

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Moral Agency and Free Will:  
Speculative Fiction Fandom and the Discourse of Empathy

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology

By

Julie Strom

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The thesis of Julie Strom is approved:

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Dr. Sabina Magliocco

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Date

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Dr. Gina Giotta

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Date

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Dr. Kimberly Kirner, Committee Chair

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Date

## PREFACE

*“Why study the Internet? Does anyone even say anything real there?”*

*“It’s a shame, with all your talents, that you choose to research the Internet.”*

As a dutiful postmodern anthropologist, I must warn you that I consider myself a member of the community I am about to describe. I grew up as digital technology took its hold on the world around me. I heard it infiltrate popular music on the radio. Video games went from beeping, two color, 8-bit games like Pong to 4th Generation, 4096 colors, pseudo-3D model scaling and rotation in the time it took me to get to early adulthood. And then the Internet — just a bunch of bulletin boards at first, and soon chat rooms and personal websites where the digital intersected with a host of interests that I had by that time known to be the realm of the nerd, and/or geek. I discovered the online community in these places where other speculative fiction fans assembled to discuss their favorite texts, be they literature, television, film, or video games. We discussed characters, plots, science, philosophy, history — much like what I see in today’s fan discourse.

If there is a single message to be distilled from all of my academic training and reading of anthropology, it is this: *look in the gaps*. The gaps in knowledge, the gaps in understanding, the gaps in gaze and perspective. Anthropology studies culture, yet it is reluctant to study its own. It is especially loathe to address popular culture, and such investigations are left largely to other disciplines. While it is widely agreed that culture is dynamic, it does not respond very quickly to cultural changes.

We all come to anthropology for our own reasons. For me it was the perspective and goals of anthropology that I could apply to so many of those things that interested me — art, mythology, history, science, and more — which also happened to qualify me as a

geek. As I eagerly devoured anthropological studies on these things as I did with all my objects of fandom, I found a gap. My gap, a hole where the study of a community and culture to which I belong could be. The dubious and disdainful attitudes suggested by the above quotes are only reflective of what I've heard from many anthropologists. I watch the hope drain from their faces when they find out I'm investigating social media discourse among the Speculative Fiction Fandom community.

Much has changed, and the Internet hasn't been the exclusive realm of geeks and recluses for a very long time. It is estimated that half the world's population used the Internet this year, a percentage brought down by low penetration in Africa and Asia. Three billion people are using the Internet in a wide variety of wonderful, horrible, and ordinary ways.

And so, this thesis is a traditional ethnography, and it's not. This is an ethnography of Speculative Fiction Fandom, although earlier iterations have attempted to pretend that it is a study of cognition that just happened to choose this understudied community as its research community. It is not a coincidence because I am a Speculative Fiction Fan.

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## Abstract

### Moral Agency and Free Will: Speculative Fiction Fandom and the Discourse of Empathy

By

Julie Strom

Master of Arts in Anthropology

Anthropology has long been exploring the relationship between culture and cognition, but only in recent decades has American popular media culture been a subject of its own ethnographic investigations. This turn of gaze coincides with inquiry into underrepresented communities and variations in social experience as they are affected by issues such as gender, race, and ethnicity. Recent events in the U.S. stemming from tensions between such groups asserting their rights and those who resist their concerns, sometimes resulting in violence, have set in motion a national dialogue which frequently invokes the subject of empathy. This project is an investigation of empathy among one of the oldest Internet-based communities, that of Speculative Fiction Fandom, a self-identifying community of interest whose practices revolve around speculative fiction

texts. Speculative fiction is a genre of fiction which explores the nature of humanity through narratives which speculate about life under different world conditions. It is a broad container for what are today prolific in popular media culture, including the subgenres of superhero fiction, science fiction, and supernatural fiction. The Speculative Fiction Fandom community is an ostensibly racial-, ethnic-, and gender-diverse community, and so its ordinary discourse is a fertile field to better understand the processes by which diverse people in discursive contexts have empathy, or not, for those others outside their own social groups. Through an analysis of the discourse centered on the thought-experiments of speculative fiction popular media, the relationship between culture and cognition may be illuminated through the identification of key rules for empathy.

## INTRODUCTION

This project is an investigation into the social, personal, and cultural production of empathy. Empathy has dimensions of both thought and affect, for which there are social, psychological, and cultural influences. Humans are not merely receptacles for these forces, however, and as agents have a part in the production of the social, the cultural, and the psychological. This flow between person and world, which includes the thought and affect that comprise empathy, is an intersubjective and dynamic process. It is the process of empathy that is the cognitive focus of this research, its aim to identify some of the most salient influences in its production.

Language is one means of accessing the social, psychological, and cultural life of persons, for within speech and discourse are traces of our consciously and unconsciously held frames of understanding. Linguistic, psychological, and cognitive anthropologists examine language to illuminate the different social and cultural discourses that contribute to our thought, behavior, and affect. Such analyses have been undertaken in the U.S. and abroad on various cultural groups and on the institutions, formal and informal, which are among the forces of social, psychological, and cultural influence, such as the U.S. election cycle (Faudree 2009) and legal discourse (Frade 2015). These analyses have only recently begun to move beyond the traditional organizing concepts of geographical proximity (cultures in space and time) and social segmentation (isolatable segments of government or institutional forces) into a new “circulation of linguistic forms including digital media” (Monaghan 2010, 224) and the natural spaces these forms inhabit, such as the Internet. Because the processes of empathy and the social, psychological, and cultural frames that inform them may leave behind their traces in discourse, the digital forms of

discourse in the public spaces of the Internet offer an opportunity to observe a great volume of discourse about a single object or topic.

This project analyzes digital discourse for traces of the salient social, cultural, and psychological influences that inform the process of empathy. Rather than investigate a community bounded by traditional geographic or other segmented concepts, this project will look at the discourse of a community based in the digital spaces of the Internet, for whom digital forms of discourse are part of the history of the community itself:

Speculative Fiction Fandom (SFF). SFF revolves around speculative fiction, and discourse such as contributions to social media is a major part of community practice. Speculative fiction is a subgenre of fiction which has at its core a speculative world environment where the human experience may be tested and includes the subgenres of science fiction, superhero fiction, and supernatural fiction portrayed in literature (e.g. *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula LeGuin, 1969), film (e.g. *X-Men* by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, ), and television (e.g. *The Dresden Files* by Jim Butcher).

Contemporary American culture, insofar as such a thing can be said to exist, is far too large, diverse, and complex to fully untangle the competing cultural knowledges that we inherit from our relationships with different ethnic, social, religious, and other ideological groups. In the field of anthropology, the boundaries of community are never fixed, are often contested, and rarely is membership exclusive. Communities overlap and intersect, and membership in any particular community is a point in a web of communities to which we belong, each contributing to our identities and the performance of it. Members of SFF are drawn from a broad and general American culture, comprised of persons of different genders, racial and ethnic groupings, socioeconomic statuses,

religious beliefs, and educational levels. What such a broad and nonspecific mass of people have in common is their affinity for speculative fiction texts and popular media culture (hereinafter also “texts”) and the community aspect of fandom, the *sharing* of those affinities with other members.

Community membership in this diverse cultural mix is determined by self-identification, and this is done in many ways. Fans may of course identify themselves explicitly as fans, but within discourse between members they more often do so by demonstrating their cultural competency and understanding of the rules that govern or apply to the community in which they are participating. I may tell you that I am a fan of speculative fiction, but if you are also a community member you are more likely to know this by the clothes I wear, the shows I reference, the way I talk about speculative fiction texts, and by the references and connections I will make between texts, than you will by my explicit verbal (or in the case of most digital discourse, textual) self-identification. Members recognize other members because membership imparts both conscious and unconscious rules of engagement that only acculturated members will have mastery of. Boundaries of community are fuzzy because we are acculturated to many subgroups and communities.

The discourse of SFF about speculative fiction texts, a broad literary genre in which philosophical questions about humanity are explored through imaginary entities such as aliens, the supernatural, werewolves, and sentient robots, offers a potential arena for the observation of empathic processes as members will negotiate, broadcast, and contest ways of understanding imaginary others. By divorcing the subject from direct associations with highly charged and emotional contemporary social problems,

speculative fiction offers a field in which discourse participants may exercise, modify, and refine their understandings of empathy in a community context free from analogue (i.e. the real, physical world we inhabit) consequences, like being ostracized by the community or becoming at risk for physical harm at the hands of offended parties. Within this discourse for an imaginary object we may highlight some of the key social, psychological, and cultural frames used in constructing and deploying empathy for categories of agents that do not exist in the analogue world – such as vampires or faeries — and so ostensibly carry no social or cultural penalty for any empathic resonance with or affinity for.

The SFF community is appropriate to this investigation because the fuzzy and overlapping nature of communities and community membership allow for an investigation into the mobilization of empathy in a discourse that connects the real and virtual worlds. This community discourse bridges the understandings that members bring with them from membership in other communities and the imagined — yet relevant — circumstances of speculative fiction. This investigation captures the relationship between the empathic response to specific texts and characters, the community of fandom for whom discourse about the texts is a voluntary, regular, and enjoyable means of expressing their membership, and the platform that they have adopted as a means to communicate those interests — social media.

In psychology and the neurosciences, empathy is commonly tested by exposing a subject to stimuli, such as narratives or images, intended to elicit an emotional response. These responses are assessed for empathy according to measures such as the Hogan Empathy Scale (HES) (Nomura and Akai 2012), the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)

(Froman and Peloquin 2001), and Basic Empathy Scale (BES) (Joliffe and Farrington 2006), which use questionnaires to gauge cognitive and affective aspects of empathy. These measures were developed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as researchers and clinicians sought to operationalize empathy and better understand its relationship to behavior. In a systematic review of research into the relationship between empathy and antisocial behavior, Paul A. Miller and Nancy Eisenberg (1988) grouped studies by the method used to test subjects and the measures they used to assess empathy. They found that self-reporting on questionnaires to short narrative situations produced the most consistent results across all the types of studies they included. Although they claimed that picture, story, and film methods of testing empathy were in part less effective because they presented “hypothetical events that may not evoke much emotion” (Miller and Eisenberg 1988, 329), they do not explain why a questionnaire’s hypotheticals, short narratives designed to “tap individuals’ responses to a wide variety of situations” (339) might produce better results.

Questionnaires remain a preferred method for measuring empathy in the behavioral sciences for much the same reasons they are preferred in the social sciences generally and elsewhere. Among these reasons are that they limit certain variables by controlling what each participant is exposed to, they may limit the effect of the observer on the responses (as the researcher need not be present when the survey is taken), and they can be administered to a large number of people with relative ease, thus yielding a considerable amount of comparable data in relatively short order and minimal effort. All of these things can also be said of the discourse of an audience of people, wherever they individually may be, watching a television broadcast and self-responding to it on the

Internet. Of course, questionnaires don't just standardize the stimuli being responded to, but also standardize responses through the use of Likert scales and dictating the items a participant may respond to. This inevitably shifts the responses further away from what is of significance to the participant to what is of significance to the researcher, as she must ultimately decide what will and will not be included in a questionnaire and how it will be structured. Depending on the purpose of the research, this is an acceptable trade off.

What an examination of ordinary discourse yields to an investigation of empathy that is missing from the questionnaire is a natural setting in which a subject may genuinely self-report their emotional and cognitive states. Unprompted by questionnaires but by a personal impetus to engage with speculative fiction narratives, members of fandom voluntarily express what they think and feel about those texts in the public spaces of social media. They do this *in their own voice*, rather than having to choose an affinity for declarations crafted by the researcher. All of the social and cultural factors which affect ordinary, everyday speech are present in the discourse of fandom, generated by the spontaneous will of the speaker in response to the same stimuli: the speculative fiction text. This isn't to say that the standard tests and assessments for empathy are invalid, but rather that they can and should be supplemented with the deployment of empathy in more natural settings.

Psychologists do not typically follow study participants out into the world-spaces in which they live to observe experience in-the-raw. This is the realm of the anthropologist. The Internet discourse of tragedy, such as responses to Norwegian terrorism (Eriksson 2015), African political uprisings (Lindgren 2013; Rennick 2013),

and African American deaths at the hands of police officers (Bonilla 2015), is one potential field for the study of empathy deployed towards analog persons. Observation of the discourse of tragedy in parallel with analog events as they unfold would allow for a more direct comparison of cognition and behavior, a connection social scientists have been drawing and redrawing for decades.

While there is a setting for and value in the study of empathy as reflected in the discourse generated by tragedy, there are challenges to this type of study. One challenge is that a great deal of research into Internet discourse is done after a phenomenon has begun, “gone viral,” and/or otherwise brought to the attention of the researcher. This makes sense, as most tragedies are not scheduled and broadcast in advance, so unless a researcher happens to be in within the tragedy’s immediate node of influence, they will only discover discourse after the discourse has grown enough to be noticed by other observers. The further in time one moves from the discourse and events which generate them, however, the more difficult it becomes to connect response to event and behavior. For a study that seeks to identify unconscious and prereflective aspects of empathy, the very analog nature of the tragedy poses a challenge in that those participants who are living the events as they unfold will very likely have already well-formed opinions about key players and the landscape of their own social and emotional environment. For example, it is unlikely that Libyans tweeting about the Libyan uprising in 2011 had no prior feelings or beliefs about Muammar Gaddafi or his regime, and so their discourse reflects a response to years of experience and reflection.

A wider net for empathy may be cast in the discourse of fandom, for although it qualifies as a “hypothetical event” as discussed by Miller and Eisenberg (1988, 329), as a

failing of narrative methods of empathy testing, the involvement of fans in the discursive fan community discussed below demonstrates that these narratives may evoke a wide range of powerful emotions. The texts of speculative fiction are fairly abundant in the present entertainment climate, they occur with regularity and advanced notice, and not infrequently generate very large audiences of fans who are eager to discuss them. The discourse of empathy on the Internet among members of fandom is vast and largely untapped source of data that has a character between the questionnaire and the spontaneous utterance. This project seeks to understand the rules for empathy through an analysis of this text-directed, emotionally charged yet ordinary discourse. The research questions which frame this investigation are:

- Who is an appropriate recipient for empathy?
- What cultural models determine whether empathy is warranted?
- What cultural models shape how empathy is deployed?

This project used grounded theory and qualitative coding methods to probe these questions through the discourse of speculative fiction fandom. The first question began as a focus for the investigation of the remaining two, but through analyses became the answer to them instead. In the investigation of who is an appropriate recipient for empathy are uncovered the primary frames by which fans understand the other, who requires the understanding of empathy, and in what contexts empathy is used. While there are differences in the way fans talk about fictional others and analog, real world humans, those discourses share an empathic process which focuses on the moral agency of the empathic object or recipient, with the emotional response to that agency tempered by fans' assessment of free will. As the following investigation will demonstrate, the

answers to the who and what questions above form a chain that links moral agency, the capacity to make ethical decisions, to free will, an individual's control over their self-directed, goal-oriented behaviors. In the discourse of speculative fiction fandom, the landscape of empathy is deployed over a subject's imaginative constructions of these qualities.

## METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The most common form of participation among the SFF community is the discourse of the themes of speculative fiction on the Internet. That is not to say that it is more significant than other forms of participation such as fanfic, fan-authored texts that take place in speculative fiction universes, or costume play ('cosplay') where fans will create and wear elaborate costumes of their favorite speculative fiction characters. Fans who may never engage in costume play or attend a genre convention will as a regular part of their participation read professional articles, blogs, fan generated fiction, and contribute to the fan discourse on the texts and paratexts. This is the discourse of the themes of speculative fiction on the Internet. This wealth of textual data is often discounted as not valid for meaningful investigation by its "virtual" nature — in opposition to real world traces of cognition and affect, it is perceived as faulty, incomplete, and even intentionally false. Yet we know that the Internet has affected human interaction, psychology, pathology, community, and memory (Kirmayer, Raikhel and Rahimi 2013), which no one can argue are real world effects. The digital is not intangible, as I will discuss in the following chapter, but is a taken-for-granted aspect of ordinary every day life that is so ubiquitous we forget it is even there. Cosplay and the habitus of fandom blur the lines between real and virtual worlds, creating a bridge between behaviors of the body and cultural interaction on the Internet.

This is a grounded theory project, a general method intended to assist in arriving at a local understanding that is less biased towards the observer's overt and implicit assumptions. It is an emergence methodology in which data is continually analyzed as it is collected, and is antithetical to the type of hypothesis testing which brings explicit assumptions into the field. Because I wished to employ a method which served

postmodern reflexivity and yet allowed my personal experience as a member of SFF to have some value to the project, I chose grounded theory.

Two of the focal texts are cable television episodics, and the third is *Dragon Age: Origins* (DAI) a computer game. Beyond the speculative fiction genre requirements, I wanted to choose texts that had not yet been seen so that fans would have generally the same level of knowledge about its themes, characters, and narrative trajectories. These all fit this ‘freshness’ requirement, with one caveat. The episodics are both in their first year of airing; that is, they have not been seen by the public prior to the airings that SFF members are responding to in the discourse. DAI, on the other hand, is a new game but the third in a series of games which has developed an extensive and complex history for its characters. The two episodics are themselves based on a book (*The Leftovers* by Tom Perotta 2011) and a comic series (*Preacher* by Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon 2000). Some fans will be familiar with the source material, and others will not. Fandom for a game series seem in general to place more value on familiarity with the source material than do fans of television shows. Even so, I have witnessed friction between fans of a TV show with varying levels of knowledge of the source material before, where experts would shame more casual fans for their lack of knowledge. In those cases, casual fans would often shame experts for being so critical of fans. I have not seen this argument in the discourse over a game franchise, but there are a great many game franchises I have not investigated.

All three texts have the supernatural as a core feature. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is fantasy fiction, because its ‘what if’ elements include magic and magical creatures such as elves and dragons. It is set in a world of roughly Medieval technology and population

densities. Its supernatural elements include deities, spirits, demons, and an afterlife. *The Leftovers* ('*Leftovers*') and *Preacher* both have contemporary American settings. The world of *Preacher* includes vampires, angels, hell, and a heaven, and may be classified as supernatural fiction. *Leftovers* is difficult to classify, as it is similar to psychological thrillers a la *The Twilight Zone* where you as the audience are not entirely sure what is real and what is in the minds of the characters. The plot element that makes *Leftovers* speculative fiction actually occurs prior to the start of the narrative: the episodic itself is about the human reaction to a spectacular, impossible, and unexplained event. The supernatural elements that occur throughout the episodic are presented such that you aren't ever sure if they real or the product of a mind gone mad. This brings an added discourse on mental illness to its fandom, not unique to the discourse of this show but emphasized by this speculative element.

The data for these texts were collected each in one of three consecutive years. The *Leftovers* discourse is drawn from Twitter over the months of June through September 2014 during the first airing of its first season on HBO. The discourse over *Dragon Age: Inquisition* was collected from Facebook between September 2014 and January 2015, in the months bracketing its release. The most recent data comes from the discourse on Facebook over the new AMC television episodic *Preacher*, and was collected between May and July 2016. Unfortunately, the data collection phase ended before the *Preacher* series did, and the discourse does not capture fan feelings to the point that they had developed at the end of the season. This means that the data for this show is incomplete, but I do not believe this should taint the analyses. What is lost in this case is the opportunity to see how external influences and internal monologues change the fan's

perception of characters as their story arc unfolds. While interesting, one of the primary purposes of observing and collecting discourse about an as-yet unseen show as it first aired, rather than an existing serial or film with a loyal fan base, was to capture the spontaneity of social media discourse as fans broadcast their thoughts and feelings. What is retained is more important to this study, the prereflective and unconscious aspects of empathy embedded in this discourse.

In addition to the discourse centered on these three speculative fiction texts, there is a fourth collected and analyzed data set that is centered on the analog world and the persons in it. These are the narratives of self-care and mental illness, contained within discussion threads initiated by three popular male actors of speculative fiction television. In these threads, both empathic subject and object are analog, and the celebrity instigators as well as many of the participants self-identify as having mental illnesses. In the previous three sets we have fans expressing empathy for imaginary others, but here the empathic understanding is directed at other people. The participants of this discourse are both analog and digital, real and yet remote. Most of them are members of popular media fandoms, and a great many of those of speculative fiction. All of them have voluntarily gathered in the social media spaces around these three actors to share their experiences of mental illness and support each other. This is a community of empathy comprised of members of overlapping popular culture fandoms, primarily SFF, and offers a comparison to the first three data sets to an overlapping fan base with a discourse of empathy centered around intangible yet nonfictional human others.

All together there are a total of 255 tweet or comment ‘threads.’ A tweet thread is all of the tweets that occur in a particular six hour period during and after an episode

airing. The volume of tweets in a thread vary from text to text. In the case of *Leftovers*, the average tweet thread contained a thousand or so individual tweets. By comparison, a tweet thread for the episodic *Game of Thrones*, another HBO episodic, contained 8,400 individual tweets for the same six hour window. Participation in Facebook threads also vary. A Facebook thread consists of a posting, for this study those exclusively by the text producers or the official public face of the show, and all of the comments to that posting. In the case of DAI, the official FB page posted two to three posts a day on average. The resultant threads almost always had upwards of a thousand comments each. Unlike Twitter, where replies are limited to 140 characters, these replies could stretch to a reported 7,800 characters, and may be expanded even further by an oversight in the comment's edit function. It is rare for a reply to be longer than two or three paragraphs, and the average comment is still a few sentences long. A reply may also have replies of its own, which follow the same length conventions and averages as the first order replies. An average comment thread has about 10% replies to replies in this way.

Sorting through this volume of data presents challenges, and would be unmanageable in the time allotted for this project if it were not culled significantly before analysis. The first category of discourse to be removed are those which are repetitions of advertisements. This occurs almost exclusively in the tweets, where a user will post through some third party app or website a stock message broadcasting that they are watching the show while simultaneously advertising the service: “#Cairo #TheLeftovers #tvtag tvtag.com/1mRa4b1” indicates that the user is watching the *Leftovers* episode titled “Cairo” and used an Internet service by tvtag to do it. The link would lead you to the tvtag.com website where you could find out more about the service and download it to

your digital devices. A search of the data for “tvtag” proved that these tweets were never amended by the user to include additional information or commentary, and so it and similar marketing-related terms were added to a list of terms to exclude from queries such as word frequencies and association trees. Inasmuch as was possible, retweets were excluded from the data pool. This is a phenomenon exclusive in the data to tweet threads. Any tweet by any user may be ‘retweeted’ by any other user, essentially taking someone else’s tweet verbatim and posting it not as plagiarism but as a sharing. More often than not this is done with an intent of solidarity, as in an agreement with the sentiment or statement made by the original author, but sometimes it is done facetiously, such as to highlight some perceived quality of the absurd contained within. The latter is common to user accounts intended to be parodies. These do not occur in my data. Retweets are usually strict duplications of the original tweet, and as such were excluded when possible.

Because this project is about the discourse about fictional characters who are also nonhumans, when possible I excluded tweets and comments that were demonstrations of affection for the actors of the text’s characters. Tweets such as “I love you #Charlie!!! <3 <3 <3 #TheLeftovers” were excluded because they do not contribute to the understandings this project seeks. Unfortunately, this also means that certain word searches would be heavily weighted by discourse that is irrelevant. Love, for example, was used so often and in so many different ways that it would require its own research project to untangle. This didn’t mean that “love” was excluded from this project, only ubiquitous. Love does occur in many of the discourse examined by this project, but it appears mostly as a qualifier and not a driving factor for empathy. The intersection of love and empathy would make for an interesting query, but by the coding methods used it

did not in my data set appear to speak to the fundamental questions I was seeking to answer.

After all the above types of discourse were culled from the data, there remained in 255 threads some 32,000 individual fan comments. There are quite a variety of attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs present in this discourse, but not all of it is directed at or is about nonhuman characters or supernatural themes. In order for any particular fan discourse to remain in the data for further analyses, it need to pass the primary criteria of empathy: it had to be a statement or part of a discourse in which the speaker subject is expressing an understanding of or sensitivity to the thoughts, feelings, or behaviors of another. Second, with the exception of the self-care narratives, the primary or direct object of empathy had to be a fictional entity. Finally, relatedly, and again excluding the self-care narratives, empathy directed at ordinary fictional and analog humans was not included unless it happened to overlap with instances of the first and second criteria. For example, if an original post was about a particular character and the resulting thread turned from discussion about that character to empathy directed towards other fans in the discussion thread, I would keep that thread for further coding. However, if the original thread was game mechanics and a non sequitur empathic discourse erupted between two game fans, I would not code that thread. The result of this type of culling kept the data narrowly focused on a purposeful target, be it the entities of speculative fiction texts or members of the self-care community.

As the data was being collected I took notes on my observations and undertook process coding. Process coding tags segments of text with action words (e.g. taking a stand, surviving, didn't do anything, etc.) based on what words the speaker uses, in order

to access psychological processes and “search for *consequences* of action/interaction” (Saldana 2016, 111). These codes and ongoing notes and observations were entered into NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. After the data was collected and prior to culling, a number of word frequency, associative, and word map analyses were run on all of the data. Word frequency analyses were used to help identify some of the types of excluded tweets and posts discussed above. Once the duplicate and non-empathic discourse was removed, some additional classifications were assigned to the data that I felt might be useful, such as the gender of the speaker and the nature of the empathic object (human, supernatural, nonhuman animal, gender, etc.). Process coding revealed some emergent categories pertaining to conflict, and the first round of real post-data collection coding focused on higher level categorizations about the things being said (concept coding). Relationships between conflict and the concepts identified were probed, and the properties of conflict as they pertained to empathy began to emerge. Using NVivo I ran matrix analyses on the intersecting concepts and processes which illuminated further relationships between the subject, the strategies used to understand an object, and any affect associated with this process. Finally, when the central core categories of conflict and moral agency were evident, I probed the dimensions of the relationship through further text searches and relationship queries.

## THEORY AND KEY CONCEPTS

Speculative Fiction Fandom (SFF) has a number of attributes which pose a challenge to traditional ethnography. The first is whether or not SFF should qualify as a community, or if it is nothing more than an unrelated group of individual consumers. From this stems the question, what is speculative fiction? If SFF is a community, then members are more than consumers. As speculative fiction is the object of their fandom, I will discuss what it is and why the discourse around it provides a natural laboratory for understanding cultural frames.

This project has a focus of cognition and empathy. While these interests are discussed in much ethnographic work, is only the explicit focus of a small subset of anthropological investigation. One very non-traditional aspect of SFF is while there are meetings of members in traditional world spaces, such as taverns or conventions, the great deal of member interaction and community participation occur on the Internet, a non-geographic space which presents an illusion of immateriality for fandom. This illusion permeates perceptions of SFF, Internet users, social media, and generally challenges traditional notions of culture and community such that SFF, and even other forms of Internet-based fandom, are rarely, if ever, a topic for serious and respected anthropological investigation. This section will attempt to address these challenges and present an argument that supports the claim of SFF as a subculture and community through traditional and contemporary theorizations, beginning with what speculative fiction is.

### **Speculative Fiction**

Speculative fiction is an umbrella genre of fiction which includes the subgenres of science fiction, fantasy fiction, superhero and comic book fiction, horror fiction, and

supernatural fiction, among some others. It is produced with aims of eliciting an emotional response from its readers. This is, of course, not antithetical to other types of literature, such as drama, but what differentiates speculative fiction thematically is a questioning of what it means to be human under different imaginative environmental conditions: if some historical event had gone differently (What if the Axis powers had won World War II?), or if some people had unnatural or enhanced physical or mental abilities (What if people could set fires with their minds?), if there was a zombie epidemic (In New York City!), or if malignant ghosts could terrorize people (Through video devices!), etcetera. These fiction texts, be they written or filmic (movies, television, and other audiovisual media), have been described as thought experiments in which the reader may imaginatively explore the consequences of philosophical ideas such as the nature of humanity and free will (Schneider 2009). This speculative element, the 'what if' scenario, is what makes speculative fiction a catalyst for philosophical thought experiments which exercise an individual's cognitive processes such as the construction of empathy and empathic response (De Smedt and De Cruz 2015; Schneider 2009). These extra-technological and supernatural circumstances are introduced to "reveal something philosophically enlightening or fundamental about the topic in question" (Schneider 2009, 1) as it pertains to the human experience.

### **Empathy**

The Merriam-Webster definition for empathy is: "the [capacity for and] action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit

manner” (Merriam-Webster 2016). In this definition we have a subject’s relationship to an understanding of the experience of an object, such as another person. This definition has the subject simultaneously experiencing the feelings and not having the feelings of the empathic object, suggesting that some important difference between them is related to the origination of those feelings. But does it matter? The discovery of mirror neurons in the early 1990s by di Pelligrino et. al. demonstrated a physiological link between performing an action and watching someone perform that action, and this phenomenon has been documented in research spanning “experiences from speech to emotions to pain to music” (Marshall 2014, 6531). Merriam-Webster also defines empathy as an imaginative projection of a subjective state onto an object (2016). Is it an imaginative process that occurs when a mirror neuron reflects the emotions of another? Again, does it matter?

In the Merriam-Webster definition, empathic understanding itself occurs with the failure of the object to explicitly communicate its experience to the subject. Setting aside for a moment the processes by which the subject engages in this empathic activity, we have some kind of communication breakdown between object and subject. The Shannon-Weaver model of communication outlines a process whereby a message moves from an originator, which here would be our object; encodes it, such as a person might do with language; transmits it along a channel, such as speech; to where it may be received and decoded by a receiver, our subject. If communication is important to this definition of empathy, this model bullets that there are numerous ways between subject and object where communication could go awry.

The subject's relationship to understanding is represented by the receipt and decoding of the message. This aspect of empathy, the cognitive processes involved in the understanding of and some emotional resonance with another, is a focus of this investigation, but that is not to say it is the only salient aspect of the broader intersubjective process of empathy. The empathic communication may fail within the subject's cognitive processes, but what happens if the object of that empathy does not want to be understood? In *The Anthropology of Empathy: Experiencing the Lives of Others in Pacific Societies*, the afterword summarizes a theme of its various authors and their essays describing empathy as "a highly complex social and emotional process that can only become manifest through particular idioms of expression and within highly particularized cultural and moral contexts" (Rumsey 2011, 215). In one of its essays, Jason Throop highlights seven "communicative strategies for concealment" (Throop 2010, 124-5) employed in the social interactions of the people of Yap. These strategies have been shaped by their culture to obfuscate the "intentions, motives, feelings, goals, thoughts, etc." (Throop 2010, 124-5) of the speaker. In other words, a Yapese speaker and unwilling recipient of empathy who doesn't wish to be understood may employ strategies which take advantage of cultural norms and give them greater control over what messages and information are transmitted. For example, interrupting a speaker or asking of them too many direct questions is disfavored. A result of these norms is that people rarely give up information, such as emotional states or behavioral motives, that they did not choose to give up. One strategy an unwilling subject of empathy may choose to employ is to speak for long, uninterrupted stretches. Because interruptions are disfavored, the speaker may avoid questions and have greater control over their

communication. Two other strategies, speaking in opposites and heavy use of sarcasm, further help obscure the speaker's motives as they result in increased uncertainty of the message and a difficulty in decoding it. These are all examples of cultural involvement in the process of empathy beyond the subject who is trying to understand the other. The object of empathy, linguistic norms, and norms of social interaction all have a role.

Of course, a fictional character is fictional. If there are generally accepted rules for what is real and what is not that apply here, fictional characters are not real and therefore cannot have cognitive states to be understood. This line of thinking might lead one to claim that one cannot have true empathy for a fictional character because what is not real can neither want to communicate nor feel, as in Horton and Wohl's theory of parasocial interaction which "considered parasocial interaction an (illusionary) experience of the viewer" (Hartmann & Goldhoorn 2011, 1104). This is easier to believe when one forgets that characters are written by flesh and blood people, who have had real personal experiences, and through their writing are intentionally attempting to communicate some broader theme or themes of the writing through the behaviors of fictional characters. There is no one-to-one model of communication here, and subsequent research in communications has since re-conceptualized this interaction in part by looking at the longer-term relationships between audience and performer (Hartmann & Goldhoorn 2011). Unlike literature, popular media culture texts are never single authored. Within this thesis I will refer to the "producers" of a text, meant to represent the myriad of individual persons involved in the creation of any particular fiction or its characters. These may include individual lead authors, teams of writers, character artists, costumers, the actor, and any number of other professional persons

involved in the task of communicating a character's psychology and culture to an audience as part of storytelling.

The communication between character object and fan subject is not a one-to-one model. There are many fans, many producers, and indeed, many messages in the popular texts of speculative fiction. Neither does this relationship reflect a unidirectional model. In the context of popular media and fan community, the term "paratext" is used as a container for several things: an interaction and flow between the original media text, publicly available writings such as professional journalism and criticism, fan produced texts circulated on the Internet known as fan fiction or fanfic, costume play, commercial merchandising, and other text-related elements (Gerahty 2015). Henry Jenkins, himself a speculative fiction fan, has written extensively on fandom. The interaction of audience and text is central to what he terms "convergence culture," which widens our understanding of fan communication and intersubjectivity to include the way producers think about characters and fans. Convergence culture describes a participatory culture, rather than a unidirectional model in which text flows from producer to audience (Jenkins 2006).

If the relationship between fan and text is intersubjective, demonstrated by a multi-channel flow of information between fans and producers, we can't expect empathy in the context of fan community to be unidirectional either. In the community discourse about texts and fictional characters we have fans employing empathy towards fictional characters, themselves created by an array of others who want that character to be understood, but we also have fans frequently embedding information about themselves within this discourse. On the one hand we have the process of fans' empathy about

fictional characters, and on the other we have their attempts at being understood in the discourse. Who they wish to be understood by is not always evident or explicit, but it may be other fans, fandom on the whole, or even actors and writers. Each individual fan is both subject and object in the discourse, bringing a complex array of social, psychological, and cultural influences to the way in which empathy is experienced and performed. This empathy is aimed at fictional characters that are the product of multiple influences across multiple channels, and who each may each be transmitting different messages about the character and broader text. Those fans participating in the discourse of empathy may also make of themselves objects of understanding, available to other community members. It is a complex and daunting matrix of culture and humanity to untangle.

### **Cognition**

As discussed above, empathy has elements of reasoning, imagination, emotion, and other points in the constellation of neurological processes we call cognition. Cognition also includes memory and other conscious and unconscious aspects of a person's psychology:

“Cognition in this sense encompasses many and diverse aspects such as perception, attention, categorization, learning and memory, thinking, decision making, problem solving, and language use [6–8,12]. All of these processes are linked to reason and are thus considered to be exemplars of *cold cognition*.

Psychological processes, which contribute to *hot cognition* such as emotion and motivation, have substantial cognitive aspects as well” (Bender and Beller 2013, 43).

This division of hot and cold between reason and affect translates over to psychological and behavioral studies of empathy. The “hot-cold empathy gap” represents a bias between one’s emotional and rational states. According to psychologist and founder of neuroeconomics George Loewenstein, who coined the phrase, people have a tendency to underestimate just how much sudden and powerful emotion will affect their motives and behaviors. This bias occurs whether one is in a ‘hot’ or visceral stage, and cannot see just how much they are motivated by emotion and not rationality, or whether one is in a ‘cold’ or less emotional stage, and cannot imagine that they will be that affected by visceral emotions. (Loewenstein 2005). Hot-cold empathy is by this definition a self-directed process of empathy, with one’s attempt (as a subject) at understanding their own behaviors (as the object) affected by one’s present emotional state.

To assist in the deconstruction of the discourse of empathy and the cultural models for empathy reflected in that discourse, this project draws from theory within psychological and cognitive anthropology to help frame the relationship between cognition, culture, and fan community. Psychological anthropology frames its investigations of culture and the human experience through a lens which places particular weight on thoughts, feelings, experiences, and other topics associated psychology and cognition. It is a fairly broad umbrella spanning related perspectives on the cognition and culture relationship. A subfield of anthropology as old as psychology, today it would be more appropriate to categorize it as a “social anthropology of cognition” (Lave 1998, 1) for its aims towards understanding the culture and cognition relationship. Among the perspectives under this umbrella are cognitive anthropology and phenomenology. Cognitive anthropology offers a method for understanding cognition and culture that

allows for the categorization of knowledge and understanding into conceptual groupings that an individual will draw from as they spontaneously experience and respond to the world around them (D'Andrade, et al., 1992). This theory accounts for the fact that persons may hold conflicting models for the same concept, and allows for an analysis that moves beyond framing behaviors as simple acceptance or rejection of available cultural models. Cultural schema theory and cultural modeling are another means of understanding cognition that may be employed in the analysis of discourse to understand the cultural models that shape cognition through an analysis of words, concepts, phrases, and other linguistic devices (Quinn 2005).

Cultural modeling and cognitive schema theory offer both high level theory and general methods for understanding cognition. Cognition occurs internally, but what we know cannot be separated from how we know it (Bender and Beller 2013; Bang, Medin and Atran 2007), which is external. The external clues we leave of our internal states, such as in discourse, may be examined by an observer and organized into recurring themes, and the relationships between these noted and tested against other discourse. By acknowledging the normalcy of conflicting cultural models held by individuals, cognitive schema theory broadens understanding of local culture by allowing statistical variance in reported beliefs and behavior to contribute to meaning rather than being excluded as outliers and irregularities. Cultural modeling is not a single method but a toolkit of interdisciplinary methods, such as interviews, surveys, quantitative analyses of data, and other mixed methods approaches to triangulating understanding of local meaning (Kirner 2016).

Phenomenology is the philosophical study of experience. Edmund Husserl, one of the founders of the school of phenomenology, felt that in order to get at the first-person perspective of experience, it needed to be bracketed into experience as lived and experience as reflected upon. He called these the natural attitude and phenomenological attitude (Sokolowski 2000). The natural attitude was defined as our ordinary way of being, experiencing our surroundings without deliberate reflection, focused on the task at hand and going about our lives with intention focused outwardly. Here “natural” means unreflexive, a state of being where being is simply being. The natural state may also be the pre-attentive, rather than prereflective; both a product of acculturation or enculturation, and both beyond or beneath our ordinary, everyday notice. The main difference is the former becomes a preconscious activity because we have done it repetitiously into a subconscious mind that takes care of things, and the latter is unconscious and drilled into us by our culture and beneath our notice.

Together these experiential perspectives are reflected in Pierre Bourdieu’s description of ‘habitus’ as an embodied system of culturally acquired structures which shape our largely *pre-reflective* [and pre-attentive] *responses* to external stimuli (Grenfell 2008). This aspect of habitus is the “systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, [] practices and representations which can be ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without [] presupposing a conscious aiming at ends” (Bourdieu 1977, 72). Bourdieu goes on to explain that habitus exists to allow people to competently function in the various fields in which they are likely to operate without having to consciously consider all the rules of behavior and culture necessary to perform those functions. The habitus is not constructed by continuous conscious orchestration and planning. The habitus is largely performed in

the phenomenological “natural” state, unreflexive of the minutia of dispositions.

Although there is this relationship between habitus and prereflexivity, one phenomenological critique of Bourdieu is that his habitus does not give great weight to the input on habitus of individual experience, instead focusing on the culturally shared aspects of habitus (D'Andrade, et al. 1992).

The second phenomenological category of experience is the phenomenological, one's reflection on the “natural,” when we consciously attempt to understand and categorize our experience and way of being, the opposite of the non- or pre-reflective state of the natural attitude (Sokolowski 2000). This division of experience into outward- and inward- directed is a common theme within cognitive and psychological anthropology, and this attitude is where much analysis is done. The phenomenological attitude is what one has when the researcher asks her questions of informants in the field or in the interview, a conscious reflection that only exists when we are broken from our ordinary, prereflective state of being, and are forced to assemble our explanations for feeling or thinking as we do.

Cognitive schemas exist on both of these experiential levels, natural and phenomenological. They are “learned, internalized patterns of thought-feeling that mediate [...] the interpretation of ongoing experience” (Strauss 1992, 3) and organize the way we see and respond to the world. Many of these cognitive schemas exist beneath our notice, and, like Bourdieu's habitus, are performed prereflectively as we go about our daily lives. Cognitive schema theory recognizes, however, that “the social order is not a master programmer” (Strauss 1992, 1) and we are able to consciously choose from a

range of behaviors based on these largely unconscious schemas in order to pursue our individual goals and aims.

This anthropological focus on empathy is not always directed at the others of our analysis. The reflexive turn of postmodernism instigated a trend of examining our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the field. Renato Rosaldo's famously personal article, "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage" (Rosaldo 1993), discusses empathy of the ethnographer, and how his thoughts and feelings about the Ilongot changed after he experienced deep grief. Here we have the intrusion of personal experience on the deployment of empathy, and an empathy which is dynamic, changing, and contextual. Rosaldo's pain is not well-hidden beneath the matter-of-fact discussion of the repositioning of ethnographers in the field as they seek to understand their research communities; it is bare when he discusses the swift and accidental death of his wife and co-investigator, Michelle Rosaldo. He discussed his feelings in the context of the anthropological study of death, grief, and funerary rites, and he reframed his understanding of the Ilongot headhunting ritual both based on his own experiences and in the context of the field of study. What there was less of, however, was an investigation into the aspects of his own culture which shaped his cognition at each change in perspective. Is there some universal quantity of grief that results in homicidal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, or is there some cultural feature that makes it difficult to connect on some "equal" footing with the cognition of others? Rosaldo is clear that we should not take the construction of any universal to be the aim of his writing, instead asking for a focus on the dynamic nature of culture and how the experience of experience may change over time.

How empathy is constructed, employed, and reacted to is culturally shaped, and the treatment of empathy within speculative fiction and other literatures reflect different cultural notions about who is eligible to feel and receive empathy, how it operates in different circumstances, and how culture, history, and individual experience may affect it (Hammond and Kim 2014). The discourse of Speculative Fan Fiction is a natural laboratory for the examination of ordinary empathy because it is a field upon which fans perform a variety of empathies on a variety of objects and yet within in the same contexts. They are reacting to and interacting with the same pool of speculative fiction texts. They are identifiable as fans by the ways that they draw from this same broad pool of genre knowledge in demonstrating their cultural competency, and with the help of those “particular idioms of expression” (Rumsey 2011, 215) through which empathy is manifest underscoring their interest and passion. These are speculative fiction fans who communicate their own experiences and understandings to each other through these same texts and genre expressions.

### **Community**

The concept of community is well used in the academic literature about social groups, but it is rarely well defined. Community is loosely understood as a group of persons or entities who share a common interest or purpose, rely on each other, share values, and have some affinity for each other. Traditionally communities were considered geographical groupings, or persons who exist in some proximity to each other. This may be stretched to consider that members of the same religion in different countries may be part of the same community. Ethnography has since its beginning had the concept of community at its core, but what precisely constitutes a community is

frequently taken for granted and not well defined beyond the vague description above. The lack of description coupled with a traditional reliance on geography creates problems for new forms of community, such as those created by globalization discussed earlier.

The speculative fiction fan community has always straddled the line between geographic and non- geographic interactions. In the 1930's when speculative fiction literature became popularized in printed periodicals, such as *Weird Tales* (1923 - 1986) and other so-called pulp magazines, aficionados of the genre would discuss story themes in letters to the editors which would be published in subsequent issues. This is the beginning of the discursive practice of speculative fiction fandom, as this fan literary criticism and commentary became a part of the process of both experiencing and producing speculative fiction. This coincided with the creation of small, "geographically proximate" (Bacon-Smith 2000) fan groupings in urban regions that in 1936 produced the first speculative fiction convention in Philadelphia, Worldcon. Although the pulp magazines all but died out in the 1950s and early 1960s, the convention phenomenon grew steadily until an annual circuit of conventions developed, much like today, where conventions occur in the same places at the same time of year, every year, and frequently to growing attendance. Although these conventions occur in geographic space, attendees may never see each other at any other time, and the convention itself allows the opportunity for fans to engage in an interpersonal, physical interaction that they do not have the rest of the year because of participants' geographic distribution. This year I attended Comic-Con in San Diego, the USA's largest speculative fiction convention with over 553,000 attendees (David 2016), and there were fans present from all over the world.

The Internet provided a space where the discursive practice developed in the letters to the editor could be employed in a virtual setting that supplemented the infrequent social contact offered by conventions. Speculative fiction fandom has been bound to the Internet from its very beginnings: “Discussion lists did not begin with USENET; SF-Lovers, the first not-for-research email list that arose on AARPANET, continues as a moderated digest” (Bacon-Smith 2000, 78). AARPANET first appeared in the mid 1970’s, and was a long time before it resembled the worldwide network of computers we know as the Internet today (Bacon-Smith 2000). In her book *Science Fiction Culture*, Camille Bacon-Smith offers a figure to demonstrate just how large fandom on the Internet is: 100,000 hits on the search engine Alta Vista (2000, 85). Today, 16 years later, a search for “science fiction” on the search engine Google found *over 1000 times* more entries — so many that the number reads only “about 103,000,000 hits.”

A great number of people with a high degree of interest in a popular culture literature genre do not necessarily a community make, and for a while speculative fiction fandom was treated as a quirky subset of consumer culture. The earliest scholars of fandom began in the 1980s and 1990s to examine fan culture and stretched the definition of community as they sought to consider “the consumption of popular mass media [as] a site of power struggles” between the “strategies of the powerful and the tactics of the disempowered” (Gray et. al. 2007, 1). Henry Jenkins, one of the leading scholars of social media and popular culture, defined his “convergence culture” as a collective strategy at the intersection the intersection of corporate media, popular culture, and grassroots movements such as amateur cultural production (Jenkins 2006). Early mass

communication scholarship was dominated by a unidirectional perspective in which the audience was mere consumer. Jenkins' consideration for citizen resistance and fan performance supported the notion that fandom was a community in a larger sense of the word, and thus a subject worthy of study (Grey et. al. 2007).

So how do we define community? Perspectives and definitions of community that rely on geographic proximity or physical interactions are relics, for although many communities do exist in geographic space, the ubiquity of the Internet in many parts of the world makes it nearly impossible to rule out the digital as a continuation of any group's cultural space. It is important to develop a standard for community which relies more strongly on other measures. For the purposes of this research I have chosen to use a standard for community which relies on a 'psychological sense of community' (PSOC), a measure which considers needs fulfilment, shared emotional connection, and a common symbolic system as being essential identifiers of community, but places a greater emphasis on self-identification over geographic proximity (Obst and White 2007). Also crucial to this model is members' experience of and feelings about the community, such as whether or not they feel supported in some way by the community, or if their participation in the community is valued. The weight given to experience in this community model makes phenomenology, the philosophical study of experience, a natural perspective through which to investigate the community of Speculative Fiction Fandom.

### **Intangibility**

For a long time, ethnographic investigations of non-Western cultures were dominated by the boundaries of geographic space. Islands, isolated enclaves, and ethnic

communities within state boundaries were the norm, and with good reason. The world exists in geographic space, and has for the whole of humanity. Barring extraordinary circumstances, humans across time do seem in general to prefer remaining in or near the place of their ancestors. While there are now and have always been mobile and nomadic cultures, even these have geographic ranges, and tend to have homesteads that they periodically return to. Recently published results of a long-term study of 20,000 American senior citizens found that 51% lived within 10 miles of an adult child, and an additional 10% lived with one (HRS 2015). Residence patterns may too vary by culture, but the tendency of communities to be contained in geographic space is common to the human experience. This tendency resulted in the natural categorization of cultures by a geographic region: the Nuer of the Sudan (Gluckman 1955); the Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, and Kwakiutl of the Northwest American Coast (Mauss 1925); and Malaysian women factory workers (Ong 1988). And why not? Even if a Haida should end up in London at a tea shop or on a geotour of Madagascar, neither of which are impossibilities in today's world, the whole of the culture does not move with her.

The organization of cultures by the tangible quality of geographic space was not directly challenged by postmodernism, and indeed its distaste for universal declarations would seem to support geographic specificity and very local narratives. Since the introduction of postmodernism, however, there have been rapid and massive changes to global mobility, driven by forces of technology, economics, and politics. The world is becoming increasingly interconnected in ways unprecedented in human history. As I will discuss shortly, academics of postcolonialism and globalization are among those who became interested in reformulating ethnography to account for new conditions of

mobility and global interconnectedness. Such challenges to thinking about geography and culture came about in part through the reflexivity of postmodernism and the questioning of how and why we do what we do, part of its job being to interrogate assumptions.

One challenged assumption is that a nation comprised a unique ethnic character by virtue of its formal borders. This idea is related to the nationalist projects of the 19th century, during which governments had an active interest in promoting histories and qualities to unify its people. The meticulous folklore collections of Johann Gottfried Herder and Jacob Grimm of this time are prime examples of the selection and use of culture to promote a national character. The tradition of bundling our communities of study within a geographic or physical space was challenged by large-scale globalization, the state of world affairs where migrants, refugees, transnational workers, multinational industry, and others traverse and permeate formal state borders with the shifting of global economic interests and (often related) political strife. Such unprecedented movement of bodies across physical borders and “traditional” community boundaries challenge ethnographies of the local. How do you conceive, for example, the Syrian refugee community as it is presently fragmented and dispersed around the world? What does it mean to be a diaspora community, or a migrant worker? To live in a border community? What does it mean to be an indigenous community situated on ancestral territory yet encompassed by the formal geographic boundaries of transplanted power structures and historical oppressors, as in parts of South America? What does it mean if you’ve been relocated away from the place of your ancestors, as with many Native Americans? In the case of SFF, what does it mean to belong to a community that is geographically dispersed and whose regular places of meeting do not occur in physical

space? These questions can only begin to be answered when the role of geography in culture is reconsidered. As we will see, studies of globalism have come up with ways to deal with this problem.

### **Digital and Analog**

At its most basic, the digital is defined as everything that has been reduced to binary code, a series of zeroes and ones: computer games, social media, videos of your cat, the news, family photos from the 1800's that have been scanned and digitized, and, of course, the Internet. The copious and intangible digital travels across tangible space without being seen, from device to device, and around the world nearly instantaneously; yet our bodies stay behind, their trajectories seemingly unaltered by our digital interactions. The intangible digital seems much like the intangible mind, yet free from the constraints of the material or the body: digitized videos and photographs are memories that may be called upon again and again, but unlike their tangible counterparts, will not degrade with each use, and unlike brains, will be reproduced infallibly regardless of how old they may be. Untethered from the material, the digital has no place in physical space, is contained by no national borders, and once the digital has joined with the Internet, like the electron, exists potentially anywhere in the world and is always manifest when you look for it.

None of this is true, but it illustrates the illusion of immateriality which surrounds the Digital. The digital is placed in opposition to the analog world, which is the physical world of bodies, of the tangible, geographies, and traditional ethnographic projects. When these two are placed side by side, the analog is frequently referred to the "real world" and the digital as the "virtual," associating them with not only the binaries

associated with mind and body discussed above, but of real and unreal, truth and fiction. New technologies regularly emerge to serve us the digital and we quickly assimilate them, so that soon they become a normalized and taken-for-granted aspect of our daily lives (Horst and Miller 2012). These illusions mask the materiality of the digital, and unless the technology breaks down, we forget the role of computers, network wires, electrical connections, wireless signals, and our phones even as we hold them (Blanchette 2011). Because of this illusion of immateriality, the digital presents a new challenge to the “fundamental opposition[s] between spirit and matter, mind and body, and [the] real and unreal.” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 8)

Although the digital does present a unique and fairly new field upon which these binaries and boundaries may pose challenges to ethnography, these problems are not unique to the digital. Issues of contested geography, transnationalism, multiculturalism, and their relationship to various overlapping aspects of culture, the body, and the social are tackled by postmodern scholars such as those of globalization. They offer conceptual tools to be used in navigating the complex and overlapping world in which we live, and for investigating the multiple flows between agents, places, structures, and institutions. For such theorizations of the global, the geographic is only one factor in this interactive soup, and one that is not necessarily privileged over others. Arjun Appadurai (1990) substitutes the focus on geographic landscapes with a focus on five metaphorical landscapes across which ideas, finance, cultures, technologies, and media flow. He suggests we investigate how these ‘scapes intersect and interact within the communities we study. These communities still have geographic connections, but they are no longer necessarily physically located within them. Characteristics of culture based physically in

geographic space in the globalized world “are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe” (Appadurai 1990, 296-7), a geography that lives only in the memory of cultural members that may never have physically entered those spaces. His theorizations occur at the dawn of the Digital Age, when personal computer and cellular phone ownership were rare, but even so, Appadurai’s landscapes are easily transposed onto the non-geographic spaces of the Internet and the cultures represented by it. By Appadurai’s categorizations, the Internet is a technoscape and *channel* for the ideologies of both the local and global.

Another problem of geography, considered by postcolonial studies, is how to think about culture as neither an impermeable enclave of ethnic practice nor a malleable subaltern population without say in the shape its culture takes. Among Edward Said’s critiques of orientalism was the assumption made by Europeans that non-Western cultures were inferior by their very nature (Said 1978). By this viewpoint, colonialism was justified because the subordinate needed to be dominated. All perspectives on how people, structures, and organizations should function were based on this singular perspective, that by being the superior culture, the West understood how things should be done. One response to orientalism and the Eurocentric viewpoint was to drop discussions of the European and non-indigenous colonial powers from the discourse of the formerly colonized, so refusing to acknowledge influence on the development of its culture (Scott 1995). David Scott’s answer to this problem of overlapping geographies of indigenous and non-indigenous is to look at the intersections of politics, social practices, concepts of race, and “different modes of organizing power” (Scott 1995, 197) in

particular geographic locations, considering how common aspects of colonialism manifest in localities with their own political and social histories.

These approaches to the challenges made by geography to ethnography have two commonalities of note. The first is both Appadurai and Scott decenter geography by offering new categorizations by which to explore culture. Neither discards the notion of geographic space, but a people's physical base within it ceases to be a primary defining characteristic of a culture. Geography is one of many "terrain[s] available for the colonized to produce their responses" (Scott 1995, 197). Appadurai's five landscapes are organized differently but are no less terrains upon which ideas, objects, bodies, and economic factors may be unmoored from geography yet illuminate culture and community. The second idea challenged by both their approaches is the perspective that there is a dominant group whose culture will subvert that of the subordinate groups. For postcolonial theorists this was a rejection of orientalism, and Scott sought to avoid this trap by thinking about an intersubjective interaction between colonial governments and indigenous peoples. Appadurai was concerned about homogenization arguments in the discourse of globalization and the Eurocentric assumption that American and corporate culture will dominate wherever it travels. Like Scott, he decentered this perspective and used his 'scapes to consider global flows of cultures and the ways in which such new influences tend to be indigenized (Appadurai 1990).

The diminishing relevance of the geographic in its power to define us and the drive to formulate new ways of conceiving relationships in an increasingly globalized world without assuming the dyad of dominant and submissive culture bring us back to the most literal binary of all, the digital. Why is this binary aspect of digital culture

important, and significant to differentiate it from, say, other forms of media? Why should it matter whether an American film that espouses Neoliberal ideals is globally disseminated in cellulose or download? The digital has introduced a new kind of mobility for ideas, allowing them to travel anywhere digital technology exists. Today, this is billions of homes, businesses, purses and pockets around the world, among nearly every known cultural group. I once had a conversation with a professor in which he was encouraged by the chief of his near-isolated Pacific island ethnographic community to surrender his laptop and library of Hollywood films on disc as compensation for his continued stay. The chief further requested specific films, all global blockbuster films of the 1980's, surprising the then-young researcher. This conversation between chief and ethnographer occurred in the early 2000s, before the public Internet had widespread world penetration. Prior to the Digital Age such a request would have likely resulted in disappointment: reels of film and the equipment to project them are less accessible, less portable, and less likely to be included in the luggage of a young ethnographer doing his dissertation research. The digital may not be responsible for bringing knowledge of specific Hollywood films to this chief, but it is the increasingly effective technoscapes of the digital that brought him, and billions of others, to the thing itself.

This is the geographic location of fandom for speculative fiction fans and other fans around the world: nowhere and everywhere. The intangible nowhere of the Internet is no less real than the now taken-for-granted phone in your pocket, your desktop at home, or even perhaps on the TV at the restaurant or gas station. As speculative fiction gains popularity, more media outlets are using it in their content. Even the news is not immune. According to the Pew Research Center, the most common news people see is

entertainment news (Anderson and Caumont 2014). They estimated that 30% of Americans get their news from Facebook, and 73% of that news is entertainment. Of the Daily News' top 25 entertainment stories of 2014, six were about celebrities best known or at least well-associated with highly successful speculative fiction films or television, including Robin Williams' suicide (*Mork and Mindy*), Jennifer Lawrence's nude photo leak (*Hunger Games*), and Bryan Singer's sexual assault scandal (*X-Men*). Half of the top 50 grossing films of 2014 were speculative fiction ("2014 Domestic Grosses" 2016). The paratexts of speculative fiction are becoming ubiquitous.

## **Culture**

The intersection of culture and cognition is generally less studied than either separately, but academic investigation into popular culture is rare outside of sociology, media, and communication studies. Anthropology is classically the field which studies the culture of groups through their common traditions. This includes but is not limited to cultural traditions of literature, art, or folklore, and its studies range from inquiries into how these traditions reflect shared beliefs, understandings, or knowledge of the group. Yet popular culture studies rarely appear in widely circulated journals of anthropology outside folkloristics. The folklorist's (or folkloristic) investigation of popular culture is often undertaken from a literature analysis perspective, which reflects on the ways in which popular culture speculative fiction texts reflect contemporary human experience and cultural paradigms. For example, the cultural meaning of supernatural creatures prevalent in the Japanese animated speculative fiction subgenres of anime and manga has been connected to Japanese folk knowledge, such as how to recognize good monks, bad monks, and rowdy monks (Shamoon 2013). The changing role of the African-American

male in speculative fiction cinema over the past century, described as moving from the first victim of the antagonist to today's warrior uniquely qualified to save the day through the skillful application of violence, has been equated to the changing view of African American males in American society from the weak and pitiful to a man as having a power base which individuates them from the white American community and acknowledges a strong quality of survival (Bakke 2010). Speculative fiction may reflect cultural constructions of identity and social structure (Laba 2008), or may critically address issues of feminism, gender identity, race, and politics (Gordon 2009).

While there is no shortage of literature analysis of speculative fiction texts which connects its themes to issues of importance to contemporary people, the communities of fandom associated with popular culture speculative fiction are often written off as mere consumer culture (Jenkins 2006; Laba 2008; Carroll and Tafoya 2000). Consumer culture has a unidirectional flow from producer to consumer, whereas community is an ongoing interaction between members of the group. Many of the academics who have in the past decade been calling for a serious investigation of fan cultures have described in their defense the rich and multilayered interplay between the producers of speculative fiction and the fan community. For these researchers, philosophers, and theorists, the speculative fiction texts of popular media culture include not just films, televisions, and books, but a field of fan generated texts, performances, professional journalism, commercial merchandising, and other associated traditional and material culture (Geraghty 2015; Jenkins 2006; Hills 2015) in a broadening of popular media culture that considers it together as a 'paratext.' (Geraghty 2015) These paratexts are all part of a fan's

cultural knowledge of the fandom to which they belong, whether they personally engage in certain practices or not.

Speculative Fiction Fandom (SFF) has in its short life developed several traditions and practices that are recognized, though not necessarily performed, by many of its members. For example, there is cosplay, a type of role playing that involves costuming oneself in direct and creative representations of speculative fiction characters, generally for public performance and photography. There are now a dozen or so large comic conventions in major cities around the country that occur at different times of the year at which cosplay is a regular, unofficial feature, performed by a small but highly visible portion of the population. These conventions themselves are becoming a tradition among the community of fandom, as many are coming to consider attendance at Comic-Con in San Diego as a pilgrimage which must be undertaken at some point in a fan's life, the SFF hajj. Collecting speculative fiction memorabilia, such as action figurines, lunchboxes, LEGO sets, or Funko POP bobble-heads is also a common feature of SFF, and is a way to show cultural competence, demonstrate membership in the community, and broadcast aspects of identity, personality, and special subgroup interest (e.g. manga or Steampunk, subgenres of speculative fiction).

### **Habitus of Fandom**

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus offers one explanation for the penetration of knowledge about fan practice among members of SFF. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* has been extensively developed in the decades since he himself adapted it, by a variety of theorists and academic disciplines. A basic operating definition of habitus is that it is a set of dispositions that regulate our behavior. It is structured by one's personal,

social, and cultural experiences, and is structuring of our present and future behaviors. The habitus is employed in our daily lives as we prereflectively move from one social setting to the next, what Bourdieu calls a field. Habitus is our way of being, socially and culturally constituted, making clear distinctions between thought, feeling, and action impossible. For example, you cannot separate the feeling of ease you may have in a familiar setting from the way your body moves in that setting, from the language you choose in that setting, from how you emotionally respond to those you interact with in that setting. Habitus is an analytical container for all of these things, conceived as a tool for thinking about the relationships between the self and the social.

Another way to think about habitus is as an unconscious strategy, constructed of the available evidence, to help a cultural member function in the most likely scenarios they will find themselves. Bourdieu called these scenarios fields, the settings in which cultural members interacted with each other based on an interpretation of the local rules of engagement, or doxa. Habitus is an accumulation of experiences molded into practice, but that does not mean that an individual is simply acting out a cultural script. Potentially all of the behaviors we witness, all the social roles in all of the different social settings we encounter, are known to us. We choose, whether or not we know it, from an array of ways-of-being that grows wider as we live and experience the new.

Habitus is useful as a tool for thinking about the community of fandom and its problem of digital intangibility. The most basic interaction between person and the digital is at the meeting of body, mind, and machine. How many of us have typed furiously at a keyboard when typing a frustrating email, or while writing a particularly cathartic journal entry? Any gamer who has had ‘that feeling’ in the pit of their stomach when their first-

person avatar dives off a cliff or some other precipice can attest to the involvement of the digital in the body. What do we have to do to the body to be able to background the physical and transfer a portion our focus to a digital body, as do first-person gamers? Is the role of the social in this process why images of gamers are so similar? We already know that dress and personal adornment reflect social status, class, rebellion and conformity, and group membership, among others. The social in the digital spaces such as the Internet are no less real in their power to affect habitus.

The concept of habitus has also proven useful in mitigating the problem of geographic space. Academics investigating transnational communities which cross geographic boundaries are finding today an increasing reliance on the digital and the Internet in maintaining community ties. Mihaela Nedelcu (2012) argues that a transnational habitus is developed in this non-geographic interaction: transnational social fields which connect disparate geographic spaces and cross state and ethnic borders are inflected by the local as immigrants are socialized into overlapping geographic spaces and to associated cultural norms. This process of socialization isn't limited to analog spaces, as the Internet may be relied upon to offer information about customs, practices, subcommunities, and other frames of local knowledge. Habitus then becomes a process within which the digital and the analog intersect, and the unreal is made real. A reconsideration of the Digital that takes into account "the materiality of everyday digital practices" (Doorn 2011, 531) is necessary, and may be facilitated through the use of habitus as a device.

With the illusion of geographic immateriality dispelled and habitus as a potential means to break down the borders between the digital and the analog, we may turn now to

the concept of *fandom*, a form of community which has particularly thrived in the Digital Age. Fandom is a community of aficionados of some cultural artifact or object. It “is a collective strategy and a communal effort to form” (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington 2007, 2) discursive communities which interpret fan objects. These objects include sports, genres of literature, and musical styles, among many others. People may be objectified in their relationships to broader fan object categories, and become themselves a fan object, such as The Beatles as an exemplar of Rock and Roll, or Neil DeGrasse Tyson as an exemplar of contemporary positivist science. Neither fandoms nor fans are uniform, and the habitus of fans is influenced by the rules of their particular fandom. Christine Hine (2011) conducted an ethnographic exploration of the online fandom surrounding the television show *Antiques Roadshow*, in which experts travel the country (U.S. and England) and appraise local antiques. Her interest was in the ways in which fans had knowledge of the way the show worked, how to participate, and what forms of participation were accepted and expected. This exploration, she insisted, required investigation into both online and local forms of participation to understand how fandom was intertwined with everyday life. While she falls short of suggesting a phenomenological approach to digital community and culture, she does emphasize that by including analog spaces in digital ethnography we may offset the “loss of depth and contextualizing information [when we focus only] on that data which is easily found by dominant search engines” (Hine 2011, 567).

Fan objects are not exclusively drawn from Western popular culture, but American films, television, and books are consistently the highest selling popular culture texts in the world. The worldwide dissemination of American popular culture is a subject

of interest to those who study globalization. Often portrayed as a homogenizing force and source of neoliberal hegemony (Ortner 2014; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Kariko 2009), habitus is one tool used to counter this position, demonstrating how popular culture is differently received and locally inflected. Alan O'Connor (2004) compared the subculture associated with punk rock music in Barcelona and Mexico City, and found marked differences in styles of dress, the types of spaces they occupied, resource availability, and social contexts of punk concerts between them. According to O'Connor, punk from the U.S. dominates global punk fandom, but its "influence[] arrive[s] into a local habitus which determines whether and how they will be accepted" (2004, 190). In Barcelona, public commercial spaces are available to punk culture, and these spaces act as community centers where politics and resistance are discussed. Punk is an accepted and even welcome aspect of the urban subculture there, unlike in Mexico City, where punks feel marginalized even by the organizers of music counterculture. The habitus of Mexican punks is shaped by older, well known bands who play music associated with strong social bonds within the community yet tied to the mobility of Mexican socioeconomic life. Because punk as a youth culture is marginalized in Mexico, there are far fewer venues for purchasing punk music than in Spain, where the youth culture is comparatively embraced. As a result, Mexican punks rely more heavily on the Internet for music acquisition, and it is common to exchange email addresses when meeting new punks to increase access to music. By contrast, Spanish punks may gather in many public spaces with relative impunity to share music in an analog setting. Local attitudes towards punk culture in both countries and its associated political ideologies have an effect on the

habitus of punks because the rules of their engagement in society differ — one accepted, another marginalized.

Similarly, the habitus of hip-hop fandom has been investigated by several scholars. Lin and Man consider the “language use, skills, and orientations, dispositions, attitudes, and schemes of perception (also called *habitus*) that a child is endowed with by virtue of socialization into her/his family and community” (Lin and Man 2011, 201) of hip hop in Hong Kong. Used as a means to teach English to a largely homogenous ethnic, Cantonese speaking Chinese, Lin and Man found that although these students had little if any prior experience with hip-hop, features of the musical genre had rapid effects on their identity formation. For example, features of hip-hop that promoted ironic humor, punning, and the clever insertion of the metaphorical and “semantically or logically unexpected” resulted in “[an embodied] self-assertive attitude” (Lin and Man 2011, 204) among students in later interview settings. Here again we have a global popular culture, this time hip-hop, having a direct effect on the habitus of its audience.

In another example of the effects of hip-hop on the habitus of its fans, in Chicago, white female outsiders to the largely male black and Latino hip-hop culture must challenge norms of authenticity and “reconfigure the norms of hip-hop culture to suit their own habitus” (Harkness 2012, 296). They must learn the characteristics of insiders and adopt an authentic habitus, yet by virtue of being outsiders must downplay the excluding racial and gendered categories and emphasize important interpretive ones. Hip-hop not only shapes their habitus as part of their acculturation into the community, allowing them to demonstrate their membership by understanding and embodiment of

community norms, but must additionally find ways to both emphasize and de-emphasize their whiteness as a potential disqualifier of membership in that community.

Perhaps the most spectacular form of participation in the fandom of Speculative Fiction is cosplay. Cosplay, abbreviated from 'costume play,' is a fan practice in which members wear handmade or commercially manufactured costumes of favorite speculative fiction characters at genre conventions, and in photographs which they share with other fans on the Internet. Matthew Hale's ethnography of convention culture in the U.S. (2014) discussed how speculative fiction fans embodied textual elements of speculative fiction popular media texts in their convention performance. He discusses SFF as a social space and a participatory culture in which the effective use of signs drawn from shared cultural texts are an important part of fan identity, and signal to other fans one's commitment to the genre and the texts themselves. Cosplay is an extreme example of this commitment. As 'play' suggests, this is more than mere costuming. Successful cosplay requires not only detailed costume mimicry, but a fine understanding of the texts themselves. For example, the character of Wonder Woman has gone through several costume changes since her introduction in 1941, and in that time has appeared in comic books, illustrated novels, television shows, and films. These costume changes may correspond to changes in story arcs and character trajectories, changes in attitudes about women, or changes to the personality of Wonder Woman herself. Which Wonder Woman would you cosplay? Thoughtful cosplay must take such things into account.

Cosplay is regular and expected part of the speculative fiction convention experience, but images of cosplay reach far more fans via the Internet than do those who witness it firsthand. More importantly, there is an active and multifaceted discourse

surrounding cosplay and artistry, performance, authenticity, identity, and bodies. Cosplay Is Not Consent is an online community of cosplayers and costume enthusiasts fighting against the sexual harassment and assault of women cosplayers at conventions, an unfortunately common event. They are fighting against a discourse in which some fans, mostly but not exclusively men, assert that women who choose to dress in highly sexualized and revealing costumes are “asking for” male sexual attention. Cosplay Is Not Consent advocates for a safe, sexual-harassment free convention space for cosplayers, and shares information about sexual crimes or danger at conventions around the country to its community. This community provides a space for discourse that is meant to be safe for all participants, especially women, but because it is a public and open community it may be infiltrated by men and unsympathetic women seeking to disrupt the conversation and blame women for any unwanted sexual attention they receive. Within this community such comments are usually met with resistance, anger, and varying levels of civility. What might a Feminist perspective of habitus be able to tell us about this negotiation of ideas, bodies, space, patriarchy, power, and resistance in this discourse? How does participation in this community affect the habitus of its members, and how do they interact with each other and nonmembers in both cosplay and ordinary settings?

Cosplay is a normal but uncommon SFF practice. This doesn't mean that the average fan has no means to perform their fan identity. Tee shirts, tattoos, and other fan accessories, like backpacks or jewelry, are among the many ways a fan may similarly identify their place in fandom. As with the Amazonian Kayapo, the codes associated with the body and its adornments signal to others one's commitment to the community and

role within it. Among the myriad of shirts which bear slogans, quotes, and symbols from speculative fiction texts one can find on the Internet, why will a fan choose one over the others? Aside from commitment to the texts, what are they attempting to communicate to other fans? What are they communicating about themselves, or things they find relevant? How does the discourse around the texts influence their choices in what to communicate? Thinking about habitus can help us get to some of these connections between fans and fandom, ideas and behaviors.

### **Humans and Animals**

So far this discussion has focused on human cognition, culture, and social engagement, which helps frame the ways in which people may understand others. These frames are also helpful in understanding how humans interact with and express empathy for the others which are part of the focus of this project, animals and supernaturals, and allows a comparison for the empathy deployed towards humans. The nonhuman empathic focus was chosen because it is one of the mainstays of speculative fiction and its associated subgenres. This is an empathy directed at an ‘other’ that is unambiguously outside the race of human; that is, either does not in the physical world exist, or is a nonhuman animal. For this nonhuman entity, our enmity or affinity can only be based in “reality” by the associations we ascribe to it. Text producers such as writers and directors can offer a presentation intended to parallel the analog experiences of the viewer, but ultimately the viewer’s ideas about the text are shaped by the cultural beliefs and predispositions they arrived with. For example, a perspective towards a werewolf character that mirrors those of racism towards a particular analog people can exist

because a person with prior access to racist perspectives is able to connect salient features of their racism (or understanding of it) with features they imagine for the werewolf.

Of course, animals do exist, and humans have varying perspectives on them. In the EuroAmerican “West,” humans are considered not only distinctly different from all life on Earth, but for many distinctly superior to it. This is not a cultural universal, however, and there are many peoples around the world, including indigenous peoples, who do not organize the natural or supernatural universe so. Some, like the pastoralist Eveny of Siberia who maintain reindeer herds, have a special relationship with a particular animal, making them more like kin than keepers (Vitebsky 2006). Many indigenous peoples consider themselves part of a community that includes nonhuman animals, the spirit world, and other aspects of the environment (Pierotti 2011). For others, certain species may be special because one of its members may become the vessel for a supernatural entity, such as an *atua*, which is a spirit, ancestor, or former chief, and as such an important person (Levi-Strauss 1971). The ways in which other cultures differently conceive of the relationship between humans and the natural world illuminates some of the ways that culture may affect one’s understanding of another.

Inherent in these relationships is empathy. The Eveny have many different words to describe the character and personality of reindeer that may guide them in their symbiotic relationship. A skilled herder will come to recognize those of a herd who tend to get lost and are more likely to be vulnerable to predators (a *berne*), their moods, or characterize them by behaviours associated with a certain life stage (Vitebsky 2006, 94) — perhaps not so different than when we might understand a human as “emo” or a “millennial.” These characterizations are based on our perceptions of the object, shaped

by our cultural knowledge, and influence the way we proceed with our interactions. The Eveny understanding of the reindeer is based on observation, and what is observed is ultimately the reindeer's communication of their needs and emotional states, regardless of whether that communication is intentional or not. In a close Eveny-reindeer bond of domestication, the reindeer would be understood to have agency and will, and a *kujjai*, a particularly special reindeer, might choose to give its life to save the life of its owner. This relationship has emotional dimensions, so that one might be certain a *kujjai* lives a life of ease as a sign of gratitude for the life it will surrender.

These more inclusive models for the human/nature relationship contrast sharply with models that consider animals as property. Objects are property, and with ownership humans may use and dispose of animals as they wish, such as proxies for masculinity (Marvin 1988; Birke 1994) where the animal is ultimately disposed of, or imprisoned forever so humans may watch them for cheap (sometimes sexual) thrills (Malamud 1998). There is a spectrum of attitudes towards animals in the EuroAmerican West, as well. The American model that lumps animals in with a group of lesser, undesirable beings that include women, minorities, children, and the disabled did not take root the same in England (Bulleit 2005), thankfully. Dogfighting is a felony offense in the United States, reflecting a general disapproval of gratuitous animal violence, but it continues to be an important cultural tradition for some segments of the South because of its connection to local notions of identity (Evans, Gauthier and Forsyth 1998). The behavior and perceived character of a fighting dog will be projected onto its owner by participants in this dogfighting culture, and have consequences for their interactions. A dog seen as cowardly may be killed because its owner fears letting it live will cause its personality

flaws to be imposed on him (Evans, Gauthier, and Forsyth 1998). The owner understands the dog's behavior as cowardly, and although the emotional response isn't perhaps what is commonly associated with empathy — a resonating affect resulting in feelings, if not behaviors, of altruism — it is an emotional response, and a resonance, to that dog's disposition.

Altruism isn't part of our definition above, but certainly there is a type of empathy that we can associate with wanting to help another. At the same time that dogfighting and other deadly animal entertainments are happening, Americans are pampering their companion pets. Americans recently spent over \$3 billion on cat and dog treats in one year, beyond the \$18bn they'd already spent on pet food (Pet Food Institute 2015) demonstrating how much some Americans love their companion pets. The “cone of shame” is a linguistic example of this consumption producing empathy. When an animal patient such as a dog or cat must be prevented from connecting any part of their neck or head with any part of their body below that point, such as from licking a hip or scratching a chin, a common preventative is the Elizabethan collar (e-collar), a cone-shaped device which projects upwards from the neck and outwards around the head of the animal. This device is known by many pet owners as the “cone of shame,” the inference being that the pet is shamed for having to wear it. The Internet has thousands of images and videos of companion pets wearing the cone of shame, which frequently make fun of them for their perceived shame. The cones or images may be decorated to add additional humor to the image, such as one in which a toothpick with three olives was added to an image of a German Shepherd in a cone of shame turning her into a martini, or another in which the cone itself was designed to resemble the Death Star from the Star Wars films.

Commercially the e-collar is available in multiple materials, colors, and sizes, and there are numerous alternatives that are presumably less shameful, as for example one alternate known as the doughnut has not been popularly deemed “the doughnut of shame.”

Considering the number of alternatives and the ease at which they may be found, I can only imagine there must be a thriving industry for such devices, driven not solely by the need to separate the fronts and backs of companion animals for a time, but by an owner’s understanding of their pet’s physical and emotional comfort.

One study of veterinary responses to companion animals in distress during medical exams and treatments found them to be a response to both animal patient and human caretaker (MacMartin et al. 2014). “I know” is one such response, uttered by the veterinarian when the animal expresses some pain or discomfort. In a linguistic sense, humans, like the pet’s caretaker, interpret the “I know” response as a claim of shared feelings, an empathic resonance with the animal. These utterances will also employ variations in prosody, repetition, and kinesics, such as bodily attention, which serve to alleviate the anxiety of both owner and companion animal (MacMartin et. al. 2014). Here the veterinarian is performing two acts of empathy intertwined — one for the patient, one for its caretaker — with an altruistic goal of lessening the anxiety and suffering of both. The owner is also having an empathic response to the companion animal in distress. If the pet is calmed by the “I know” response, or as product of the “I know” response’s calming effect on their owner, does this qualify as empathy? It would be interesting to know if mirror neurons, areas of the brain which exhibit sympathetic activity in one organism’s brain when it observes the behaviors of another, among the participants in this clinic setting.

How is it that there is so much variation in how humans, both within groups and between them, will perceive different non-human animals? One of the ways to consider this question is through a discourse about “the other,” a device used by philosophy and the social sciences to frame a society’s relationship to its marginalized, oppressed, and otherwise disenfranchised people. In many of their analyses, “othering” is a means to subjugate, dominate, or otherwise do symbolic and physical violence to whole groups of people. The movements for animal welfare and animal rights, which in the U.S. began in the late 1800’s tied to the Feminist movement, raised a moral argument to the treatment of companion animals. The ideology of the Feminist movement is such that “if feminism is concerned with issues of oppression and exploitation, the argument goes, then we should care about the exploitation of animals.” (Birke 1994, 44) The Feminist movement is able to understand the perspective of animals as marginalized and oppressed beings in part because women have a relational historical experience. This points to one quandary in the academic discourse of empathy: can the ability to understand the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors of another exist without common experience? It isn’t surprising that one can have empathy for another when experiences or experience types are shared, but it seems that the conscious aspect of recognizing that commonality is essential.

There are several American perspectives towards nonhuman animals in the literature that we might expect to see in the data. Aristotelian hierarchies of being and Cartesian binaries of human/nature underpin all of them. One paradigm, offered by Richard W. Bulleit, is a historical narrative of relations framed by the domestication of animals. The present significant period in the human/animal binary is Postdomesticity, which he describes as a time when most of a culture’s people are physically and

psychosocially separated from the plants and animals they eat, and from the lifecycles of these food sources. (Bulleit 2005) As a result, many people feel guilt over the consumption of animals they can no longer experientially relate to. This guilt manifests, according to Bulleit, in a fascination for sex and blood. With regards to violence, he says, “the blood and gore that children could not help witnessing in the era of domesticity gives way in postdomesticity to fantasies of blood marketed to adolescents” (Bulleit 2005, 14). He also discusses how the strong taboo against masturbation in the Domestic wanes in the Postdomestic as sex with animals becomes rare, and children who until the Postdomestic were regularly exposed to animal copulation; the loss of that animal contact manifests in pornography, which has replaced masturbation as the sexual taboo. “The pattern stems from postdomestic changes in living conditions that have affected virtually all nonrural families” (Bulleit 2005, 10), the patterns themselves taboo in our present postdomestic phase. Thus, he says, we have urges driven by our history of contact with animals for which contemporary replacements are culturally taboo, leaving us with guilt for feelings we cannot help.

His suggestion may be characterized as a human sympathy for nonhuman animals borne of a guilt about how watching them suffer makes us feel, rather than an empathy for based on a capacity to understand their plight. The withdrawal of human-animal experience has in this paradigm diminished the capacity for humans to empathize with the natural world. This schism between humans and the natural world is the backdrop for Bulleit’s analysis of speculative fiction’s treatment of animals and insects. Wild mammal violence in films is replaced with other creature violence because of our guilt over eating mammals. The terror of *King Kong* (Paramount 1933) is replaced with giant mutant ants

in *Them!* (Warner Bros. 1954) and the most alien non-mammal, the alien of *Alien* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox 1979). For Bulleit, the use of insects as the antagonists in *Starship Troopers* (Tri-Star Pictures 1997) and *Men in Black* (Columbia Pictures 1997) reflect this guilt, and these films “legitimated insects as targets of human violence.” (Bulleit 2005, 23)

These observations about speculative fiction do not track with critical analysis of the texts he refers to. Originally a book by science fiction writer Robert Heinlein, *Starship Troopers* was a satirical allegory about Fascism and the dangers of U.S. militarism and patriotism. It takes place in a future where a militaristic human society has spread out to other parts of the galaxy and encountered a race of sentient, intelligent, and otherwise peaceful insects. Provoked by human encroachment, the insects retaliate, causing the humans to prepare to eradicate them. The film takes a satirical look at the propaganda devices and other ways that the Fascist Earth government uses to foster hatred of insects in the human population, so that they will eagerly join the war effort. Children in schools watch videos of other children gleefully stomping waterbugs, WWII style propaganda shorts show disabled veterans proud to have served humanity, and the ways in which insects are different, and therefore disgusting and unworthy, are touted on posters that pepper the city. True, insects were chosen as the antagonist, but in the light of the entire text the violence done to them cannot be written off as simply legitimizing insect violence. Taken in context, the bugs in this narrative are a representation of the subaltern, unable to communicate its perspective to humans, the vilified outsider. The plight presented for them is one common to imperialism, colonialism, the military-industrial complex, and other contemporary human social issues.

Bulleit's discussion of how animal characters in the folktales of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were used as political allegory is more like what is happening here. Towards this end they are anthropomorphized, and begin to resemble humans in thought, action, and sometimes even in dress. The animal kingdom becomes divided along positive and negative human personality traits: slippery as a snake, strong like a bear, crafty like a fox, dumb as an ass. If fables and folktales don't tell the story of the animal (Bulleit 2005), we might expect this to be the same in speculative fiction as a contemporary category of folktale. I chose to examine the SFF discourse of empathy towards animals because in speculative fiction they are rarely only animals. In the *Starship Troopers* discussion above, the insect race is described in the text as intelligent, having a social structure, individuality among members, and wanting only to be left alone on their planet. Considering other aspects of the text, such as militaristic expansionism and the industrial war machine, these insects are positioned more like the indigenous peoples of Earth than any actual insect group. There is a possible third option for the insect presentation in this text, and that is it could be an intended representation of actual insects, offering the idea that insects are intelligent, sentient, rational beings capable of sophisticated planning and foresight. This latter is unlikely, though, not merely because it is a radical idea to grant sentience to nonhumans generally, much less insects, but also because both the text author and the film director agree the text is intentionally allegorical.

To contrast this view, animals are often used in Japanese speculative fiction texts as representatives of their spiritual and religious belief systems (Shamoon 2013), rather than as human analogs. The Japanese have a long history of anthropomorphizing animals, but of using them to invoke cultural beliefs about nature (Occhi 2012). Their view of

nature is not the same as the American, with its Cartesian heritage of nature/culture and body/spirit binaries. In the Japanese worldview, animism, the belief that spiritual forces inhabit the natural animate and inanimate world, is a significant part of their cultural heritage. The popular speculative fiction animated works of Hayao Miyazaki, such as “My Neighbor Totoro,” serve to demonstrate the proper relationship between humans and the environment, and the ideology of the wood (Bak 2008). Because humans are in an active relationship with other nonhumans and the environment, animals may be anthropomorphized without representing humans as they convey information about the proper relationships between them. In other words, animals are not necessarily used to explain the sphere of human relationships because unlike in Western society, humans and animals belong to the same network of relationships. It is a perspective shift.

There is a relationship between speculative fiction and animal studies that is worth addressing. Speculative fiction and its subgenres use the what-if scenario to address contemporary issues, and it does so through lenses familiar to animal studies and animal rights and welfare advocates, such as Feminism, the nature of consciousness, and more:

“The range of [science fiction] tropes for which animal studies is relevant forms an accurate measure of the topics with which the present age grapples: struggles over extinctions, extreme weather, climate change, and other indications of the ecological deterioration of the biome or ecosystem, and between relativistic and fundamentalist ideologies, nationalism and globalization, first and third worlds, and the organic and the technological.” (Gordon 2009, 332)

So the allegory that the animal contributes to in American speculative fiction may not, in this perspective, be exclusively about human social relationships. In a relational network that includes humans and nonhuman animals as cohabitants of the same ecosystem, it may also be about animal ones. I asked above if there may be a form of traditional ecological knowledge embedded in American popular culture speculative fiction. If such a network were embedded in these texts, it might support a claim for traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) in popular culture. Traditional ecological knowledge belief systems are in opposition to Western modes of thought with their blending of the human, nonhuman animal, and spirit worlds into a cooperative community, often without strong hierarchies (Pierotti 2011).

The interaction between humans and animals in American culture has a range that includes animal violence and murder as well as extreme pet pampering and fetishism. The tendency of Americans to use baby talk to animals has been noted by several researchers (Burnham, Kitamura and Vollmer-Conna 2002; Sanders and Arluke 1996). This baby talk is characterized by elevated pitch, high affect, and exaggerated contours, and is elicited automatically between both humans and human babies and their nonhuman pets (Burnham, Kitamura and Vollmer-Conna 2002). Human babies become increasingly responsive to these characteristics around seven months, evidenced by activity in the language centers of the brain (Grossman et. al. 2010), and one common interpretation of babytalk is that it functions as a language acquisition and socialization strategy. One feature of babytalk which points to these functions is the hyperarticulation of vowels, which assist in differentiating one word from another. This tactic is also employed by some people when attempting to communicate with a foreign language

speaker, and often to comical ends, but it is not reproduced in baby talk directed at nonhuman animals such as companion pets — suggesting that humans unconsciously omit this aspect of the babytalk when it is directed at an entity that has no hope of ever becoming linguistically proficient (Burnham, Kitamura and Vollmer-Conna 2002, Sanders and Arluke 1996). Among what we have left after the human language is removed is a caretaker/dependent dyad and the assumptions and behaviors that go along with it. In the human parent-child relationship, the parent is caretaker, teacher of culture, and possibly also disciplinarian, nourisher, and protector of the child dependent, who is vulnerable, possibly confused or at a lower stage of cognitive development, and in many cultures, certainly our own, an “innocent.” Many, if not all of these roles can overlay the human caretaker/nonhuman animal dependent relationship. These relationships may be inherently hierarchical, as neither baby nor nonhuman animal has full citizenship or autonomy in our society.

Jay Mechling used the folk dyad as a lens through which to examine both of these relationships outside of a hierarchical model, offering the folk dyad as a means to interpret human-human and human interspecies play behavior (1989). In a dyad, interaction is not based on the social statuses of the participants. This, he argues, is the way of play, be it between humans or interspecies. It is an interaction that we, as the observer, cannot separate as being one more meaningful than the other. Communication is key to both dyads, and over time members of the dyad will learn and become increasingly adept at reading cues from each other. Mechling uses this measure of a “communication system that *learns*” (Mechling 1989, 319) and other key points, such as the performance of behavioral routines between participants and of significance to them,

to prove that there is a dyadic relationship at work between humans and nonhuman animals. Once proven, he turns the folk dyad on its head by discussing a number of fallacies about the human dyad that the human/nonhuman folklore dyad illuminates. The first of these mentioned is at the heart of the dyad, the presumption that in the interaction, participants are of equal social status or status is irrelevant to the interaction. This further bolsters his assertion that the human/nonhuman play interaction qualifies as a folk dyad, for it would be difficult to argue that humans and their nonhuman pets are social equals even while playing fetch.

Human or not, these interactions are about communication, attempts at understanding, and emotionality. In babytalk, a human/nonhuman dyadic reflects most of the character of its human/human counterpart, leaving other features of prosody and pitch to communicate with nonhuman animals what human language could never hope to achieve. The communication breakdown between human and animal that results from neither's preferred language being spoken by the other results in an empathic enterprise where each is trying to decipher the other's behavior. In play, this interaction results in emotional responses, such as elation, frustration, happiness, or anger. Time and repetition are key to increased success at this empathic enterprise just as it is to the success of play, because participants get better at the understanding of the other. Just like anything else, it seems, the more we do it, the better we get at it.

### **Humans and Supernaturals**

This project divides sentient beings into three categories; human animals, nonhuman animals, and supernaturals, those beings whose existence is in some way outside the natural, known scientific order of life on Earth, here and now. Supernaturals

may, and in speculative fiction often do, overlap with both humans and nonhuman animals. In this definition, a human with pyrokinesis, the ability to create and control fire with the mind (King 1980), is as much a supernatural as is Inuyasha, a woman who is half human, half dog demon. Inuyasha is a popular anime series, a subgenre of speculative fiction characterized by colorful illustrations and highly stylized characters set in fantastical, speculative world environments. Anime, short for “animation,” is dominated by production in Japan, where it originated, but it has fans and producers worldwide. Japanese traditional culture and spiritual belief systems are often embedded into the characters and themes of the most popular and highly lauded anime texts (Shamoon 2013).

The artificial distinction I made above between humans, nonhuman animals, and supernaturals is not one made by many non-Western cultures, including the Japanese. In Shinto, an indigenous Japanese religion, the spirit world is natural, not distinct from nature but part of it. There are two main categories of spirit entity; the *kami*, spirits of nature (animals, landscapes, etc.) that are likened to deities, and *yokai*, a broader class of spirit being that includes the spirits of the dead, monsters, and demons. Hayao Miyazaki, one of Japan’s most celebrated producers of anime, through his texts reminds his audience to remember the values of respect for the environment, the family, and the spirit world (Buljan and Cusak 2015). Miyazaki discovered the *yokai* from an elderly woman in a rural village as a child, and had supernatural experiences with them when stationed in Papua New Guinea during World War II (“Spirits, gods, and pastel paints.” 2010). Although he denies being a follower of Shinto, aspects of the Shinto belief system and other traditional Japanese ecological knowledge can be found in not just his but many

anime texts, employed to address issues of importance to the text producers, anime fans, and Japanese society:

“The limits of the human, expressed particularly through robots and cyborgs; and the devastation of the natural environment[,] violent crime and death, and the existential question of what human life actually is constantly arises through the interactions of human characters with vampires, demons, extra-terrestrials, cyborgs, and robots, among other non-human persons” (Buljan and Cusack 2008, 3).

The embedding of societal concerns in popular culture texts as explored through the interactions between humans and the supernatural is common to other subgenres of speculative fiction. One recent interpretation of *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (1897) finds that he represents the loss of an indigenous way of life in the face of globalism, his personal history filled with lost peoples and dead languages, himself self-conscious and uncomfortable in a strange land (Viragh 2013). Another sees *Dracula* as “the embodiment of ancient, evolved terrors[,] a supercharged predator [...] to which we are hardwired to attend,” but sees his literary progeny in today’s vampire stories as a vehicle “for the embodiment of salient anxieties, conflicts, or desires” rather than strictly biocultural drives (Clasen 2012, 382). Margot Adler interprets *Dracula* as representing the British fear of the rural immigrant at a time when England had one of the largest ports of the world, and anti-immigrant sentiment negatively characterized them as dangerous plague-bringers (Adler 2014). She studied over 200 contemporary vampire novels and found several key themes among them, and agrees that vampires represent the fears and needs of the age in which they are created. Among the persistent themes she finds in

contemporary vampire literature are morality tales about power and its abuses, with parallel concerns of contemporary audiences: the struggle to be moral speaks to the struggles of humankind waging wars in every part of the world, and the human race likened to a vampire whose prey is the planet. The monstrous outsider represents the teenager in our society, persecuted for performing their identity, whose “established rites of passage are understood to be forbidden sex, illegal drugs, and sometimes criminal rebellion” (Adler 2014, 19).

Each of these interpretations offer reasons why someone might have empathy for a fictional, supernatural character like a vampire. It is their connection to our anxieties that brings them closer to our understanding. Their suffering is our suffering. Emotional resonance with another without understanding is sympathy. Just as with real, analog persons, we can never truly know the perspective of another, but imagination work of empathy allows us to create some approximation of our perception of the perspective of another. A vampire might be monstrous, but if “vampires are us” (Adler 2014, 37), empathy might be an attempt at understanding ourselves.

## ANALYSIS

The most common context in which the discourse of empathy occurred was conflict. This is perhaps not surprising in the discourse centered around fictional characters, as speculative fiction most commonly uses conflict as a means to explore the nature of humanity and our relationship to the environment and each other. Even within the narratives of self-care, however, which was centered around intangible yet nonfictional human others, the context of conflict was prevalent. Conflict prompted empathic discourse, it was used to frame requests and justifications for empathy, and it was used as a point of proof of the depths to which an individual would adhere to an ideology. Concurrent with these addresses of conflict is the negotiation of moral agency, which tempers how the empathy within the fight will be deployed.

### **Introducing the Texts**

This section will first offer a backdrop to each of the four discourse areas, three of which are centered around speculative fiction texts and the fourth aimed inwardly in the narratives of self-care. After the relevant history and general character of the discourse is discussed, this section will move on to illustrate the ways in which empathy is instigated and shaped by concepts of conflict. The main categories of conflict are violence, struggle, and fighting for. Examples of these categorizations will demonstrate how ideas about moral agency will affect the deployment of empathy, such as whether violence against a potential object of empathy warrants an emotional resonance with them or some kind of moral judgement (or absence thereof) which renders that violence justified or unworthy of discussion.

## *The Leftovers*

*The Leftovers* is a speculative fiction episodic series based on a 2011 book that was broadcast on HBO in the late summer and early fall of 2014. It qualifies as speculative fiction because of its 'what if' premise: three years before the temporal setting of the first episode, a seemingly random two percent of Earth's human population vanished. Family members, friends, coworkers, classmates, strangers on line at the grocery, babies in car seats, are all there one moment and gone the next, with no traces and no explanations. Like much speculative fiction, the 'what if' is abbreviated for 'what happens to humanity if' some extraordinary circumstances occur. The dramatic focus of this show is the long-term changes to behaviors in the aftermath of this unexplained worldwide event. The shift in balance between a text about a supernatural event to one focusing on the long-term effects of the supernatural event on its survivors was of consternation to some members. As one speaker sarcastically tweeted, "never tell us why anyone disappeared," typical of the frustration some felt that they were not receiving the answers they had expected from the texts. There may be a relationship between the genre expectations of the viewers of this show and the nature of their membership in SFF that resulted in a disparity between what they wanted and what they received, because for the duration of the season, a time span of over 10 weeks, confusion was the most expressed cognitive state. Comments such as "#TheLeftovers dafuq did i just watched [sic]" and "I DONT UNDERSTAND THIS GOD DAMN SHOW #TheLeftovers" were common until the final episode, which offered no explanations for the supernatural event but did complete the story arc it had presented from the first episode.

### *Dragon Age: Inquisition (DAI)*

The fictional Dragon Age universe was established primarily through a series of three computer games with a richly detailed history uncovered as one plays it. There are books and illustrated novels which contribute to and elaborate on the game lore, but many gamers do not indulge in extra-game literature. The setting of DAI is fantastical and roughly medieval. What is relevant of game mechanics to this discussion is that this is a quest-based roleplaying game (RPG) in which one plays a single character, and one's choices, both actions and interactions (e.g. conversations) with computer controlled non-player characters (NPCs), have consequences later in the game. Some are significant to gameplay, others only add to the richness of the game world. For example, seducing an NPC in an early part of the game may result in a new powerful rival later on, a chance meeting with a discarded lover of no consequence but continuity and story filler, or nothing may result from the encounter at all. Quests are usually triggered when the player talks to an NPC who needs some task done. The player may accept or decline the quest, and once accepted, they may complete it or not.

One primary thematic backdrop of the Dragon Age universe is the conflict between The Chantry, the only religion accepted by the dominant human culture, and mages, humans with inheritable magic-using abilities, and the Templars, a military organization under control of The Chantry and charged with the "safekeeping" of the mages. By this third installment, DAI, there is open war between these factions, and within the game, players are constantly challenged as to who they will support or fight for. On social media, the text producers frequently use their official Facebook page to engage with players over these themes. These posts will ask about favorite villains,

encourage discussions of characters, and challenge the divide between mage supporters and Chantry or Templar supporters. For example, one unavoidable choice in the first game, *Dragon Age: Origins*, was between staying to help defend the village of Redcliffe from an undead attack or pressing on towards the player's original destination. The DAI Facebook page asked fans what choice they'd made in this scenario, and the fans who responded frequently elaborated on their choices and commenting on the choices of others. This was the nature of most of the DAI discourse, fan discussions within a larger discussion directed or initiated by the text producers.

### *Preacher*

*Preacher* is a supernatural/comic fiction television show based on a DC comic book published in the last four years of the 20th century. The television text follows the interaction of a number of supernatural entities in a small and morally troubled Texas town. Jesse is a reformed criminal-turned-preacher having a crisis of faith when he is possessed by an extremely powerful supernatural entity with no will of its own. This entity gives him the power to command the obedience of anyone he speaks to. Jesse is befriended by an Irish vampire named Cassidy, who helps protect him from others trying to claim the force inside him, including a several angels. Unlike *Leftovers* and DAI, a good number of the fans expressed their familiarity with the original comic book texts. Their discourse about the show's representations of *Preacher's* fictional characters were often tempered by their understanding of the characters as they were portrayed in the original text. For example, Tulip, a black woman, is a supporting character from Jesse's criminal past who in the comic book was a blonde, white woman. Some of the fans were unhappy with this change based on the grounds that it spoiled the original text's purity,

and others felt that those who complained were unreasonable: "The tulip in the show is a new character. It's not the tulip from the graphic novels" and "Whiners be like. Tulip is black! I'm confused! Why isn't Cassidy blonde?" are two examples of this conflict in the discourse between fans of the comic text and those of the show.

### *Narratives of Self-Care*

In the last decade or so, a number of male actors have opened up about their depression to the public. Some of these men use their celebrity and social media towards destigmatizing mental illness and creating a safe space for the discourse of mental health. The narratives of self-care examined by this paper are those which occurred in such safe spaces created by three men whose careers are dominated by roles in speculative fiction television. As a result, their fan base is largely, though not exclusively, SFF members. These actors have each developed their own strategies for combating stigma, but the dissemination of information about depression is common to all of them. The depression education literature made available by government health agencies such as NIMH, professional associations such as the American Psychological Association (APA), and commercial health websites such as WebMD.com and Psychology.com all focus on defining depression, identifying and clarifying its symptoms, identifying its causes, and discussing treatment options. These topics are addressed variously by these actors in the informal setting of social media. It is this combination of SFF membership and the actors' destigmatization project that makes this discourse a fertile field to observe empathy as it is directed towards nonfictional, analog humans.

The first of these actors is Wil Wheaton, whose career in speculative fiction began as a teenager in the 1980's with his roles as series regular Wesley Crusher in the

television show *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. When the *Star Trek* series ended, Wheaton left Los Angeles, got an office job in computing, and started a blog in which he spoke about his experiences as a child star, his life as a self-identified geek, and eventually about his anxiety. He eventually returned to the film industry and has since built a solid catalog of exclusively speculative fiction and geek-related media (e.g. a show dedicated to tabletop gaming) that has earned him a solid place in the hearts of speculative fiction fans. He is very active on social media across multiple platforms and effectively engages his fan audience in his projects by sharing photographs, videos, and most especially his personal narratives about his everyday life. Wheaton's main social media project is an intersubjective fandom, as he is himself an avid speculative fiction fan. As his communicative style is very open, he discusses his mental illness freely.

In contrast to Wheaton's varied career, Jared Padalecki's career in speculative fiction is dominated by an 11 year continuing run on the television show *Supernatural*. Six years ago his character's story arc coincidentally mirrored a major depressive episode he was going through at the time, prompting him to go public with his Major Depressive Disorder (MDD). In 2015 he started the Always Keep Fighting campaign (AKF) to raise money for To Write Love on Her Arms (TWLoHA), an organization that supports and educates on the topics of depression, self-injury, and addiction. Padalecki speaks candidly about his depression in interviews, but rarely discusses it in his social media. Padalecki's social media instead focuses on sharing those things which give him strength to fight his illness every day: his family. Video and photos of him interacting with his children are highly shared and responded to, with comments typically reaching into the multiple thousands. Even though Padalecki's posts do not usually directly address mental illness,

they are known by fans to be part of his own self-care because of his regular broadcasting of the AKF campaign.

The final of these three actors is Wentworth Miller. His first acting job was in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon 1988), an important episodic of speculative fiction television for academic study and fandom — more than half of the scholarly articles about vampires are about this show (Adler 2014) — but he is best known for his co-starring role on the crime/suspense television show *Prison Break*. For the past few years he has been part of the regular cast of a number of interconnected and overlapping television shows based on the DC Comics universe, one of the most popular corporate comic fiction producers in the world with a viewership of several million. His acting career is more diverse by genre, and so his audience may be considered to be an overlapping collection of multiple genre fandoms. Early in 2016 Miller was trending in the news because of his response to a meme (a widely shared digital image which employs text and juxtaposition with the intent of being humorous or informative) which "fat-shamed" him (publicly humiliating someone through the criticism of their physical size) by comparing photos of his lean *Prison Break* and less lean post- *Prison Break* physiques. In his response he discussed his struggles with depression, addiction, and suicide during that time, and addressed the weight gain issue in these terms: "And I put on weight. Big f--king [sic] deal." His emphasis was instead on the healing process, forgiveness, and the importance of seeking help — what would fall into the category of self-stigma.

"Self-care" in the context of these self-care narratives is a mental health practice with roots in the anti-psychiatry movement of the late 20th century. Perceived abuses

within the institution of mental health and the public unveiling of the horrors faced by some institutionalized, such as were revealed in popular entertainments such as novelist Ken Kesney's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) and *Frances* (EMI 1982) fueled an anti-psychiatry movement that permanently affected legal policy and health practices in the United States. One early objective was giving the mentally ill the right to refuse surgical or pharmaceutical treatment, which with the exception of cases where the patient is likely to cause harm to themselves or others, was eventually granted (New Hampshire Bar Association 2007).

Out of this pushback grew the c/s/x (consumer/survivor/ex-patient) movement of the 1970's, unified by a distrust of psychiatry and a desire return the power of healthcare into the hands of those with illnesses. Survivors and ex-patients reject the contemporary biomedical model, and seek to create alternatives outside the health system that do not rely on pharmaceuticals. Consumers in the c/s/x movement are those who accept the biomedical model of mental illness, but seek to reform the system through the inclusion of alternative therapies and self-care (Adame and Leitner 2008). Survivors and ex-patients are represented in the social media discourse, such as in the narratives of self-care centered around depression, by those who advocate for sufferers to discontinue their meds and instead try therapies such as juicing or exercise. These comments are frequently presented as a victorious personal narrative:

“Hey Wil. I have clinical depression. I was on Prozac for 2 decades!!! 3 years ago I started to take Juice Plus (fruits and veg in capsules). I started to feel more energetic and well. After taking JP for over a year I started to wean myself

off Prozac. I haven't been back. I noticed many of my depression symptoms were directly related to the pill I was taking. Just wanted to share my story with you :)”

This comment to Wil Wheaton’s depression quote above is typical of the survivor/ex-patient (s/x) contributions to the discourse. These commenters are rarely replied to directly, I suspect to remain congruous with the community atmosphere of civility and support, but are often challenged indirectly within the same comment thread by consumers: “key [sic] is to get help and meds. Nothing to be ashamed of if you do that” and “Thanks Wil, there's still so much stigma surrounding this issue. It's considered more shameful to get help and on meds than to stay crazy, hurt, depressed and anxious.” One common characteristic of these consumer comments is the rejection of self-stigma: discarding shame so one may seek biomedical treatment and “get help.” The s/x comments, by contrast, do little work towards combatting either self- or public stigmas, and in lieu of educating about mental illness, hint at an experiential-based perspective on treatment that highlights their rejection of the biomedical model. The s/x poster of this comment directs it to Wil Wheaton, but the rest of the statement is about the poster as they offer themselves for empathy by providing information about their lives and behaviors through a series of “I” comments. They are the real object of empathy, and one that clearly wants to be understood. Even though the comment rejects the prevailing biomedical model that supports pharmaceutical maintenance of mental illness, it does so within the context of a loosely scientific ideology which uses biomedical knowledge and has an internal logic. One common misunderstanding of the scientific method seems to be the belief in inductive reasoning without space for the possibility that the conclusion is false.

## **Conflict: A Context for Empathy**

The most common context for discussing others across all the discourse was conflict. "Conflict" is used here in the broadest sense: "as a general state of affairs in a relationship or as some basic incompatibility in the very structure of the relationship, which leads to specific disputes and sometimes to violence" (Kyrou and Rubinstein 2008, 515). Conflict in this broad context is a necessary element of dramas and comedies alike, and speculative fiction texts may be either or both. This context became evident very early on during data collection through grounded theory and process coding, which uses action words exclusively to highlight processes of human behavior (Saldana 2016). The presence of conflict in the discourse of empathy was expressed in a variety of ways: fighting for/with/against, standing with/by/behind/beside, supporting, and defending being the most common. Within the discourse, conflict as an impetus for empathy sorted into two categories: violence, actual physical harm or death imposed on some entity, and struggle, an ongoing conflict to which violence may or may not be a part. When violence was an impetus, the object of attempted empathy could be the recipient of violence, the one who carries out the violence, or even directed to the meta-level of the text producers. The object of empathy instigated by struggle was directly related to the nature of that struggle. If the struggle was between various opposing members in an ongoing conflict, the object of empathy could be any member of that conflict. If the struggle was between an entity and its own nature, the object of empathy was almost exclusively the struggling entity. The below excerpts will illustrate these two most common conflict subcontexts of conflict, violence and struggle, to which fans will respond with attempts at understanding and empathy.

## *Violence*

Violence is one common stimulus for empathic discourse, be it violence done to or by the object of empathy. Animal violence is disfavored among Americans generally, and when it appears in popular media culture and speculative fiction texts it is usually done with some narrative purpose. Sex and violence towards humans may be gratuitous and ubiquitous in popular media culture, but violence towards animals is less common, often used to punctuate the depths of horror or depravity of the text's narrative.

Violence towards animals in the texts is frequently responded to. This first example of the response to animal violence is drawn from the *Leftovers* tweets. Before the show's first episode aired, the brief synopsis described above (the disappearance of 2% of the population) is all that most SFF members knew about the show. In the very first episode, three minutes in, a main character, Kevin, is jogging down the road. The script reads as follows:

EXT. SIDE STREET - CONTINUOUS.

Kevin is jogging up the road. A dog appears in the street in front of him. Kevin stops and pulls off his earphones. He crouches and beckons the dog.

KEVIN:

(kissy noises) Come here. Come. (whistles) Come on. It's okay, I'm not gonna hurt you...

Suddenly the dog's neck explodes and Kevin quickly turns to the sound of loud gunfire. He sees a man, Dean, placing a rifle in the back of a pickup truck before quickly driving away.

KEVIN:

Hey! Hey!

Kevin runs towards the dead dog. He kneels and reads the tag on its collar.

The responses on Twitter to this scene were immediate and passionate. This is a small sample of some hundred tweets:

1. Did we really need to show how messed up society has become by brutally killing a dog with a high powered rifle? #TheLeftovers
2. Huge middle finger to the guy who shot that dog. #TheLeftovers
3. WHY THE HELL DID THAT MAN JUST SHOOT THE DOG AND WHY DID THEY SHOW THAT #TheLeftovers
4. Poor dog. Is this #ThePurge ? You can just shoot animals on the streets?
5. The dog didn't do anything, someone randomly shot it. 😐🙄🐱  
#TheLeftovers

There are two things that stand out in the Twitter responses to the dog shooting. Most of the tweets have an emotional response to the shooting, anger and/or disgust being common among them. The use of capitalization in 3) adds extreme emphasis to the textual utterance. The three emojis used in 5), add further affective contours to the textual utterance: the first a flat-mouthed smiley face that may allude to apathy or the hopelessness inherent in the “no comment” stance; the final a cat with its paws on its face in a look of surprise; and between them is the person with hands raised emoji, originally created to connote celebration, but it may also be alternatively used to connote engaging in religious exaltation (e.g. “praise Jesus”) or holding up the hands to demonstrate to a

police officer that one is unarmed and should therefore not be shot. There may be further interpretations and uses of this particular emoji, but if it is the latter, the user may be drawing a connection between animal rights and civil rights, even if inadvertently. This wouldn't be the first time the oppression of a human group has been associated with the (mal-)treatment of animals. Early suffragette-feminists and working class unionists in Battersea, England aligned themselves with the animal rights cause as they took up the treatment of one Brown Dog, used for medical training through vivisection, as a metaphor for the oppression and abuses they'd suffered at the hands of various entities (Lansbury 1985). Their ability to empathize with the plight of the Brown Dog, though their actual experiences were vastly different, resulted in the Brown Dog Riots of 1907. The shooting of the *Leftovers* dog and the vivisection of the dogs represented by the Brown Dog are different violent results of the conflict inherent in the imbalance of power between humans and non-human animals.

As noted above, violence done to animals in popular media culture is less common than that done to other humans. This is reflected in the genre expectations of fans, many of whom expressed their anger over a violation of their storytelling expectations for the show. They don't typically express emotion about the animal violence itself, but instead direct their anger at the show producers:

6. Note to Damon Lindelof, starting a show with recurring shots of a dead dog is how I start hating your show #TheLeftovers
7. senseless acts of violence against animals is also not an acceptable plot device. you can't just blast a dog like that. jesus. #theleftovers

8. Ok HBO, if u shoot a dog at the start of your new show-it's a big turn off.

Just FYI. #TheLeftovers #HBO

9. I DID NOT NEED TO SEE THAT DOG GET SHOT! You can kill all the

humans you like, but leave the animals alone!!!! #TheLeftovers

The first three (6-8) demonstrate meta-referenced emotions, that is emotions connected to behaviors outside the text itself: Damon Lindelof and HBO are producers of *The Leftovers*, and “plot device” refers to literary conventions generally and perhaps genre specific ones. The final tweet 9) is expressing affect not directly for the dog getting shot, but because that event did not need to be seen by them. The first segment of this tweet, typed in all capital letters for emphasis, is unclear as to whether the animal violence shouldn't occur at all or if it could acceptably occur off screen. The final segment of the tweet can be interpreted to modify the first and assert that no animals should be harmed at any point in the narrative, or it could still be suggesting that on screen animal violence is the transgression resulting in their anger. Together this tweet is, as the other three preceding it are, referencing violations to genre conventions, be they genre specific or more broad storytelling and filmic. This allows us to interpret the comment about killing humans as being genre specific as well, and there is no reason to believe the user was stating a belief that outside of fictional narratives it was acceptable to kill humans but not animals. It does suggest that for this particular user, it is more personally distressing to see violence done against an animal than against a human. Bulleit suggested that violence against animals in popular culture satisfied an innate bloodlust, and our offense at it was the manifestation of our shame at that bloodlust

(Bulleit 2005). Violence against humans is sufficiently ubiquitous in popular culture that bloodlust cannot be the only reason for either its presence or the response to it, of course.

Later in the episode the dog was identified as Dudley, missing for three years, but not one of the tweets referred to him as such. Dudley was always “the dog.” Their upset isn’t founded in a personal relationship with Dudley, but towards “the dog” as some larger container of meaning. Maybe it’s all dogs, or just domesticated ones. Dudley was dirty in a way that suggested long-term homelessness. “The dog” could be a metaphor for the subaltern and the risk of death at the hands of random acts of bigotry in contemporary society. The character of Dean that shoots Dudley in this first episode goes on in subsequent episodes to shoot many more dogs, although none quite as graphic or unexpectedly shocking as the first. Dean shoots these packs of dogs because “they’re not our dogs anymore” (Leftovers 2014, 1). Whose dogs they are likewise went unanswered. The character of Dean decided, by what precise influence we never really know, that these dogs — maybe once the dogs fetishized in Bulleit’s Postdomestic vision — now need to die. He is turning the pampered pet on its head to justify acting out its opposite need, to see blood. The fans were angered by this attempt at reversal, and largely rejected it.

If those who threatened to abandon the show because of animal violence ended up staying to watch the series through to the end, it would confirm the behavioral inconsistency of fetishizing companion animals while also satisfying a need to engage in the animal violence. This was lost to our ordinary experience in the transition from the Domestic period where more of the population was engaged in agriculture and other animal industries (Bulleit 2005). Dudley the dog stands somewhere between domestic

and feral, and the conflict between he and the man who shot him is recognized by fans as an imbalanced relationship in which Dean, the human, has transgressed. The emotional responses to his death, anger and disgust, may not resonate with what Dudley would have felt in such circumstances, but qualifies here as empathy because of the element of understanding: that Dudley is innocent; that killing him is unjust and unwarranted; and that the text producers should have known that even fictional violence towards non-human animals was a breach of acceptable behavior. As this suggests, it is not only violence against fetishized domestic animals that is disapproved of, and violence to wild animals may also be met with disfavor.

In the discussion threads of DAI fandom on Facebook and BioWare forums, where fans were not restricted by either the character limits or the spontaneous character of Twitter, responses tended to be more thought out and less reactive. The linguistic conventions commonly used to express emotion in Twitter, such as the use of all capital letters and repetitive punctuation, are replaced by more elaboration and justification of response.

The below is a thread posted to the official BioWare forum in a space the producers of DAI had set aside for general community discussion, about a game quest which required the player to commit animal violence:

10. Lady Lutane:

So I am noticing this theme. We are hunting Mommy Dragons...Why? because it excites IB? IDK. OK i can go with that. But there is a forward camp in one chapter that a NPC complains about a bear attacking them..So you get this mission to kill the bear. You get there its a Mommy bear with

cubs. I do not want to kill the damn thing. Why not have the option to go and make the camp move somewhere else. Seems alot of Mommy hatred in DAI> mommy dragons, bear etc...just ....Move the damn camp and leave them alone.

11. COSEC:

Actually, there's a war table mission where your forces in the Western Approach are being attacked by varghests. If you take Leliana's approach she suggests using scouts to lead the varghests to new territory since the Inquisition has taken over their habitat. If you do, however... their leader is pretty upset that you sacrificed the lives of your soldiers to protect the native wildlife. You don't get to be a bleeding heart in good conscience here! =D

12. Lady Lutane:

If I am being forced to choose those 2 choices, then in a game I would take saving the critters.

13. Lady Lutane:

Also...subnote, i have 4 adult children, so perhaps my dislike of hurting a Mommy protecting her young is just projecting into my gaming.

Lady Lutane is clearly empathizing with the mother bear, and she acknowledges her means of understanding, her motherhood, as a potential bias. She is dismissing her own feelings as potentially invalid, perhaps reflecting the dismissal of womens' experience in American patriarchal culture, or the way an objectivist might dismiss a pet owners' experience of communicating with their pet (Sanders and Arluke 1996). There

are both animal rights and Feminist concerns implicated in this discussion, and it continues for several pages with new people adding opinions and gradually changing the shape of the discourse. Later in the same thread it became a discussion about engaging in animal violence within the context of the game:

14. Danish Knight:

I started ignoring wolf packs that don't attack me because their dying cries makes me sad inside xD

15. Zifgrit:

Why is getting Nugskin and other leather based materials so damn horrible? I die a little inside when I kill a Tusket or Nug. The things I do for +cunning... Is there no place to buy these leather materials? Money would let me bypass the whole feeling bad for eradicating the native wildlife...

Remember that no animals, neither dogs, bears, nugs, nor tuskets, are being harmed in these scenarios, nor is there any risk to a real animal. And yet numerous gamers expressed an aversion for engaging in simulated animal violence even if it resulted in beneficial in-game outcomes, such as leathers that may be used in crafting. I, myself, have opted not to perform quests in various games that have required animal violence. Is this the Postdomestic guilt that Bulleit spoke of, or is this a genuine distaste for harm done to animals for the animals' sake, and not ours? Zifgrit's comment about his guilt being assuaged by not having to be personally involved with the killing and skinning process, in game, certainly reflects the contemporary Postdomestic separation of humans from their food (and materials) sources Bulleit described. Again, however, we

have something other than a response to a shame at our bloodlust. We have a genuine empathy. In Lady Lutane's thread we have animals understood in terms of home and family. In the latter two comments above the empathy may be primarily for the animal victim, but there is also an empathy directed at the perpetrator of the violence, the player. The emotions expressed here do seem to resonate more with the animal: cries result in sadness, the tusked dies and the player "dies a little inside" with it.

Unlike *Leftovers* and DAI, very little of *Preacher*'s violence is directed at animals. Humans are the main target of violence, and the show's primary supernaturals, angels and a vampire, receive a share of it as well. Cassidy, the Irish vampire, did eat a number of presumably "innocent" animals in a few episodes, but fans had little or nothing to say about that animal violence. Unlike *Leftovers*' Dudley or the bears in DAI, these animals were not given any characteristics other than their cuteness, the violence done to them by Cassidy receiving little more notice in the text than the animals themselves. They were Cassidy's food, simply. Cassidy in the time frame covered by the *Preacher* text has chosen not to eat people, or prey upon them, except in the one extreme case where he was so badly injured that his behaviors more closely resembled that of a wounded and dangerous wild animal. Cassidy seems happy to subsist on bags of hospital blood, animals when in a pinch, and the odd vampire hunter. He has essentially denied the most egregious of vampire qualities, the eating of people, what is known as the "vegetarian vampire" trope (Wright 2015; Pollard 2016). His character is more interested in human pursuits – sex, intoxication, and the joys of public brawling. Perhaps it is that his behavior is voluntarily more human than vampire is what absolves him of responsibility for the lives he takes.

The vampire, Cassidy, was a favorite of the fans, but they rarely had much to say beyond the fact that they were satisfied with the character and/or the actor's portrayal of him. He was their "favorite," and a "drunk blood soaked vampire [one could not] fail to love." Cassidy drank, swore, engaged in no-strings sex with human women, brawled, and, of course, ate people, but there was no discussion about who he was as a character, what motivated him to behave so, or any of the other signposts for empathy that the rest of the discourse contained. Their generic approval of Cassidy was amplified during scenes of violence, and indeed, violence and humor seemed to his preferred characteristics. For the most part, his violence was reactive and defensive. In the first episode, he killed several vampire hunters on a private airplane after he discovered he'd been lured into their trap. The scene was variously described as "crazy" and "chaos" but the only comments directed at Cassidy, again, were vague approvals. In another episode he killed two men he thought were vampire hunters, but who turned out to be angels that were after the show's eponymous character, Preacher. The show fans had nothing to say about Cassidy at all during this scene.

At one point, Cassidy is badly injured and needs large quantities of blood to heal himself. A recurring human character and friend to Preacher, Emily, is tasked with caring for him. Cassidy is a horribly burned, half-feral creature kept in a dark room, knowing only pain and hunger, needing more than the guinea pigs and other small animals they'd been feeding him. Eventually Emily calls her boyfriend to the scene and tricks him into becoming Cassidy's lunch. This is the first human harmed by Cassidy that was not in defense. There was some minor blowback for this, but it was not directed at Cassidy:

16. Dr yanukel: The quiet ones are the worst.

Emily fed d mayor to vampire

#preacher

17. Rodentmouse: I still don't really understand how old girl just killed Miles

like that. Maybe I never got their relationship at all. #preacher

18. Carlennian: oh my god wtf is wrong with emily??? #preacher

Here we have fans trying to understand Emily's behavior. What would drive a woman to orchestrate the murder of her boyfriend? Rodentmouse in 17) feels he must have mischaracterized their relationship, suggesting there may be a rational reason for her behavior that he has missed. Carlennian in 18) is confused and angry, emphasized by the repetitive question marks and the use of "wtf," the orthographic condensation of "what the fuck." Dr yanukel's response in 16) is slightly more nuanced, assigning the "quiet one" trope to Emily, her relative benevolence as a character up to this point now turned against her. Even though Cassidy did the actual eating, Emily takes all of the blame for it. Why is Cassidy exempt from consequences for this act?

One of the few times Cassidy's character was questioned was over a still photo taken from the first episode when he proactively kills his hunters, but shared by the show producers to the Facebook page before the episode had aired:

19. That looks like he slaughtered some innocent folks?

The turning of this comment into a question changes its tone from accusation or statement of fact into a philosophical quandary, where there is a space for Cassidy's apparent actions to be either clarified or justified before a decision about his character is to be made. The suggestion is that if he "slaughtered some innocent folks," that he and/or

his behavior is not acceptable. As it turned out, the folks slaughtered by Cassidy were vampire hunters, who even if can be argued for as being moral, are not innocent. Once that episode aired and the scene was seen by fans, there was a different tone to the conversation:

20. K the scene introducing cassidy on the plane has me SOLD

21. Joe Gilgun covered in blood is my aesthetic. #Preacher

22. Cassidy drinking blood from a broken bottle in the chest.. Priceless..

Finally catching up now.. Wow #preacher

Cassidy's violence towards the humans is lauded, and it can't be just because the victims aren't innocents. In Margot Adler's study of more than 200 vampire speculative fiction texts, the projection of human experience into the contemporary vampire is central to her analysis. Adler identifies a guilt-ridden and conflicted vampire type which tries hard to be a moral being against its own nature (2014). She connects these vampires to our own analog struggles with morality; of the outsider, of having an identity rejected by society, and about how we exercise our power over the planet and its others human and nonhuman. In this perspective, audiences see in the vampire aspects of themselves, and this understanding contributes to their empathic process. They understand something about the vampire other despite those things which make them supernatural and monstrous, and consequently also feel something about that understanding. Like Cassidy, these conflicted vampires stick to animal blood, but never lose their taste for humans (Adler 2014). Cassidy does not present as particularly conflicted in the early episodes, and in fact his carefree self-confidence is one of the traits fans most seemed to enjoy about him from the start. Time constraints prevented this project from observing

how his story arc unfolded and the fan response, but if Adler's analysis of the contemporary vampire is accurate, we can expect that Cassidy's back story as it developed would provide more details as to why the vampire who seems to love being a vampire prefers to subsist on bottled blood.

In the discourse of self-care, the only significant mention of violence was that which was self-directed, such as suicide and self-harm. These were offered primarily to the community as requests for empathy, such that the speaker was sharing something of their past and present lives as a means of understanding them and their illness:

23. My self care is getting up daily and still being here. After my husbands suicide all I could think of was ending my life so I could be with him again and maybe understand why. Now with my current health issues, which the doctors believe are a result of PTSD (because nothing shows on any test) I just feel like giving up again, but I haven't.

24. I tried to kill myself not too long ago thinking everyone would be better off without me. Thinking I failed them professionally. Listening to your words has given me hope that I can do better. Thanks.

These shares were offered in response to separate posts by Miller and Padalecki about self-care, neither of which mentioned or elicited the subject of suicide. In both cases, self-violence is the narrative context for their request for empathy. Suicide is acknowledged as an unfortunate but common feature of MDD, and when a sufferer dies by suicide, they are most often articulated as being "lost to" suicide. This alludes to a further subtext of a great deal of the self-care narratives, and that is the concept of depression as an ongoing struggle.

## *Struggle*

One driving concept behind self-care is the idea that it is necessary to be healthy in order to help combat the effects of mental illness, a lifelong struggle for which there may be maintenance but no cure. Padalecki's fundraising project, Always Keep Fighting, is a direct testament to this belief. According to the National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH), Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) occurs in about seven percent of the U.S. population, and among men at a rate roughly twice that of women (National Institute of Mental Health 2016). The general perception among the medical community is that men are less likely to seek treatment because of the social stigma attached to mental illness. This effect of stigma is considered to be two-fold: first there is public stigma, the perception of the social body that persons with mental illness are undesirable, and then this social and emotional pressure on persons with depression manifest in self-stigma, an internalization of society's negative perceptions (Latlova, Kamaradova and Presko 2014). In a survey of numerous studies on depression, stigma, and gender, Latalova et al found the tendency towards critical self-stigma was greater among white males. This would result in both negative feelings such as shame and rejection and a "self-stigma of seeking help" (Latlova, Kamaradova and Presko 2014, 1340) whereby sufferers held negative views on seeking medical treatment. Men experience self-stigma to a more acute degree than women in societies with gender norms of dominant masculinity, and the 16 countries included in the Latalova et al survey shared core ideas about mental illness that contributed to a common public stigma. The authors concluded with the suggestion, borne by the data, that "disseminating public information about depression may prevent or reduce self-stigma" (Latlova, Kamaradova and Presko 2014, 1404).

The reduction of stigma through social media dissemination about mental illness is a primary goal of the three actors at the core of the self-care narratives examined by this project. These men share certain contours of their personal struggles with depression and mental illness. In general, these sharings are upbeat and positive, and even when they touch on the darker aspects of depression, they nearly always end on a positive or at least hopeful note. Wentworth Miller declared April 2016 as self-care month, and each day he posted a different Facebook status update that fit the following pattern of “Today my self-care looked like X; what did it look like for you?” These posts were usually creative and metaphorical:

25. -Today self-care looked like suddenly remembering a children’s book I hadn’t thought of in ages... then finding it online, looking through the images, and recalling the hours of joy it used to bring me.

26. -Today self-care looked like cleaning my eyeglasses so I could enjoy the view. :)

27. -Today self-care looked like lotion on my hands. They work hard and serve me well.

These posts indirectly respond to common features that sufferers of depression regularly struggle with, such as loss of interest in activities that once brought happiness, and self-neglect. Miller is using metaphor to encourage his fans to creatively imagine how they may care for themselves and continue to survive the struggle with depression. For each of these posts there are anywhere between one and three thousand comments. Fans commonly responded by parroting Miller’s “what did it look like for you” post format:

28. -Today's self care was lowering my expectations of myself for today.. It really put a lot of pressure on me to feel like I was being productive but once I didn't put that expectation I felt a lot better 😊 #selfcare

29. -Self care for me today looked like doing makeup sessions with the kiddos I missed yesterday due to taking a 'sick/personal' day and seeing their smiles and watching their joy as they discover their abilities. Plus, on a more personal level I may have found a way to make a new 'in life' friend (which was my yesterday's self care.)

Like the s/x post above, these are a broadcast request for understanding, a request for empathy. Unlike most of the s/x posts, however, these set aside overt biomedical frameworks and focus on cognitive and behavioral aspects of mental health treatment, such as alleviating stress, spending time with loved ones, and meaningful social contact. Here, empathy is part of the strategy of self-care, an understanding of one's mental health needs shaped by the larger narrative of self-care.

In these self-care narratives, depression is a struggle between self and depression, which as a mental illness is presented as a natural if unfortunate condition of humankind. In a sense, this is a struggle between self and their own nature, and self-care is a range of tools to strengthen the self and resist the nature. Within the *Preacher* text, Cassidy the vampire is also engaged in a struggle with his own nature. Margo Adler suggests the vegetarian vampire trope may be "a stand-in for our own addictions" (Adler 2014, 38) and our struggles against them. Cassidy does not present as emotionally tortured as, say, Edward Cullen in the *Twilight* series, but perhaps that is because he redirects his addiction into carousing and promiscuity. Excessive use of drugs, alcohol, and sex as unhealthy

coping mechanisms are a well known feature of addiction. Perhaps the proxy for addiction's addiction is another reason why Cassidy's violence is accepted and welcomed by fans, because the idea of avoiding pain and struggle through alcohol, drugs, and pharmaceuticals is common to American culture.

A more literal context for struggle may be found in the discourse over speculative fiction texts. The struggle between parties and against oppressors is another common impetus for the discourse of empathy. Fans of DAI were frequently asked by BioWare to share their opinions of the game characters and story themes. In the storyline prior to DAI the mages were experiencing increasing oppression and surveillance under the Templars, sequestered within Templar controlled mage-only enclaves. The last major event of the game prior to DAI was an act of terrorism by a mage against the Chantry, the religious body which controlled the Templars. Many of the discussion threads about characters turned to this plot point to frame their feelings about characters and the narrative itself. Roughly two thirds of the fans who replied to these threads sided with the mages as the oppressed party, but some did not. Most offered justifications for their support:

30. I've always fought on the side of mage's rights and against the totalitarian power of the knights templar and the order, so that will be my first play through Either decision could have some bad results, but I have always felt my character to be more sympathetic to the mages than the templars.
31. A mage is just an abomination waiting to happen. Support The Templars
32. Templars. The Circle was to corrupt to take any risks. In Kirkwall, you couldn't kick a hobo without him being a blood mage.

33. I sided with the Mages. To slaughter innocents simply because they MAY be guilty? As a Christian irl, I've studied my faith's history and this sounds an awful lot like the Crusades and the Inquisition
34. Sometimes those who didn't side with the mages met with strong opposition:
35. Tayler Yeah and all those innocents harmed by blood magic and mages who couldnt even hope to control their own power. yeah humanity was supposed to just sit back and leave them to their devices...history is bound to repeat itself and essentially the chantrys tale of darkspawn origin is true, mages cause more bad than good...even if its unintentional
36. Brian LaFleur Tayler is a nazi.
37. Anthony Yeah, because the Templars have never done anything immoral... they are paragons of good! You can't blame every mage for the actions of a bunch of Tevinter psychos from a Chantry story. Convenient that the CHANTRY's story blames MAGES for the darkspawn. So that the Chantry has more of a reason to yoke the mages. That doesn't sound suspicious at all. Lol
38. Souza Yeah mages have the potential to be bad, so does everyone else, specially more if they know nothing but violence and oppression from an early age. There will always be mages in Thedas because that's not something we can change (I think), so unless you are defending we automatically convict anyone from a circumstance beyond their control to

a life of oppression and expect the situation to change miraculously than you will side with mages.

All of these fans, regardless of which side they fall on, are expressing some understanding about the parties in conflict. What sorts whether fans support mages or Templars is whether they understand the mages as being deserving of freedoms and rights or human aberrations without the will to resist their evil and destructive natures.

### **Moral Agency**

Traits which characterize an object's agency dominate the discourse of empathy, regardless of whether the discourse be fictional character or nonfictional, analog human. During the data collection phase, a variety of actions and behaviors were highlighted through process coding, including those which were sorted into conflict and its subcontexts of violence and struggle, discussed above. Because the "who" in empathic discourse was as important as the "what," once the data collection was complete it was coded for traits or characteristics ascribed to the object of empathy. These included the identifying characteristics of nonhuman animal and supernatural of special interest this project, genders, and other psychological or social qualities such as intelligence and sex appeal. When the intersection of these traits and action words in the context of empathy were analyzed, what emerged was a relationship between the empathic object's moral agency first and the subject's willingness or ability to empathize with that object.

Innocence is one common recurring trait ascribed to characters, human and nonhuman animal or supernatural alike. Innocence is generally offered as a quality that is to be protected, and there are moral implications for interaction with innocence:

39. The templars punish and imprison innocents who have never committed any crime and have never practiced blood magic. Most never will. You cannot punish someone for a crime they haven't committed simply because they might do so. [from DAI]
40. I saved Redcliff, Arl Eamon as well as his son, Connor. I would not condemn a wise and kind ruler as well as his innocent son, to death by blood magic, due to Loghain's treachery. [from DAI]
41. Holy SHIT! You can't expect to fuck with innocent people & not have them jump in your ass eventually. #TheLeftovers Expand
42. WHAT ON EARTH?! They freaking shot an innocent dog and walked away 😞 #TheLeftovers
43. - ..... But don't kill innocent dogs, man. Don't do that. #Preacher
44. That looks like he slaughtered some innocent folks? [from *Preacher*]
45. Self care looked like spending time with my Granddaughter and Grandson and my Son, the innocence the love, the smiles, the laughter, fill my heart and my soul!!
46. Today's self care: watching my daughter sleep on my lap. Her face-so at peace, so innocent and lovely-it gives me hope and strength.

In the human-analog human empathy narratives of self care, such as in 39) and 40), innocence is a quality of children, a source of positive emotions and resilience, and frequently something the adult subject might somehow regain. In the discourse about fictional characters, however, innocence is more often employed as a way to measure the ethical balance of an event. Regardless of what category of person the object falls into,

human, nonhuman animal, or supernatural, innocence is a primary criterion by which the subject understands and positions violence in these fictions. By contrast, the narratives of self care directed at analog selves and human others never juxtaposed innocence with violence. Its opposite term, however, “guilt,” is frequently employed:

47. I suffer from anorexia, and today my self care looked like letting myself eat a sweet treat without feeling guilty or sick.

48. Self-care (yesterday now) was celebrating my birthday by doing exactly what I wanted without feeling guilty.

Here guilt is a quality of self to divest oneself of in the process of self care, and positive things are associated with the absence of guilt. More than half of the coded entries for guilt occurred in the self care narratives and in this context. Of the remaining three data sets, once all entries for ‘guilt’ that pertained to a fictional organization (the “Guilty Remnant”) in the *Leftovers* series were culled, there remained only 15 uses of the word. Of those, it was used to justify violence about half the time, and as a trait that produces suffering the rest. The connection to violence in these few uses of “guilt” are here like the use of “innocent” in 39) through 46) above, as a trait balanced against the use of violence.

As mentioned above, violence is a common theme in the fan discourse based on the texts, but not in the narratives of self care. In the case of the latter it is exclusively brought up in the context of a symptom of depression or other mental illness, such as self harm, and is never justified in the discourse. By contrast, fictional violence is a setting by which many fans are eager to demonstrate their personal systems of value as they discuss why characters do or do not deserve the violence done to them in the texts. Innocence

and guilt are the far ends of one spectrum. Another trait commonly referred to with this connection to violence relates to mental illness. Terms associated with mental illness are frequently used to explain, though not exonerate, violence and other negative behaviors. In these cases, having a mental illness, which includes addiction, more often than not reduces the culpability of the object for their negative behaviors, including violence.

49. Love Bioware Villains. They may be enemies but still, they are so sure of what they believe to be the right course of action. They have their own reasons. Even when Meredith went loco, she mentions Elthina as an old friend and how she'll be avenged during that final fight. [DAI]

As 49) shows, mental illness, in this case “loco,” is associated with some loss of cognition, here memory and reason. The character of Meredith is crazy but retains the ability to reason, make choices about her behavior, and recognize still some injustices even if she is blind to her own. This is what makes Meredith a lovable villain in the eyes of this particular fan. In the context of violence, there is a spectrum between mental illness (or at least its stereotypical descriptions of “crazy” and like terms) and villainy, or perhaps evil.

The commonality between the spectrums of innocence/guilt and mentally ill/immoral in the context of violence is moral agency: behaviors weighed against an estimation of that object’s capacity to resist some wrongdoing, either in their past or in the potential future.

50. So am I going to choose someone who was born with an extraordinary gift or an addict who's doing his job so he can get his next fix... tough decision [DAI]

51. I suffer from crippling anxiety, and because of my poor choices under the influence of opiates after I became actively addicted I now am being obligated to stop taking the anxiety medication that has suppressed the effects of said anxiety. [self care narratives]

These examples demonstrate how addiction, a mental illness, is used to qualify future and past bad behaviors without exonerating them, in empathies towards fictional characters and the analog self. The less moral agency attributed to the empathic object along these spectrums, the more positive the affect directed towards them, and the less likely their behaviors are to be condemned or deserving of violent retribution. Addiction mitigates culpability but is frequently seen in our society as being preventable and the fault of the sufferer. Despite its classification as a mental illness, being an addict relieves the sufferer of some blame for their behaviors while under the influence but ultimately they are seen as being to blame for the addiction itself.

These traits of innocence/guilt and mentally ill/immoral are further mitigated by the choices made against one's nature or current state. Drawing from the samples above, Meredith was crazy but made choices using reason in 39), and so deserves a good, fighting end; the mages in 50) have the capacity to do evil (blood magic), but their state of innocence, not having gone against that nature, should earn them some peace. There is an act that could be chosen, might even have a tendency to be chosen, but that is not.

This perspective offers another potential reason why the vegetarian vampire Cassidy is not condemned by the fans for going off his diet and actually eating a person while they disapprove of human Emily for feeding that human to him. Adler assigns the "monstrous outsider" (Adler 2014, 19) to one type of contemporary vampire that is

persecuted for their identity, likened to young adults who feel persecuted for their established rites of passage such as drugs or sexual experimentation. The behaviors are monstrous because they are disfavored by society at large, but nonetheless those behaviors are congruent with the nature of the groups in question. Cassidy is a blood drinker, an immortal, and a supernatural creature of the night. He is a preternatural predator and his natural prey is human, yet when we meet him it becomes clear that he only eats people in self defense. Eating people is natural to him, but he goes against his own nature and only eats people in particular contexts. At the point where he eats Emily's boyfriend, a man who has done nothing against Cassidy but in the text is suggested to have done some unspoken wrong to Emily, Cassidy is badly injured to the point of having become nearly feral. His capacity to resist his nature is diminished, his need for survival paramount.

## DISCUSSION

In *Toward an Anthropology of the Will* (Throop and Murphy 2010), Jason Throop identifies three experiential correlates of free will. The first, sense of own-ness, refers to a person's "*control and authorship* over a particular act [which] need not be an explicitly reflexive act" (Throop 2010, 4). The second, goal directedness or anticipation, is "the carrying out of an act in the service of an intended object, goal, project, or end" (Throop 2010, 35). The final correlate of free will is effortful-ness, "what Wegner (2001) calls an 'internal 'oomph'" (Throop 2010, 35). Together these correlates shape the landscape of free will, not a single quality but a matrix which may be used to understand the capacity of an individual to resist the darker aspects of their nature.

The second and third questions I asked about empathy at the start of this project were what cultural models determine whether empathy is warranted and how empathy is deployed. Using the first question as a guide, who is an appropriate recipient for empathy, led us to one model that answers the other two. One type of empathy is reserved for those who positively exercise free will in relation to their natural tendency to do harm. Regardless of the status of the object as human, nonhuman animal, supernatural, or even analog human, much of the discourse of empathy in this data is about understanding an object's control over their own behaviors, their intentions, and that motivation for action that is their oomph. In this context, the quality of innocence can be tied to the absence of "oomph," or impetus to act, and mental illness to the capacity for self control. Immorality, which I offered as the opposite end to mental illness in the discursive spectrum about violence and culpability, speaks to the intentionality aspect of free will.

Above I mentioned the hot-cold empathy gap in which persons underestimated the degree to which emotion would affect their decision making. The mirror neurons

discovered in the 1980's that sparked a new conversation about empathy suggest a relationship between seeing someone doing a thing and doing that thing oneself, the gap between personal experience and an imaginative construction of subjectivity. We might expect then that subjects who have themselves experienced addiction related impulsive behavior, for example, might be more inclined to attribute less free will vis a vis own-ness and anticipation to objects assigned the trait of addict, and consequently lessen their culpability for negative and impulsive behaviors. If the hot-cold empathy gap is the difference between feeling the "oomph" and trying to understand the oomph of another, that can be reduced to having an experience and imaginatively constructing an experience for another. In this discourse, empathy may be constructed in the bridging of this gap.

One of my first research questions asked who was an appropriate recipient for empathy. The answer to this question as presented by this research is this: the subject's estimation of the object's moral agency and free will influence whether or not that object is an appropriate recipient for empathy. Innocents are treated as blank slates for negative behavior, such that if they hadn't expressed negative behaviors yet, they were more likely to be viewed as a minimal future risk and be positively empathized with. Innocents are also treated as positive states of being worth protecting and striving for, assessed by not having had impetus to engage in negative behaviors. The categorization of "innocent" is not exclusive of those who have never done or thought of doing bad things, as one might perhaps ascribe to a baby. The categorization of innocent might also be applied to those who had long resisted their violent or dangerous natures, and the absence of guilt, its opposite, might be directly associated with reframing something previously seen as negative in a new positive light. Two of Throop's correlates of free will, own-ness, the

authorship of one's behavior, and anticipation, the intentional pursuing a goal to its end, are presented in the discourse as diminished by mental illness. Addiction, however, is differently perceived as affecting own-ness but not anticipation. The less an object possessed these correlates of free will — diminished authorship, anticipation, and oomph — the more negatively they were likely to be characterized by the fans. Even in the narratives of self-care are about free will, self care is an intentional act employed explicitly for the purposes of fostering mental health.

Between the subject and empathized object is a chain which links moral agency to free will and a range of mitigating factors. These mitigations existed on a range between extremes, such that a seemingly complex cognitive calculation must be required to arrive at an answer as to whether or not an object had earned the empathy of the subject. The categorizations of moral agency and free will held both when the responses were spontaneous, as on Twitter, and more reflective, as on Facebook. Such complexities mean that our emotions may be divided as we calculate and recalculate before a word is uttered. Fortunately, the cognitive schema theory adopted by this project from the start provided a useful framework for dealing with a disparity between reported and observed behavior, or conflicts in understanding. In this examined discourse of empathy, conflict creates the spaces of discovery, a place to understand others and ourselves.

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