

Elise Fong | Fan Status and Hierarchies

After attending the Fan Studies Network convention and the panel concerning fan status and hierarchies, it was interesting to see just how much Henry Jenkins was referenced. The conference focused on various fan studies topics, where many of those topics intersected with terms and ideas that we've discussed in class thus far. Within the panel on fan status and hierarchies specifically, I was surprised to see just how varied topics of research could be under these two terms that we've been discussing. Georgia Carroll's study on how a fan's finances can affect his or her status in a fandom, as well as Taylore Woodhouse's research on bilingual fans and transnational fandom were two panelists that I particularly understood in relation to our class. Both of these panelists, along with their research, described fandom as hierarchies that work and perform in different ways along with using references to fandom communities like *Supernatural* and Taylor Swift, or anime fan communities like the *Free! Fandom*.

Starting with Georgia Carroll's topic, "Money Can't Buy You Love but Can It Buy You Fandoms Status? The Commodification of Fandom and its Impacts on Fans," focuses on the fandom community and its commodification through attaining photo ops, conventions, or concerts. The fandom communities Carroll focuses on in her research are the *Supernatural* fandom and the Taylor Swift fan community. The way she described fandom is as a leisure activity, noting that the opportunity to participate in either fandom is not equally distributed. Here, Carroll mentions that fandom participation requires two things: time and money. Fans put their time into their fandom through consuming that fandom's object (For *Supernatural*, watching every episode), attending fan events or conventions (or for Taylor Swift fans, concerts), or even by discussing your fandom object. With money, fans spend on costs of events pertaining to the fandom, merchandise of the fandom object, or even attending events (photo ops, tickets, etc.). Carroll putting together time and money as requirements of being a part of either the *Supernatural* or Taylor Swift fandom create fan hierarchies consisting of those who can give more of his or her time and money are considered more of a fan than those who don't. For me, this point that Carroll makes references back to Kristina Busse's work on geek hierarchies, writing that "expansiveness is another form

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of commitment: owning rare artifacts shows both financial and time commitment, show comprehensiveness of collections...shows fan cred” (Busse 84). Busse also explains how these commitments of time and money result in fans collecting items, like photo ops with Taylor Swift or saving VIP tickets, which are also used to “establish membership” of a community, and therefore separates you from an outsider status (Busse 84). One technique Carroll used when researching the relationship between consumption and hierarchy, using the *Supernatural* and Taylor Swift fandoms as communities to draw from, was speaking to fans instead of speaking about them. This analysis technique was crucial to her research, as she had direct feedback and comments about each fan’s respective fan community and how investments of time and money affected their experience within the fandom. Noting Paul Booth’s work on how fan experiences have become a commodity, she said that fan’s felt like in order to be considered a true fan, they had to spend more and give more of their time. This meant fans were persuaded into attending conventions, spending more on gold tickets for highly valued fan experiences like getting photos taken with their fandom object’s actors (or celebrity in the case of Taylor Swift), which would result in intra-fandom visibility. Carroll’s interviews made directly with fans offers real descriptions and experiences that these fans have within their community, as well as showing a relationship between their visibility within the community and their economic and social capital. Meaning, the more a fan participates by spending their time and money, the more they are visible within the community, but that this relationship is available only to those who are able to afford to do this, constraining who is considered a fan and who is not.

Taylor Woodhouse’s research on “Clashing in Contact Zones: Bilingual Fans as Community Builders in Transnational Fandom” focuses on the gift economy within fandoms blended with her background in psychology, where her research focused on public sphere theory. Here, Woodhouse emphasizes the position that bilingual fans have within a fandom, specifically within translating work from other countries, and looks at fandom in terms of a gift economy. Before analyzing the gift economy

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discussed in Woodhouse's research, I first want to focus on how she views fandoms as transnational.

Woodhouse poses that fandoms can even be transnational when fans of various nationalities and language backgrounds are united under their fandom. Woodhouse later uses the term public sphere theory to look at fandoms as publics, or communities that are large, but united around fan works. This theory works in a way that as fan publics form, fans also create fan works for others to consume. An example she gave on her panel was that online fandoms are essentially networked fan publics, like when someone draws an image and uploads it to Tumblr to be reblogged. Her main analysis for her research was the popular anime *Free!* since the fandom is transnational because it's composed of both English and Japanese speaking fan publics, which can overlap and interact together. Not only that, but these transnational fandoms create translated works, where bilingual fans are positioned as fan translators who have knowledge of community norms as well as being able to decrease conflict between both English fan publics and Japanese fan publics. This is where public sphere theory and transnational fandoms work together, as Woodhouse showed how these allowed fans to perform unique, but necessary, kinds of labor for their fandoms. In the case of *Free!*, this was bilingual fans translating Japanese fan artist's work and circulating it to English speaking fans. Specifically, Woodhouse refers to *doujinshi*, or Japanese self-published fan works or arts. Hellekson notes that within this gift economy where no monetary value is assigned or made, "fannish rules indicate that such creative materials ought not to be stolen or plagiarized, so its creator would receive credit, but the fan may also not profit (Hellekson, *The Fan Experience*, 71). While this was meant as a way to bridge gaps between the two fandom communities, Woodhouse noted that it caused conflicts which threatened the stability of the transnational public. Why is this? Woodhouse noted that there was a disconnect between fan artists and translators, as the artists felt like their work was being mistreated and circulated without their consent. Woodhouse's study of fandoms references back to our discussion on gift economy, where Karen Hellekson writes that "the fan work is an element of symbolic exchange" (Hellekson 115). This notion of symbolic exchange comprises also affects the gift economy

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aspects as Hellekson writes that “the tension and negotiation between the three result in fan creation of social relationships that are constructed voluntarily on the basis of a shared interest” (Hellekson 114). For me, it was interesting to see a gift economy within Woodhouse’s research analysis go wrong and create a conflict so massive amongst fans, as in class when we’ve discussed the idea it is usually very beneficial for the community. Since this gift economy is comprised of the three aspects of giving, receiving, and reciprocating, it’s interesting to see it used differently and that it can produce different results from what we are used to or would expect. This could have potentially resulted from the fact that a lot of fandom today is so commoditized or monetized.

With Carroll and Woodhouse’s research and discussions at the panel specifically, I understood more about two concepts discussed in class: that of fan hierarchies and of gift economy. I learned how fan hierarchies are influenced and created through large investments of time and money specifically, as well as other perspectives of gift economies affecting fandom communities in a negative way. These two panelists for me revealed more about fan culture because I first got to see another perspective of media culture stemming from the Taylor Swift fan community from Carroll’s study. To see against a media text like *Supernatural* that equally has a large fan following to Swift’s fans, it’s interesting how the fan’s responses in interviews with Carroll tended to mimic the same understanding. That understanding being that in order to be considered a true fan, one had to invest in going to events, spending money at those events to get more exclusive, collectable items that made you more visible within your respective community. Not only that, but Woodhouse’s study was an interesting mix of fan studies with psychology and how public sphere theory, along with transnational fandom, can affect the gift economy in negative ways due to miscommunications. Attending this specific panel of the Fan Studies convention was beneficial for me because I got to learn more about something I love to write about and discuss, but it was also fun to connect it to fandoms I know about or are even apart of myself. Understanding the research behind a panelist’s topic was helpful in learning more on their specific interest, which allowed for me to have a

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basic background of knowledge to grab from, along with being able to participate in discussions afterwards (even if I was too scared to verbally participate).

Works Cited

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