphasis on the organised, social, and communal aspects of "fandom" cannot be ignored. As I show in chapter 1, "fandom" is used so liberally in academic, media, and fan discourse to refer to all manner of things to do with fan practices that I do not want to needlessly confuse meanings by inventing my own term. Besides, this book is not about *my* definitions of fandom, it is about the definitions of others and how these structure beliefs about fans, fandom, and how to study them/as a fan. As such, using "fandom" will suffice, and the occasional "fan culture" may be used when appropriate, but ultimately, the definition depends on the scholar at hand.

What to Expect from This Book

In his 1978 work *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said approaches the concept of "the Orient" as a type of Foucauldian discourse, meaning he focuses on the power relationships he reads in language and practice. Through this, Said argues that he shows and unravels "the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient" (1978, 3). Similarly, in this book, we explore the way fans and fandom have been, and still are, structured by fan scholarship through discourses of otherness and binaries of good/bad, and show how fan scholarship tradition manages and produces the imaginary ideal of "fandom."

We begin this journey in chapter 1, exploring how fan scholarship's idealised and "imaginary" (Hill 2016, 37) portrayals of fandom are rooted in its 1990s attempts to legitimise fandom as a topic of academic study and affection. These attempts at normalisation and legitimisation align the fan with mainstream standards and ideologies. However, scholars also continue to separate fans from non-fans (or indeed the mainstream) through narratives of otherness. By teasing out the underlying Bourdieusian (1984) concepts of capital, taste, and subversiveness in these attempts, we can see how the ideas of "other spaces" and subversive communities have been employed to facilitate conceptualisations of value and resistance. Additionally, we explore how these assumptions have built the fan scholarship research tradition of isolationism from other (challenging) theories, methods, and viewpoints,

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by upholding the idea that only a fan can understand and represent other fans (and self-positioning fan scholars over non-fans as somehow superior in their representations).

Chapter 2 gets theoretical, but do not despair, we will learn how to explore, critique and then use a theory step by step. By critiquing the theoretical frameworks, we begin in chapter 1 to open an alternative path to explore fandom. We shift the focus from Bourdieu's popular notion of (cultural) capital to the concept of *disposition* to explore the beliefs that inform our understanding of the world. While this appears to be a miniscule shift (I stay within the bounds of the same scholar even), it shows how even the most *minor* of changes in focus *away* from basic assumptions can yield dramatically different results. We also shift focus from fandom as exclusive spaces resistive to dominant order to a focus on the discipline and *panoptic sorting* used to keep order, exploring the regulatory practices that help us shape our beliefs and daily practices.

From here we move onto the actual application of disposition and panoptic sorting through two case studies, each triangulated with their own participant discourse chapter. Chapter 3 begins by exploring how the BBC's *Sherlock* (2010–17) was received by scholars in ready-to-go networks, or academic "reading formations" (Bennett & Woollacott, 1987) that uncritically echo dominant brand and media discourses. We see how a significant amount of scholarship appears to resemble brand "merchandise" rather than academic critique (Hastie 2008, 75), and begin to see a set of beliefs that uncritically recodes fannish readings into academic accounts, which I call a *fannish disposition* (or our beliefs in what fandom is, how it should be studied, and how to study our object of affection). Not only do these practices reproduce established, mainstream media discourses, but they also implicitly endorse dominant views and values along the way (on sexuality, gender, mental health). As such, we begin to see that both fannish beliefs and scholarly practices are supplement to mainstream, neoliberal ideologies, and not different or resistive to them.

Chapter 4 picks up the idea of reproducing established neoliberal ideology by exploring participant discussion on "common sense" self/consumer-regulation (Hall and O'Shea 2013) to enhance the fannish consumer experience. We consider how filtering information works on a theoretical level, by examining the popular media concept of the "filter bubble" (Pariser 2011) and Peter Sloterdijk's philosophical concept of spheres (2009). Through this, we learn that sorting and filtering practices help us prevent undesirable information from challenging our beliefs about how the world works (dispositions). From here, we consider how the fannish

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disposition could structure our sorting and filtering practices to support our beliefs about fandom, which builds the argument that fan scholarship appears supplement to mainstream, media-related value systems and should be explored as such.

Chapter 5 ties the neoliberal sorting practice further into the fannish disposition by returning focus once more to an academic case study, this time of scholarship on Disney's Marvel Cinematic Universe. Exploring scholarly attempts to legitimise popular culture by linking it into corporate and mainstream discourses of fidelity, fan-boy notions of "good" fandom, and key social issues, shows how these accounts implicitly reproduce an ideology of "neoliberal capitalist realism" (Hassler-Forest 2012, 424), or the belief that neoliberal, capitalist structures and discourses are natural and unavoidable (Fisher 2009). It also shows how reproduction of these discourses shapes beliefs about fans and fandom, without explicitly self-identifying as being about either. This places the fannish disposition firmly within the corporate playground and neoliberal ideological value systems, and shows it masks difficult questions we should ask ourselves about the claims, goals, and stakes of our research as (fan) scholars. Additionally, the limited reflexivity we see in these chapters indicates a more complex relation between dominant ideology, fannish dispositions, and academic practice and positionality than is currently accounted for in fan scholarship.

Chapter 6 wraps up this argument up by considering how conceptualisations of the "good" fan are structured by complex processes and practices, which also serve to keep us dispositionally safe in our beliefs about fans and fandom. We see that upholding an imaginary concept of fans and fandom can cause disappointment when faced with experiences to the contrary and requires negotiation to be reincorporated in our belief system. By exploring notions of reflexivity on a multi-faceted and temporal scale (Sender 2012; Archer 2012), we see that binary notions of reflexive/non-reflexive are futile and revive classic notions about scholarly superiority, and thus cannot explain away the lack of fan scholar engagement with their own (dis)positionalities. Building on work by Rebecca Williams (2015; 2016) and Anthony Giddens (1984; 1991), I finalise the fannish disposition as a tool by offering the idea that the fannish disposition helps us filter out information that might challenge our dispositional security, or our belief about what fandom is, and how we should study it and our objects of affection. It offers a potential explanation for why, contrary to much available evidence, fan scholarship prefers to remain isolationist, but it can also be used by scholars to explore our goals, aims, and claims about fans and fandom, and place them alongside new theories, ideas, and practices.

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What Not to Expect from This Book

First, I have a small note on the number of footnotes and citations (which readers likely spotted already). Because I theorise the conceptualisation of fans and fandom, this book relies on many citations. In fact, I had to choose carefully which ones to use and where to place them, as I did not have the space to use them all (the bibliography had over 1,500 entries, which I had to halve). To stop the text from becoming entirely illegible, I have tried to keep most reference summations or multi-citations to the footnotes and the direct citations or references in the text. In other words, if a reference is in the text, it is directly related; if it is in the footnotes, it is there for reference.

This brings me to the media texts. The popular texts of *Sherlock* and the MCU were selected for a variety of reasons, but mostly because of the limitations of one small book. Both texts have yielded a significant volume of fannish academic attention, thus providing me with a broad and varied body of scholarship to analyse scholarly practices in. Additionally, the fact that both texts are highly mainstreamed and internationally popular means they enjoy a relative "cultural omnipresence" (Weaver 2007, 582), which for the purposes of this book makes them both good examples to demonstrate the complex links between mainstream value systems and scholarly practices. However, because of my focus on the links between fannish disposition, mainstream ideology, and scholarly practices, all of which are grounded and based on Anglo-American concepts, this research has omitted non-Anglo-American case studies from its scope, as I felt it could lure us into comparisons. This is not to exclude the possibility or importance of transcultural approaches, but this book aims to point out a baseline of patterns first (the fannish disposition). Any ensuing research based on this book can (and preferably should) expand on my theories and findings by exploring many case studies of various types.

My second reason for choosing *Sherlock* and the MCU is to challenge the foundational assumption that fandom *membership* is required to practice fan scholarship. I am not a fan of *Sherlock* or the MCU and have only seen a few episodes (and maybe four films) in total (and did not care for them). I do not participate in (online) media text-related or fandom-related communities or on social media, although I am a fan of comic books (not so much American comics) and enjoy Holmes and some of his adaptations (not so much recent ones). It is through my own positionality as an outsider in terms of fan scholarship tradition that I want to show that a different point of view can bring new insights into studying fans and fandom too. To reiterate, I do not

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study or analyse the media texts themselves. While I have to engage with them to some degree to explore and critique what happens in academic accounts, do not expect an analysis of *Sherlock* or the MCU in this book.

This brings me to the participant data, which was collected through a multi-sited, ethnographic project called "The Views on Fandom Project." This project was developed in 2015 and ran in a variety of iterations (interviews, surveys, focus groups) to the end of 2021, following 453 participants between ages 18 to 66+, divided male/female about evenly, with over 37 nationalities hailing from 30 countries. The project aimed to collect a broad range of accounts on fans and fandom, with participants recruited regardless of their self-identification as a fan, and regardless of their fannish relation to *Sherlock* or the MCU. As a result, I received a wide variety of opinions and discussions, which were tremendously helpful in shaping the ideas of this book, and in contrasting all the scholarly writing with their lived experiences. As one can expect, the bounty of viewpoints and data is large; however, do not expect this book to analyse all participant discussion. Here, it merely helps us triangulate academic accounts. I will of course use as many quotes and examples as my editor lets me get away with.

I also want to acknowledge that there are many complex processes in play when considering the creation of an academic account than just a scholar's reported motivations. For example, there are demands from publishing houses, who in turn serve and drive capitalist structures of "market demands" (Hastie 2008, 74) and who consider topics of monographs and edited collections in that light as well. Similarly, journal articles are adjusted to fit the theme and agenda of specific journals (set by whomever is in charge). Then there are the demands of the scholar's institute, their own research agenda and priorities, as well as their country's individual political and cultural climates within which scholars must operate (such as the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework), all of which are entwined with market and capital strategies. However, I also want to point out that these structures and restrictions should still be mentioned in accounts transparently, which they are often not.

Finally, while I know as a person and as a scholar that overarching political beliefs play a role in establishing value, practice, and even what can and cannot be studied, I do not discuss specific political theories or the (rather simplistic) Anglo-American political binary of left/right. Similarly, gender plays an important part in Anglo-American fan studies scholarship (Busse 2013), and as such the concept of gender returns throughout the academic case studies. However, the focus of this book lies on exploring the links

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between fannish disposition and scholarly practices, and while gender is indeed part of these links, it is not directly relevant to establishing *the existence* of these links and mounting a theoretical and methodological critique of the baselines. That is not to say that an analysis of Anglo-American political beliefs and ideology (and its effects on discourse) relating to the fannish disposition may not be fruitful. If I had time and resources, (or a particularly benevolent university willing to sponsor this task),[6] I would prioritise this in-depth exploration of political alignment and Anglo-American ideologies in transcultural scholarly accounts above all.

With that all said and done, this book covers *a lot* of theoretical ground and asks some *difficult* questions. Challenging established fan scholarship practices as well as the way fan scholars have been thinking about themselves and fandom is a difficult position to take. Despite what one might think when reading this, I love fan studies. I am just not too fond of current fan scholarly practices as I believe they hold back our understanding of fans and fandom instead of expanding it. It is because of this love that I read through hundreds of studies to find new ways to place studying fans and fandom in relation to the overarching structures we are all part of. I hope this book is useful to anyone and everyone who is interested in fans, fandom, or fan studies, no matter what discipline they hail from or what their topic is.

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6 Call me!

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