From Imagined Communities to Contact Zones: American Monoculture in Transatlantic Fandoms

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In English-language scholarship of media fandoms, lacking any indicators to the contrary, we tend to assume a default Anglo-American orientation. Defined less by geography or culture than by a common language, such an orientation can flatten differences within both fandoms and fan studies itself. This, in turn, lends itself to a broad conceptualization of fandom as not simply comprised of, but defined by, a community-based framework. There is, of course, no question that fandoms may be understood as communities of affect. Particularly as experienced online, they map neatly onto what Benedict Anderson has termed ‘imagined communities’, defined by certain commonalities – of language, culture, religion, race and, in the case of fandom, fan object – held by geographically dispersed people and enabled through globalized mass media.¹ Indeed, the correspondence of Anderson’s imagined communities to online fandoms is such that it has been a seminal framework of media fan studies as a whole for conceptualizing how fans congregate and communicate.

At the same time, this emphasis in fan studies on imagined communities as intensified spatiotemporal convergence obscures its politics; namely the theorization and analysis of how such communities lend themselves to nationalist ideologies. As theorized by Anderson, imagined communities are ‘distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined,’² a style that is necessarily constrained by the borders that surround and define a given community. Thus, while a framework of imagined community enables us to understand online fandoms as determined largely, if not solely, by shared interest in a given fan object between geographically dispersed people, it might equally foreground *how* such communities are formed: who does and does not qualify for membership and why; how common rules of

engagement are determined and the centripetal assumptions they overlay. Which is to say, while the first, spatiotemporally-convergent, understanding of imagined communities supports and reinforces a paradigm of generally cohesive “community”, the second, more political approach does the opposite, drawing attention to the possibility of friction and fissure within fandoms.

In the context of “normative” Anglo-American fandoms, broadly defined by English language and cultural commonalities, such fissures become visible when we take into account their transatlantic locus, comprised not only of the United States and the United Kingdom, but also such places – media markets and industries – as Canada, Scandinavia,³ and Mexico, each with its own idiosyncratic relationship to the others.⁴ An imagined community framework can help us see these differences, even if it remains inadequate to the task of understanding the lines of tension and axes of difference that can nonetheless occupy ostensibly coherent fan communities.⁵ It is here that a turn to Mary Louise Pratt’s theory of ‘contact zones’ is salient: Pratt argues that Anderson’s imagined communities are ‘strongly utopian, embodying values like equality, fraternity, liberty, which the societies often profess but systematically fail to realize’.⁶ She might just as easily be speaking of fan communities that, like the nation-states of Anderson’s work, similarly privilege ‘principles of cooperation and shared understanding’ that assume ‘all participants are engaged in the same game and that the game is for all players’.⁷ A contact zones perspective enables us to further the political critique of Anderson’s imagined communities further along, as ‘social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power’.⁸ In a fan studies context, thinking of fan communities through a contact zones model thus facilitates ‘attention to what divides fans from one another, [rather than celebrating or assuming] fans’ identical interests and similar interpretations of popular cultural products’.⁹ Indeed, how these cultures are understood in the

context of a given fandom depends largely on the perspective adopted by scholars: cultures of nation, race, ethnicity, gender, class, and so on are all potential sites of difference and disjuncture even where normative fan practices and assumptions predominate (inter-fandom points of affinity notwithstanding).

With this in mind, how might a contact zones approach to transatlantic television fandoms alter our understanding of seemingly normative, monolithic Anglo-American fandom? What insights does it afford us? In what follows, I will explore how a contact zones framework foregrounds the cultural diversity inherent in transatlantic fandoms. I am particularly concerned with how perceptions of what one fan productively terms ‘American monoculture’ inform both conflict and cultural capital within these fandoms.¹⁰ Less invasive cultural imperialism than a totalizing and pervasive popular cultural backdrop, American monoculture is that *de facto* mass or ‘mainstream’ popular culture against which fans of all nationalities define both themselves and the media they consume. As I discuss below, fan resistance to any association with American monoculture is enacted particularly through assertions of local specificity, and it is in this way that even American fans may differentiate their consumption of American media from mainstream monoculture. If anything, American fans’ attempts to distance themselves from American monoculture suggests that online transatlantic fan engagement, as much as any other kind of fan interaction, is informed by those same hierarchies of authenticity and taste that comprise subcultural self-identity. In this sense, we might understand fans’ attempts to distance themselves from American monoculture as less a uniquely transcultural phenomenon than symptomatic of the ways fans assert identity *through* local specificity against the consumption of seemingly undifferentiated, *de facto* American popular culture.

This essay thus explores both how and to what ends transatlantic television fans perceive and distance themselves from American monoculture, first by considering transculturally articulated fan frictions that emerge within the contact zones of online transatlantic television fandom, followed by an examination of how fans' eagerness to distance themselves from American monoculture informs and drives transatlantic fanfiction community practices of "Britpicking" and its ancillary 'American-picking, Ameri-picking, and Yank-wanking' offshoots.¹¹ Finally, I will look at the Canadian popularity of Granada Television's long-running series, *Coronation Street*, particularly as it encompasses a liminal axis of transatlantic television fandom not commonly considered in scholarship. At once neighboring the United States and part of the British Commonwealth, Canada occupies a unique position in relation to both the US and the UK – one that plays out through *Coronation Street* fandom as it, too, is inflected by a backdrop of American monoculture. In approaching these varied phenomena through a contact zones lens that foregrounds the potential for transcultural conflict within the spaces of fandoms, this essay demonstrates both the constancy of transatlantic fan resistance to American monoculture as overlaying broader concerns with subcultural identity, as well as the culturally specific ways this resistance is performed.

Monoculture, Authenticity, and Subcultural Capital in Transatlantic TV Fandoms

In June, 2015, I solicited a small sampling of Tumblr-based fans' experiences of transatlantic television fandom. Self-selected primarily from my own Tumblr "followers", these fans were invited to describe instances of transcultural friction, accommodation, and so forth, as examples of fan interactions that exceeded a "community" orientation. Ultimately, three Americans, three British fans, and one Canadian responded with detailed accounts of their

experiences, enabling me to identify at the anecdotal level two generalizable points of felt transcultural friction: fandom Americanization as experienced by non-U.S. fans, and British cultural gatekeeping as experienced primarily by American fans. Americanization, or American cultural imperialism, perceived by non-American television viewers is certainly not a new phenomenon. Ien Ang's seminal study of Dutch viewers of the American television show *Dallas* described how the spectre of the show's Americanness loomed large over viewers' perceptions of it. In particular, amongst those who disliked or even hated the show, she discerned a strongly anti-American discourse that understood American television shows 'as a threat to one's own national culture and as an undermining of high-principled cultural values in general'.¹² As one dissenter commented, "I find it a typical American programme, simple and commercial, role-affirming, deceitful".¹³

What distinguishes contemporary non-American fans' sense of the intrinsic Americanness of both American television and, in particular, fans from such overtly ideological criticism is its firmly affective nature; as one of my survey respondents observed, 'perceived American monoculture is probably something that annoys almost all fans from outside it to some degree'.¹⁴ Indeed, many of the responses from British fans of UK television shows emphasized how it *feels* when Americans fail to comprehend or acknowledge cultural differences, ranging from a simple 'it does jar a bit when...' ¹⁵ to exclamations of 'it just bloody well irks me!' ¹⁶ and 'What is up with some of them? The sheer intoxicated self-righteousness of it....' ¹⁷ For these fans, it is the Americanization of fandom through American fans' assumption of a hegemonic, US-centric fandom value system (already embodied in US media exports) that underlies transatlantic fan frictions; frictions that are exacerbated within fandom contact zones 'by the fact that we are similar enough to be able to argue about our differences in the first place, and to

assume that each should know what the other means when actually they don't.'¹⁸ That is, in the absence of overt markers of difference, online fans tend to assume congruence between fan and language communities, often where little exists. To be sure, as with Ang's anti-fan respondents *avant la lettre*, there is an ideological side to these frustrations with perceived American monoculture, despite the colorations and attachments of fan affect. Yet where Ang's respondents actually employ ideological explanations to obscure and distance themselves from visceral reactions to *Dallas*,¹⁹ these fans begin from a place of affect, which in turn may lead to recognition of the ideological work their responses perform.

American fans' monocultural assumptions and concomitant ignorance of British cultural specificity are also a flashpoint in transatlantic television fandoms. As one Welsh fan points out,

Our TV is very regional, originally broadly divided into 'Granada land' (the North) and 'BBC land' (the South) and the TV company that makes a show impacts its perception (in the same way that ITV = slightly 'lesser' than BBC traditionally) it [*sic*] irks me that I'm supposed to 'know' what it 'means' when Americans say a 'CW Show' but

American fans lump all "British TV" as equal.²⁰

At the same time, such distinctions, and non-American (primarily British) fans' insistence on registering them, provoke in some non-British (primarily American) fans the perception of 'a cultural power imbalance between [the US and Great Britain] that persists even in the face of American-led globalization'.²¹ Sarah Thornton has argued that what she terms 'subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being "in the know"',²² much of which is demonstrated through displays of cultural authenticity that, 'in its full-blown romantic form... suggests that grassroots cultures resist and struggle with a colonizing mass-mediated corporate world'.²³ Within Thornton's subcultures and transatlantic fandoms alike, such authenticity is grounded in

an oppositional relationship to what is posited as “American monoculture”, with subcultural or fan-cultural value determined by its distance from “mainstream” US culture. When British fans complain about the frustrations of ‘trying to have discussions about “British shows” with American fans who don’t try and understand [us]’ (read, who don’t mark out an authentic distance from American monoculture), American fans may perceive this as a spurious British assumption of American cultural homogeneity in the face of their own cultural specificity. In turn, this can provoke counter-assertions of American cultural diversity from US fans, a discursive strategy that enables American fans to distance themselves from perceived American monoculture.²⁴ In such fan exchanges and discussions, both UK *and* US fans therefore construct a (globalized, culturally-imperialist) US “mainstream” as other to their own fan-cultural identities.

Transformative fandom’s already presumed oppositional and non-hegemonic self-identities further complicate this calculus. As one American fan of *Doctor Who* writes,

The first conflict I ran across... was the divide between Old and New Who fans, or rather between those who knew both canons and those who didn’t. (Authentic vs. fake geek discourse, anyone? Less obviously gendered, but still gatekeeping.) Early on, in particular, this seemed more prevalent among those who identified Who (Old or New) as Their Culture, as something especially Brit [*sic*] that Americans could not possibly understand.²⁵

There are at least two oppositional axes of authenticity at work here. First, from a transatlantic perspective, the British-American axis privileges Britishness as more authentic. Second, from a gendered perspective concerning online *Doctor Who* fandom, an axis of distinction runs between “real” long-established male fans and “fake” queering fangirls new to the show – a spurious

distinction already challenged within fan studies. Given the hurdles of fan-cultural authenticity that fans must negotiate in order to be deemed “real” or “true” fans – in both a transatlantic and gendered sense – my respondent identified these frictions as kinds of fan “gatekeeping”. Even so, the specificity of the transatlantic conflict does not disappear altogether, as this respondent goes on to note,

Exclusionary politics aside, they did have a point. I hadn’t watched much UK TV, or any TV, for years; a lot of RTD’s [Russell T. Davies’] cultural coding (especially on *Who*) did go right over my head on first viewing – just following the accents and dialogue was challenging enough without parsing the cultural politics. It took a while to realize that RTD was taking something like a beloved sacred cow and reinventing it; he was doing it with a Doctor with a Northern working-class accent and a Companion who came from a council estate, had a black boyfriend and a “chav” accent, and was not incidentally played by the UK equivalent of Britney Spears.²⁶

Understood in this way, American monoculture within transatlantic fandoms is not necessarily synonymous with a monolithic, outward-directed American imperialism. While for non-American fans it appears implicated in ideologies of American cultural hegemony, it equally might be understood, particularly in a fan context, as signifying a more generalizable American-dominated cultural mainstream against which even American fans define themselves – just as my respondent notes that fandom gatekeepers, despite their problematic exclusionary cultural politics, actually had ‘a point’, and that it required some time to learn the ‘cultural coding’ of (i.e. accumulate the “authentic” subcultural capital called up by) showrunner Russell T. Davies’ reinvention of *Doctor Who* in 2005.

If such staples of fan activity as textual interpretation might thus be understood as equally likely to divide as unite fans within a transatlantic television context, foregrounding the kinds of intercultural clash intrinsic to contact zones, how do such differences play out within the (arguably) oppositional spaces of fanfiction reading and writing? As transformative work, fanfiction (re)creates its milieu, but what happens when such spaces are foreign to the writer creating them? In what follows, I will explore how British and American fans alike mobilise local specificity in fanfiction, both as a distancing tactic from perceived American monoculture and as a means of fixing the non-American authenticity of fan objects often created or revised according to the imperatives of transnational media industries.

Subcultural Authenticity and Transatlantic Fanfiction: Britpicking and Brit-fixing

The practice of “Britpicking” is thought to have begun circa 2003 with the online proliferation of *Harry Potter* fanfiction.²⁷ A play on the word nitpick, it typically involves non-British fanfiction writers consulting with British fans to ensure their work corresponds culturally and linguistically to the British locus of UK television shows, books, and films. Although there may be multiple factors underpinning the emergence of Britpicking practices, it seems safe to say that one significant reason has been British fans’ vocal indignation and irritation with erroneous cultural/linguistic details in UK-set fanfiction created by non-British writers. As “Alison”, a contributor to the *Fanfic Symposium* website, wrote in 2004,

I’ve been reading in The Professionals fandom for a number of years and, on the whole, I’m impressed by the effort made to get Bodie and Doyle and their environment as authentic as possible. The trouble is I’ve just started reading Harry Potter fan fiction and, apart from being astounded at the vast amount of stories out there, I’m becoming more

and more irked by the fact that there are far too many writers who are not bothering to learn about the culture that Harry and his friends and foes live in, despite having the books as reference material.²⁸

The Professionals aired in the early 1980s; in the early 2000s its fans were likely to have been adults. In contrast, by 2004 *Harry Potter* had effectively introduced a new generation of younger fans to the pleasures of fanfiction. Thus, an expectation that *Harry Potter* fandom would or should reflect the same attention to authenticity demonstrated by fans of *The Professionals* may well have been optimistic (as well as implicitly challenging the fandom bona fides of young fanfiction writers). As one American respondent notes,

I strongly suspect that H[arry] P[otter] was the gateway UK fandom for a lot of US Who/TW [Torchwood] fans – certain [sic] in my circles, it was. There may have been a generational effect in play; one asks more sophisticated questions later in one's life as a fan and with more adult content in the canon.²⁹

“Alison” asserts above that ‘there are far too many writers who are not bothering to learn about the culture that Harry and his friends and foes live in, despite having the books as reference material.’ Yet the books sold by Scholastic, a publisher specializing in children's and young adult markets, were localized for the American market with ‘the spellings, terms, and idioms used by British speakers [translated] into their American equivalents so the audience was not put off or confused’.³⁰ Thus, American fanfiction writers *were* using the books available to them in the US marketplace as reference material, for a context-dependent understanding of “the books”. Nonetheless, Scholastic's American localization or “domestication” of the *Harry Potter* books lends itself to an implicit fan critique of American monoculture based on the British-American

axis of authenticity within which transatlantic fanfiction writing (concerning UK-centred media texts) often occurs.

Other British fans' nods to cultural commonsense seem equally divorced from the material conditions of transnational production and distribution. In a 2013 post by British LiveJournal user wellingtongoose, entitled 'More Tea Please, We're Sherlocked', purporting to teach fans 'how to write a good Sherlock fanfiction featuring this glorious brew', she asserts unequivocally that 'BBC Sherlock was made very much for British audiences.'³¹ Yet as a co-production between BBC Wales, Hartwood, and WGBH, the Boston member station of American public broadcaster PBS, *Sherlock* is at least materially transnational. Indeed, as Michele Hilmes argues, we might also understand it as a transcultural text, insofar as such television co-productions involve providing capital for program production 'in exchange for distribution rights *as well as for some degree of creative input into the production*'.³² In the case of *Sherlock*, Hilmes notes that

properties (like *Sherlock*) that already have transnational recognition and can work... imaginary identification into their narrative focus... are qualities that mark the most successful co-productions, and... draw together transnational publics.³³

Within Britain, reactions to such practices might be considered analogous to those that gave rise to Britpicking practices:

on the British side, this has involved accusations of cultural dilution, of using the television license fee paid by all British TV viewers on programs made for Americans. Implied here is that making programs that appeal to Americans somehow weakens their essential Britishness.³⁴

Alternatively, as in the case of wellingtongoose's LiveJournal post that substitutes 'Sherlocked' for 'British', transnationally conceived, marketed and consumed programs may also be *recontextualised* by fans as fundamentally British. Such discourse amounts to what might be termed *Brit-fixing*, where Britishness is fixed by fans as a marker of textual authenticity. That said, what underpins many British fans' reactions to British-American television co-productions and transatlantic fanfiction writing communities is an implicit perception of American monoculture as the Great Homogenizer – an approach grounded in historical perceptions (in the UK and Europe) of American popular culture as intrinsically immature, generic and hyper-commercial. Even here, however, the material conditions of *Sherlock*'s transnational production are displaced, implying that related transformative works should conform to a British cultural sensibility.

We might assume from this that the British relationship to American monoculture – played out in practices of Britpicking and Brit-fixing within transatlantic fandoms – is defined by the threat of American cultural hegemony and a resulting “dilution” of British cultural distinction. As noted above, the similarities between such a discourse and that employed by Dutch viewers who disliked *Dallas* in the 1980s are clear, both reflecting familiar concerns over American cultural imperialism. But it is not only non-Americans whose online transatlantic fan activities are impacted by perceptions of American monoculture. Whereas Britpicking is now a recognized aspect of English language fanfiction, the opposite – proofreading for cultural accuracy in fanfiction set in an American milieu – remains far rarer, despite errors by non-US writers provoking similar irritations in some American fans to those expressed by the British fans above. As one American fan of the CW show *Supernatural* (“SPN”) observes:

it grates on me when British fic authors of Supernatural fic make no attempt to get the

British-isms out of their writing. They're writing characters who are, like, THE epitome of Americana, and then they have Dean say something like 'thanks ever so' and it's very jarring. I'm sure British fic authors get just as annoyed at Americans writing Sherlock, but I feel like at least we mostly try? I'm not sure British SPN authors even try.³⁵

Indeed, *Supernatural*, one of the biggest Anglo-American online media fandoms, is something of a lightning rod for cultural clashes in the context of transatlantic television. As noted on the (predominantly Anglo-American-centered) fandom wiki, Fanlore, responses to a LiveJournal-based workshop on Americanisms and *Supernatural* fanfiction were decidedly mixed and contentious. The workshop itself, hosted by two non-Anglophone European fans,³⁶ began from the perspective that

Supernatural deals not only with two brothers fighting heaven and hell, it also deals with a country and its culture. In some ways, Supernatural is one of the most 'American' shows out there, because unlike the majority of other shows, it is not restricted to a specific town, or city building, or even room.... In traveling through the Midwest and the small towns, and via literally [sic] using the backroads of the US, Supernatural is as American as it gets.³⁷

Notably, responses to this statement, as well as the content of the workshop post itself, closely reflect those of the fans discussed above. While many non-American fans thanked the posters for putting together such a resource, others were critical of the posters' flattening of "American" culture and resulting failure to address local and regional differences. This reflected the same concerns with local specificity often voiced by British fans: 'In reading over the comments, I have to say I agree with what I've read – the US is a place of contradictions and complexities that aren't easy to understand – even for those of us who live here!'³⁸ In this way,

then, the drive to distinguish oneself from American monoculture is repeated by Americans in transatlantic *Supernatural* fandom, underscoring the extent to which American monoculture might just as easily be considered through a lens of mainstreamed commercial homogeneity as nationality. The suggestion that non-American writers conform to an “American” style of writing and, in particular, characterization is seen by one fan as a ‘bafflingly exclusionary vision of Americanness’, particularly in the context of *Supernatural*’s own problems with multicultural representation (‘for a start... [what about] Black, Hispanic, and Asian American people’).³⁹ Taken as a whole, however, the similarities in fan conversations concerning both Britpicking and “American-picking” suggest that they play out along two different axes: one of cultural verisimilitude, and one of fandom in/authenticity. Considered against the latter, exhortations to demonstrate adequate knowledge of other cultures in fanfiction echo subcultural identity claims that are centered on fan authenticity. As the commenter in the previous section observed, criticism of “American” writing based around U.K.-based story worlds seems analogous to “fake geek” discourses in fandom more generally.⁴⁰

Reinforcing this is a tendency in fanfiction, whether it has been US/UK culturally nitpicked or not, to index insider knowledge through certain (show-specific/national) cultural markers. In *Sherlock*, for example, John Watson mentions milk exactly once, in a scene towards the end of ‘The Great Game’ when he tells Sherlock in frustration, ‘Uh, milk. We need milk’, in hopes that Sherlock will buy it instead of him. In *Sherlock* fanfiction, however, it’s become something of a recognized trope to have John Watson somehow involved in the purchasing of milk from Tesco, often against his will: ‘John trudged up the steps to their flat the [sic] Tesco bag with milk and honey in one hand.’⁴¹ When John demands that Sherlock get the milk, he often fares differently in the unfamiliar wilderness of the shop:

Entering the sliding doors of Tesco, Sherlock grabbed a carrier basket and strode back to the dairy section. There, he was confronted with a dizzying array of possible choices: whole, semi-skimmed, skimmed, non-homogenized, organic, soymilk, goat's milk. How did anyone ever choose when all they needed was just 'milk'?⁴²

Broadly speaking, milk here serves a generic purpose; appended to 'Tesco' it becomes a marker of some baseline level of cultural and fandom authenticity. Whether fully Britpicked or not, its inclusion in a story signals, however marginally, the author's awareness of the show's British setting. This tendency seems equally reflected in non-American fanfiction of shows such as *Supernatural* as well; as one fan observes, 'I know I've read some DeanCas fics where people who are unfamiliar with the US [nevertheless] write about the landmarks - like the Great Ball of Twine, etc.'⁴³

Further, the more specialized the landmark, the greater the degree of performed cultural familiarity and authenticity, as seen in the opening of a *Harry Potter* story by American fan asecretchord:

...Harry Potter made his way to the narrow alley where the rubbish bins were stored. The theatres at the National would be emptying soon, disgorging their audiences in a flood that would sweep along the South Bank before spilling into the Underground. If he could just find something to eat – a half-eaten sandwich from Eats or a forgotten takeaway box from Wagamama – he'd be set for the night and could head for home.⁴⁴

In her discussion of Britpicking in Anglo-American fandoms, Erin Horáková observes of one British *Sherlock* fanfiction,

unfortunately no preparation, no community, however helpful can match the effortless, brief description of breakfast at a café in Hounslow after a rough

flight.... There is, perhaps, also something inimitable about the local specificity the Lancastrian Hall shows in the ensuing clipped discussion of ‘a Yorkshireman’s refusal to admit to excellence in anything originating from the other side of the Pennines’, even in [the author’s] choice to stage a scene in this shoddy, little-known corner of London.⁴⁵

Here, then, we have three kinds of fanfiction localization: 1) baseline use of British culture/brands; 2) specialized non-British use of specific British landmarks; and 3) British inhabitation of cultural experience. Yet all three perform fan authenticity in ways that highlight the specific role played by American monoculture in transatlantic television fandoms.

“Britishness” is figured here as oppositional to transatlantic cultural homogeneity, and as marginalized by US-centric transnational popular culture – something we often are inclined to view through a lens of American cultural imperialism. At the same time, Britishness also sits at the top of fan hierarchies of authenticity within fandoms of British television shows.

Exhortations to “Ameri-pick” non-American fanfiction of US television shows similarly position Americans at the apex of this fandom hierarchy, but only when American national/local specificity is foregrounded. Regarding her feelings of irritation with the kinds of American monoculturalism she sees in transatlantic fandoms generally, one British respondent notes,

this undeniably gives me the pleasure of perceiving myself as a sensible British person who has a sense of proportion which the American doesn’t.... Making that kind of judgment no doubt plays to my stake in the British idea of Americans as spoilt children.⁴⁶

In this way, analogous to American fans’ attempts to distance themselves from a hegemonic American monocultural center by way of local specificity, in which they – like this fan – are better than/different to the undifferentiated American mainstream, the two axes of anti-

American-monoculture and pro-fan-authenticity become one and the same. In each, authentic fandom has to struggle against a threat of inauthenticity, whether marked out by unknowing fans lacking US/UK cultural awareness, or homogenized American monoculture. In doing so, these authenticity claims collapse together to demarcate and fix “real” fan identity. Indeed, I would argue that attempts to fix “true” fandom (often based around US and UK cultural authenticities, where paradoxically both construct and other American monoculture) are a defining aspect of transatlantic television fandom.

My focus to this point on British-American fan intersections and clashes within the contact zones of *Doctor Who*, *Sherlock*, and *Supernatural* online fandoms might imply that they are synonymous with transatlantic television fandoms. Certainly, the strength of American and British TV shows overseas in these two markets reinforces such an understanding. Yet, as noted in the introduction, it is important to explore transatlantic television fandoms outside a strict Anglo-American framework. Given the great popularity of the British soap opera *Coronation Street* in Canada, as well as the utter lack of such fandom in the US, what follows is an exploration of its specific contours as an example of transatlantic television fandom.

Tripartite Transatlantic Fandom: Canadian Fans of ITV’s *Coronation Street*

In Canada, the popularity of the long-running British soap *Coronation Street* is such that it was the topic of a 2010 documentary aired on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) entitled *Corrie Crazy: Canada Loves Coronation Street*.⁴⁷ A subsequent newspaper article about the return of *Coronation Street* to nightly broadcasts on the CBC observed that, in the end, ‘there was no plausible explanation’ given by the documentary for the show’s Canadian reception.⁴⁸ The article specifically dismisses fans’ claims that ‘believable characters’ and ‘real people in real

situations' were the reason they loved the show, arguing, 'With respect, this is nonsense.

Coronation Street is not realistic.... it is tin-pot television, ludicrously melodramatic, mannered and corny.'⁴⁹

This writer does identify at least one impetus for such fandom, however: 'it's true that many of the actors look like regular British people and bear little resemblance to the cookie-cutter handsomeness one sees in U.S. network TV.' He continues:

Part of its appeal in Canada is rooted in the peculiar mix of the familiar and the exotic that it offers. We are colonially familiar with much of Brutish [*sic*] culture and, simultaneously, the texture of that culture is not ours.⁵⁰

Writing in *Shakespeare in Quebec: Nation, Gender, and Adaptation*, Jennifer Drouin is more specific:

English Canada's Anglophilia, which distinguishes Canada culturally from the United States, manifests itself not only in notions of "the classics" and "refinement" but also in popular culture. Colonial longing for the mother country must provide at least a partial explanation why 775,000 viewers tune in nightly to CBC Television to watch *Coronation Street*.⁵¹

As with the spectre of American monoculture in US-British transatlantic television fandoms, here Canadian-British cultural affinity, on the one hand, and shared oppositionality to American monoculture, on the other, are credited both for *Coronation Street*'s extraordinary showing on Canadian television, and its expression of English-speaking Canadian national identity. As one male Tumblr user and Canadian *Coronation Street* fan explained in more affective detail, the show's Canadian popularity

definitely comes from the “not-American” sense of it.... to be an English-speaking Canadian is to be a foreigner in your own country at times. The cinemas are all American movies, our highest rated TV shows are American, the pop music is generally American. This is largely due to popular tastes and largely because Canada doesn’t produce enough TV and movies to dominate the airwaves.... There’s also a bit of an inferiority thing going on. Canada could produce a fine police procedural which does ok but viewers also have the choice of, like, five US based police procedurals, all with bigger budgets and stars. So *Corrie* comes into that in as much as culturally, *some* Canadians feel a stronger connection to that than they do to US stuff. And it’s a well produced show.⁵²

There is no one axis of Canadian interest in *Coronation Street* – no one reason why Canadians seem to like it so much. Neither is there a singular binary or relation underpinning the show’s popularity (unlike “UK versus US” fan authenticity claims). Rather, *Corrie*’s fandom has multiple points of semiotic entry which are at least tripartite: British affinity, the felt weight of American monoculture, and English-speaking Canada’s liminal position between UK and US cultures.

The ‘inferiority thing’ described by this respondent demonstrates the differences in transatlantic relationships mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. If both Canada and the US share a colonial relationship to the UK, their paths nonetheless diverged when the US declared independence. Thus is Canadian money imprinted with the image of Queen Elizabeth II, and English word spellings overwhelmingly conform to British standards. At the same time, Americans and Canadians share not only a land border, but driving norms, popular culture, and myriad other minutiae of cultural identity. They speak similarly accented English, enough so that Americans sometimes adopt an informal guideline of claiming to be Canadian when traveling

overseas in order to avoid the negative associations of Americanness abroad. In this sense, English-speaking Canada is not simply culturally “Canadian”, but also not/British and not/American: a liminal and hybrid subjectivity that lends itself to a differently positioned oppositionality to American monoculture. Reflecting this, Canadian fans of *Coronation Street* do not claim “Britishness” *per se*, but instead occupy a unique position in relation to the show. As the above respondent writes,

the fandom in Canada is so different because it exists outside the celebrity [world of] ...the UK. We don't see the stars of the show on chat shows or supermarket magazines or Strictly Come Dancing. We just have the show, aired every weeknight, on the CBC.... I think the difference between Canadian and UK fans is that Corrie is more like a club you belong to in Canada whereas in the UK, it's just a big show that's been on the air for more than 50 years.⁵³

Indeed, given the ubiquity of the show in the UK and its absence from transatlantic markets outside Canada, he observes,

it's funny: I never thought of Corrie as being part of a fandom because it's not a “genre” thing.... It's not Sherlock or Star Trek or Buffy. But when I realize I run a Corrie based Twitter and used to contribute to a Corrie based blog, then I see that it's totally a fandom.⁵⁴

Existing outside both the British-American axis, as well as the aegis of what normative cult/genre TV fandom typically understands *as* fandom, the Canadian fandom of *Coronation Street* gives lie to definitions of transatlantic media fandom as necessarily bi-directional between the US and the UK. Further, it complicates an understanding of American monoculture within transatlantic fandom as being somehow synonymous with American cultural imperialism. While

it is absolutely the case that American media continue to dominate global markets and, as such, American mainstream pop culture remains a key node within the contact zones of transatlantic fandom, multiple other subjectivities – in particular, transcultural fan identities – also inflect who we are as fans and how we position ourselves relative to border-crossing media that we embrace and love.

Conclusion: From Britpicking to US Universalism

To this point, the perception of and distancing from American monoculture in transatlantic television fandoms has been confined primarily to issues of media interpretation, the production of fanfiction, and “authentic” fan identity. Yet it’s worth noting that other survey respondents voiced different ways of understanding how American monoculture asserts itself in transatlantic fandoms. Particularly in the case of racial representation, a topic that is heavily debated in Tumblr and Twitter-centered online fandoms, American monoculture may be understood as American fans’ insistence on understanding social relations solely through a US socio-historical lens. As the Welsh respondent quoted above writes, one characteristic of US-centric fan culture concerns ‘Race/Ethnicity/what is or isn’t offensive issues. These abound in watching American drama and having fan discussions about them. See also: we are not all English over here and it’s really important.’⁵⁵ Another British respondent notes,

the transformation of fanspace into a kind of social justice ragespace feels like a specifically American development, and an Americanising of the space, because the obsession with cultural privilege is in itself an American leftist one.... ‘Blatant intra-American racism = I’m not surprised black American fans are angry but I’m not quite sure why white fans think this plays identically to the whole world.’⁵⁶

Here, rather than fan/cultural authenticity, what characterises these interactions is a kind of American universalism – or the critical recognition of it by non-US fans – that is at least perceived to play a determining role in the formation of, and participation in, online transcultural fandoms writ large.

It is these kinds of culturally complex intersections that are ineffectively served by fan studies' continued reliance on cohesive, or even simply imagined, "community" frameworks. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, this is not to say that fans cannot feel a sense of community in (always already) transcultural fandoms; the common refrain among online fans that "fandom" is where they found likeminded friends and a sense of social belonging is common because it's a legitimate fannish experience. But as with all (sometimes seemingly universal) experiences, felt community is subjective and uneven, particularly as it plays out in those 'contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power'⁵⁷ that characterize contact zones. Fandom may be 'beautiful',⁵⁸ but the singular 'fandom' common to much fan studies work hints at the problems inherent in assuming that all experiences of it are alike and generalizable. Particularly where differences hide in plain sight, as in the case of Anglophone transatlantic fandoms, beginning from the assumption of fandoms not as cohesive communities, but as always already transcultural and therefore vulnerable to the kinds of frictions presumed in a contact zones model, enables fan studies scholars to highlight and interrogate the very real conflicts and struggles that punctuate transatlantic media fandoms.

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 6.

² Ibid.

³ Strictly speaking, 'Nordic Noir' does not neatly map onto a transatlantic framework. Nonetheless, given the literally overseas orientation of its trans-border popularity (particularly in the United Kingdom), it seems suited to interrogation as a transatlantic phenomenon.

⁴ Rebecca Wanzo, "African-American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 20 (2015): 2.1.

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- ⁵ Piotr Siuda, "Fan Cultures: On the Impossible Formation of Global and Transnational Fandoms," in *Is It 'Cause It's Cool?: Affective Encounters with American Culture*, ed. Astrid M. Fellner, Susanne Hamscha, Klaus Heissenberger and Jennifer J. Moos (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2014), 296.
- ⁶ Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 38.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid., 34.
- ⁹ Siuda, 297.
- ¹⁰ Tumblr User P, solicited response by author, June 2015.
- ¹¹ Erin Horáková, "Britpicking as Cultural Policing in Fanfiction," in *Play, Performance, and Identity: How Institutions Structure Ludic Spaces*, ed. Matt Omasta and Drew Chappell (New York: Routledge, 2015), 135.
- ¹² Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985), 93.
- ¹³ Ibid., 91.
- ¹⁴ Tumblr User P.
- ¹⁵ Tumblr User W, solicited response by author, June 2015.
- ¹⁶ Tumblr User M, solicited response by author, June 2015.
- ¹⁷ Tumblr User P.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ang, 92-3.
- ²⁰ Tumblr User M.
- ²¹ Horáková, 135.
- ²² Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Identity* (London: Polity Press, 1995), 11.
- ²³ Ibid., 116.
- ²⁴ Tumblr User M.
- ²⁵ Tumblr User G, solicited response by author, June 2015.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ 'Brit-pick', Fanlore, 9 July 2014, <https://fanlore.org/wiki/Brit-pick>.
- ²⁸ 'the americanisation of British Fandoms', Alison, 29 June 2004. <http://www.trickster.org/symposium/symp157.html>.
- ²⁹ Tumblr User G.
- ³⁰ Horáková, 136.
- ³¹ 'more tea please, we're Sherlocked', wellingtongoose, 3 April 2013. <http://wellingtongoose.livejournal.com/21577.html>
- ³² Michele Hilmes, 'Why Co-Produce? Elementary, Holmes', *Antenna: Responses to Media and Culture*, 11 March 2014, <http://blog.com.marts.wisc.edu/2014/03/11/why-co-produce-elementary-holmes/>.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Tumblr User GP, solicited response by author, June 2015.
- ³⁶ 'Cultural Imperialism in Fandom', Fanlore, 7 December 2011. https://fanlore.org/wiki/Cultural_Imperialism_in_Fandom.
- ³⁷ 'Workshop: Faking It: Pretending you're A US Citizen When You're an Ocean Away', Legoline and benitle, 28 November 2009. <http://spnroundtable.livejournal.com/187754.html>.
- ³⁸ nighean_isis, comment, 29 November 2009. <http://spnroundtable.livejournal.com/187754.html>.
- ³⁹ 22by7, comment, 29 November 2009. <http://spnroundtable.livejournal.com/187754.html>.
- ⁴⁰ Tumblr User GP.
- ⁴¹ 'Married Ones', tealeavesandmoonlight, 9 April 2016. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/379683>.
- ⁴² 'Milk and Beans', Botan, 25 May 2016. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/6966382>.
- ⁴³ Anon, personal correspondence.
- ⁴⁴ 'No Sign of Love', asecretchord, 22 June 2012. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/441213>.
- ⁴⁵ Horáková, 139.
- ⁴⁶ p
- ⁴⁷ Jennifer Drouin, *Shakespeare in Quebec: Nation, Gender, and Adaptation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 204.
- ⁴⁸ Doyle, John. "What's up with Canada's Coronation Street obsession?" 31 August 2012, *The Globe and Mail*. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/television/whats-up-with-canadas-coronation-street-obsession/article4513162/>
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Drouin, 204.

⁵² Tumblr User S, solicited response by author, June 2015.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Tumblr User M.

⁵⁶ Tumblr User P.

⁵⁷ Pratt, 34.

⁵⁸ Francesca Coppa, “Fuck Yeah, Fandom is Beautiful,” *Journal of Fandom Studies* 2.1 (2014): 73.