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## “Get out of here you anti”

### *Historizing the Operation of Structural Racism in Media Fandom*

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**ABSTRACT** Pleasure(s) of people of marginalized genders and sexualities are central to media fandom scholarship, making it suitable to analyze as an identitopia. Recently, the figure of the fandom antifan or anti, an individual deemed hostile to fan pleasure, particularly around shipping practices and fanwork production, has gained prominence in fandom discussions. The anti is seen to interrupt media fandom’s identitopia through policing and puritanism.

A troubling aspect of this formulation is the consistent identification of fans who are critical of fandom’s negotiation of race/ism, as antis themselves. They are then accused of supporting censorship in the name of social justice. This is a disruption of antifandom models as these fans do not claim a negative stance themselves. This article theorizes this disruption via the fandom killjoy, drawing from in-depth fan interviews and examining related racist incidents in fandom spaces. **KEYWORDS** fandom studies, antifandom, critical race studies, media fandom, fandom racism

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On May 23, 2023, a *Vox* article’s headline declared that, “Puritanism took over online fandom—and then came for the rest of the internet.” The article’s central thesis argues that media or transformative fandom, based on the creation and consumption of (often queer) fanwork and dominated by participants of marginalized gender and sexual identities, is under attack. It goes on to claim that fandom, “once the bastion of delightful deviance and subversion, [is] being completely overtaken by a new form of purity culture” and explains that the attack is being led by fandom antifans, more simply known as antis, who “are opposed to sexual content in media,” and that, further, “none of them distinguish between fictional harm and real-world harm.” Finally, the article claims that following the passage of the FOSTA-SESTA internet child protection bill in the United States in 2018, “fandom’s proudly sex-positive culture has increasingly become sanitized, homogenized, and erased—which has allowed the puritanical voices of these “anti-fans” to

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take their place.”<sup>1</sup> This is a very familiar assertion to anyone who spends any time in internet fandoms in the present day. The specter of the anti haunts contemporary media fandom discourse across platforms and fandoms, with multiple X (formerly known as Twitter) and Tumblr accounts with substantial followings devoted to archiving evidence of their behavior and supposed influence.<sup>2</sup> They are characterized as organized and powerful groups, driven by a cohesive pan-fandom ideology that seeks to control and police fandom culture itself.<sup>3</sup> They have also been called a cult.<sup>4</sup> This construction differs from what scholarship has traditionally defined as antifandom, which for the most part has focused on fandom-specific antifans.<sup>5</sup>

But how far does this construction hold true? Was media fandom once a conflict-free utopia that celebrated “deviance and subversion,” which is now under attack by outsiders and interlopers who do not understand its history? To begin with, the article bases its characterization of media fandom as a utopic space, giving participants of marginalized genders and sexual identities a space of refuge in online spaces that can be otherwise hostile to them, on a widely accepted, yet partial, narrative of fandom scholarship and popular commentary.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, while there is certainly evidence of a rise in combativeness in these spaces over the last ten years, rather than seeing this development in isolation, fandom scholars have analyzed it in line with broader trends in internet spaces with polarization being the new norm.<sup>7</sup> Also contributing is the rise of algorithmic feeds on platforms such as X (Twitter), which often cause posts from individual users that would ordinarily have very little reach to blow up via outrage clicks.<sup>8</sup> Thirdly, conflicts over characterization, shipping practices, and fanwork itself are also not new, as thoroughly documented much before 2018.<sup>9</sup> Finally, scholarship has found that the term *anti* is applied extremely broadly within fandom, frequently including critical fans who are highlighting the operations of systemic issues such as racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and such.<sup>10</sup> It is this weaponization of the term that I will focus on in this paper.

A crucial point tying these narratives together is that the earlier sketched out celebratory framing of media fandom history elides the fact that these spaces have had an equally long history of white-centricity, systemic racism, and anti-Blackness.<sup>11</sup> As this special issue is framed around the idea of an “identitopia,” I argue that the construction and maintenance of the dominant characterization of media fandom, by both participants and scholars, as a utopic space for fans from marginalized identities to share pleasure, depends on the active erasure of antiracist critique, both historically and in the

contemporary moment, which interrupts that identity. My research uses fan interviews and examines related instances of public discussion of racism in fandom spaces, including but not limited to those regarding the role of central fandom institutions such as the fan-run nonprofit OTW (Organization of Transformative Works), to examine the evolving construction of the figure of the anti within fandom discursive practices. I demonstrate that this construction is deployed to undermine antiracist critique and frame fans who are vocal about such patterns as outsiders and bad-faith actors, whose actual goal is the policing and censorship of shipping practices and fanworks, and by extension, fan pleasure itself.

## METHODOLOGY

Methodology choices in fandom studies are interdisciplinary, emphasizing fan privacy and vigilance about fan-researcher power differentials, with auto-ethnography remaining a popular choice.<sup>12</sup> Critical scholars have problematized these approaches as fans can be hostile to researchers they deem antagonistic.<sup>13</sup> The reasons for this include research into fandom racism.<sup>14</sup> This challenge has shaped the methodology of this project, building from scholarship with similar concerns.<sup>15</sup>

This article is based on in-depth interviews with seventeen fans who have been vocal about the operations of race/ism in fandom, across anglophone fandoms of both anglophone and nonanglophone texts. The fans cover a wide age range (22–40), with a similar scope of fandom activity (1990s–present), covering over thirty years of fandom history. Respondents are active producers of fanworks, and some have organized community-based events. This is key context as the figure of the anti is portrayed as ignorant of fandom history and disconnected from community labor. The respondent sample lines up with the general trends observed about anglophone fandom spaces having substantial presence of participants from marginalized genders and sexual orientations. It intentionally departs from those trends in terms of racial identity as these spaces are still found to be dominated by white participants.<sup>16</sup> Expanded demographic data can be seen in figures 1–3.

Semistructured interviews ranging between forty-five to seventy minutes were conducted. Participants were asked about their experiences around addressing issues of race/ism in public fan spaces across platforms and over time. Open-ended responses were elicited on the reactions they received, and whether respondents had been labeled antis themselves or observed it being

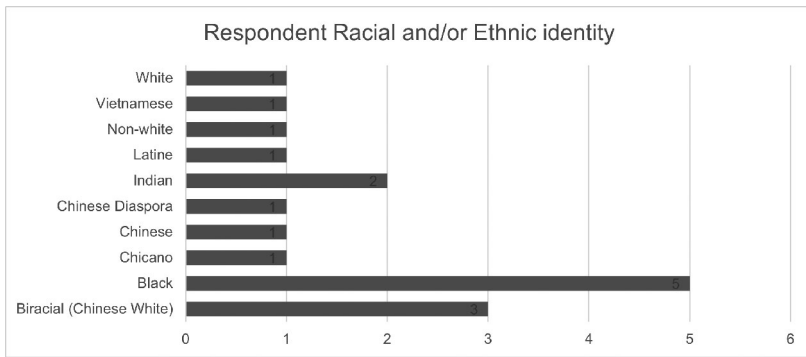


FIGURE 1. Respondent racial/ethnic identity

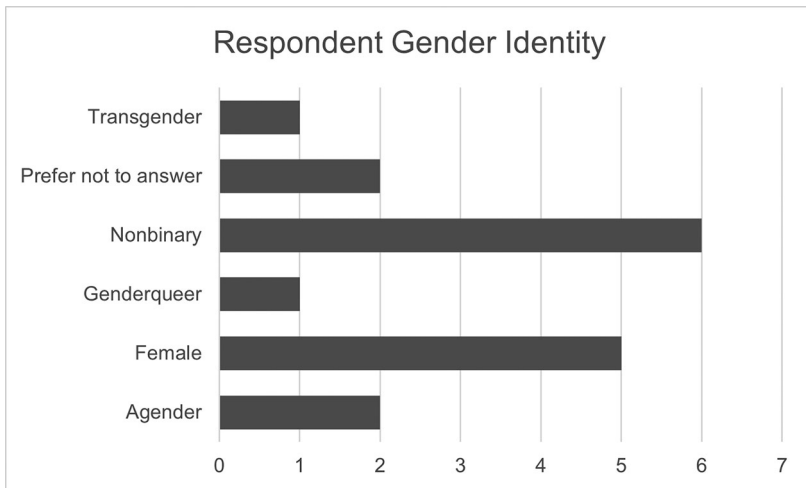


FIGURE 2. Respondent gender identity

applied to these discussions. The interviews were coded using a combination of manual coding and the software program ATLAS.ti. Narrative Analysis was used to investigate further patterns in responses, following my respondents' choices to communicate their fandom journeys through individual storied trajectories.<sup>17</sup>

The interview sample was generated via purposive and snowball sampling.<sup>18</sup> Studies on fandom have historically used a very broad range of sample sizes, from under ten to over a hundred respondents.<sup>19</sup> The decision to keep the sample size limited was taken to minimize risk of harassment. Fandom scholars routinely recruit participants by posting public calls for interviews on

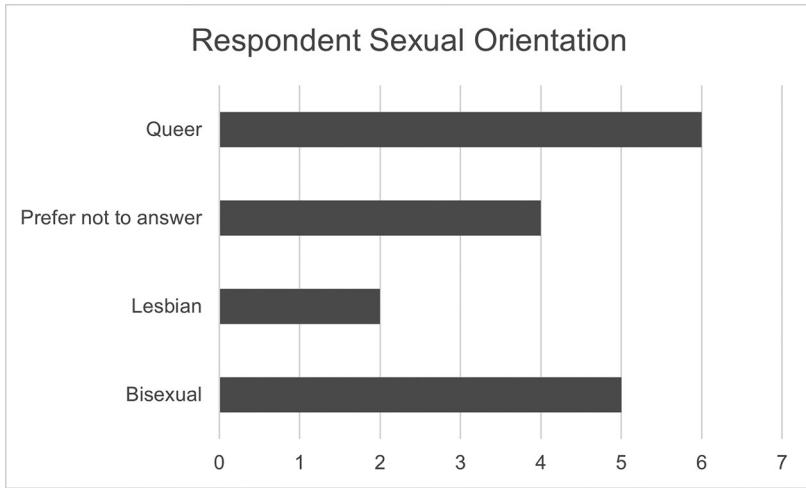


FIGURE 3. Respondent sexual orientation

fandom forums and are open about their histories of fandom participation.<sup>20</sup> This was not an option for this project due to the highly polarized atmosphere around discussions of race/ism in these spaces. Finally, this study follows best practices of the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) guidelines in order to minimize any harm to those cited.<sup>21</sup> This is to balance the requirements of documenting these incidents and associated discussions, especially as posts are often deleted, with ethical considerations of individual privacy.

#### HISTORIES OF MEDIA FANDOM, ANTIFANDOM, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE “ANTI”

Media fandom activity has been extensively chronicled from its inception, primarily through fandom-based examinations of fanwork and its associated communities across multiple internet-based platforms from early Listservs, to Livejournal, to Tumblr, and beyond.<sup>22</sup> These histories have framed fandom as a space for identity exploration (mainly around gender identity and sexual orientation), community building, adaptation of new technologies, and even organization for social causes.<sup>23</sup> Outside of academia, fans themselves are active archivists and remain keen to preserve historical records of fan objects as well as broader fandom communities.<sup>24</sup> Crucially, media fandom history also encompasses the history of internet spaces, which remains very challenging to preserve due to both individual decisions (deletion/ moderation) and

the disappearance of entire platforms (Geocities in 2009, Yahoo Groups in 2019).

Fans are very aware of the ephemeral nature of these platforms and routinely seek to preserve and document online events deemed to be important to the formation of communitarian norms around fanwork creation, reception, and hosting. A historical narrative that has garnered sustained interest and dissemination is the one concerning the threats that queer and/or erotic fanwork has faced, from copyright claims by authors and media houses, to large-scale platform purges like the Livejournal-centric event now known as Strikethrough that, among other events that are not as widely cited, informed the creation and popularity of the OTW and its associated fanwork hosting platform, the Archive of Our Own (AO3).<sup>25</sup> This narrative is also brought up in response to other more recent events that have affected fanwork, such as the 2018 “porn ban” on Tumblr.<sup>26</sup> In this narrative, the primary existential challenge faced by media fandom spaces has been the threat of censorship and policing of fandom pleasure. It is common to find “Know your fandom history” posts on X and Tumblr reminding younger fans of this trajectory.<sup>27</sup> This narrative also serves as a warning, encouraging fans to be suspicious of *any* critique that interrupts celebratory histories and shows that fandom communitarian norms can also reflect and reinforce systemic cultural biases including racism and anti-Blackness.

As I have previously argued, fandoms are particularly invested in disavowing and deferring the influence of racism (and particularly anti-Blackness) in communitarian structures and fanwork creation. This investment stems from a desire to maintain their identity as inclusive spaces that are invested in social justice issues such as expanding representation, through fanwork as well as direct fan campaigns, for characters from underrepresented demographics (focused specially on sexual orientation) in popular media franchises.<sup>28</sup> This sense of identity can be traced partly to the long trajectory of fan studies scholars arguing for these spaces to be seen as progressive and subversive, and as communities with great potential for inculcating ideas of civic participation.<sup>29</sup>

Further, scholars have observed that fans take great interest in how their activities are documented and historicized. This has mostly been framed in positive ways, painting fans as highly knowledgeable and engaged historians.<sup>30</sup> However, this has also meant that histories of critique and pushback to white-centricity in these spaces have been largely neglected. That is not to say that historical accounts of activities of nonwhite fans have not been

produced, but these continue to be othered and not given their rightful space in popular retellings of media fandom histories.<sup>31</sup> This means that racial identity is always perceived as an additional element to these histories and spaces, rather than constitutive of them. As Kiedl and Waysdorf observe in their introduction to a special journal issue, fandom histories, “shape the structures of fan communities. Covering the complete political spectrum, fan-made histories can focus on marginalized groups or contribute to their marginalization, making history a central space for debates about who is welcomed as a fan and who is excluded.”<sup>32</sup> It is in this context that the rise in efforts to undermine critical voices as antis for pointing out the equally documented, if less discussed, histories and contemporary realities of fandom racism and anti-Blackness that interrupt this celebratory framing must be understood.

This thread of analysis was also reflected in interview responses. A majority of participants showed awareness of multiple historical narratives about media fandom, both those that valorized these spaces and the efforts by nonwhite fans and allies to document racist incidents and patterns within those same communities. For instance, one respondent noted that they had witnessed RaceFail '09, an influential set of discussions about racism that occurred in science fiction and fantasy fandom on Livejournal in 2009.<sup>33</sup> This helped them recognize racist patterns in fandom, years before they felt confident enough to speak up about it.

And RaceFail is interesting because you see, if you followed that at all, you see the same conversations happening over and over and over again as if they haven't been rebutted, as if that part of fandom history has been, for lack of a better term, whitewashed. Just paper it over and let's pretend it never happened. Whereas other things that happened in the same decades, like Strikethrough are, “we can't forget our history.”<sup>34</sup>

This points to the importance of the labor put in by critical fans themselves to interrupt more entrenched histories of how these communities have functioned.

The second aspect of this historicization is the distinction between the antifan as conceptualized by antifandom studies and the operationalization of the figure of anti against critical fans highlighting the operations of systemic racism in fandom. In *Squee from the Margins*, I formulated the “fandom killjoy” as an unwilling position that many fans of color are forced into, noting, “To be a fandom killjoy as a nonwhite fan is a deeply alienating

experience, as it involves either the internalized acceptance that certain pleasures and explorations are simply unavailable, or the identification of being someone who consistently brings unwanted drama to fan spaces.<sup>35</sup> The fandom killjoy is not located within the domain of antifandom studies, primarily because antifans were, and continue to be, framed as those who actively choose a position of dislike or hate vis-à-vis a specific fandom object. As Jonathan Gray observed in his 2003 definition, antifans are deemed those that “strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel.”<sup>36</sup> Gray’s revised and expanded model of antifandom accounts for differential modes of antifandom, but antifans continue to be seen to actively choose an oppositional stance to a fan object, media text, or celebrity.<sup>37</sup> This, quite evidently, does not overlap with the fans forced into the position of fandom killjoys, even as they seek to make fandom spaces more receptive to ideas of social justice.

However, with an increase in polarization in fandom spaces, I argue that what was a theoretical construct is being increasingly concretized, and further weaponized, by fandom discourses that seek to other and undermine fans who are vocal about ideas of race/ism within them.<sup>38</sup> In that, these fans are routinely suspected of pretending to care about racism while actively seeking to police fandom pleasure as their primary goal. This rise and sharpening of ideas of antifandom mobilized within fandom communities is distinct in some aspects from the scholarship in the area as antifandom scholars have largely located their studies in specific fandoms and their antiobjects.<sup>39</sup> This has not taken into account that the figure of the anti, construed to be oppositional to fandom’s supposedly inclusive and liberatory culture, is now very recognizable in online spaces.

As I have already laid out, unlike an antifan of a particular object, the anti designates an individual who is perceived to fundamentally oppose fandom pleasure in general, and more specifically wishes to police and censor the production of fanworks. The fandom anti is seen to object to specific fanworks on moral grounds, with hot-button issues being wide age-gaps, incestuous relationships, and romantic or erotic portrayals of minor characters, though this can be expanded as well. This kind of policing is deemed to be fundamentally opposed to the ideals of fandom in two primary ways. First, on a philosophical note, fanworks have long been seen as areas where morally ambiguous ideas may be explored without censorship.<sup>40</sup> The second way the fandom anti is seen to transgress fandom mores is to ignore the fandom etiquette of “Ship and Let Ship” and attempt to impose their definition of



appropriateness on popular character pairings, or ships, in various media texts. Further, the anti is seen to be aggressive and prone to personal harassment of fanwork creators and unable to distinguish between fiction and reality, and their arguments are always seen to be in bad faith.<sup>41</sup>

There is certainly evidence that such individuals exist, and that social justice terminology is sometimes misused by individuals in fan conflicts around popular characters, relationship pairings, and so forth. There is also documented conflict, both intergenerational and transcultural, around the production of fanworks that deals with erotic themes that may be considered taboo.<sup>42</sup> However, as established by earlier cited scholarship, this is not a new phenomenon. What is new is the anti being framed as an organized and existential threat to fandom spaces, and further, the collapse of critiques of systemic racism into the same category, even if fans making them do not follow the modes of anti behavior outlined here.<sup>43</sup>

It is this collapse that is concerning because if critique that identifies structural and systemic racism in fandom is framed as being no different from general fanwars, it devalues the larger history of such critique that has been documented for as long as fandom spaces have existed. Further, the individuals examining those issues, for the most part, are longtime participants, well aware of fandom etiquette and mores around fanwork production and reception. Indeed, in most cases, these fans are also engaged in the production of fanwork of various kinds, including those dealing with taboo erotic themes. This is also reflected in the interview sample of this project. To call back to the article that I referred to at the beginning of this paper, I argue that to attempt to frame this history of critique as the same as “puriteen” discourse, signifying an obsession with moral “purity” and associated with younger participants unaware or disrespectful of fandom norms, can only succeed in a space where that history has been systematically sidelined and devalued. As one respondent who asked to remain anonymous observed, “It’s always interesting that RaceFail is never seen as part of fandom history.”<sup>44</sup>

When fandom discussions on the topic are surveyed, many participants deny that the term *anti* is used to undermine critiques of systemic racism. However, there is substantial evidence that there has been a persistent linkage of the two issues. To cite one example, in March 2019, a fan first crowd-sourced a list of “hot anti takes” and then made them into a series of flowcharts that would (mockingly) function as “the arbiter of shipping propriety.” They further encouraged people to use them to “see if your ship can pass ALL FOUR CHARTS,” as seen in figure 4.

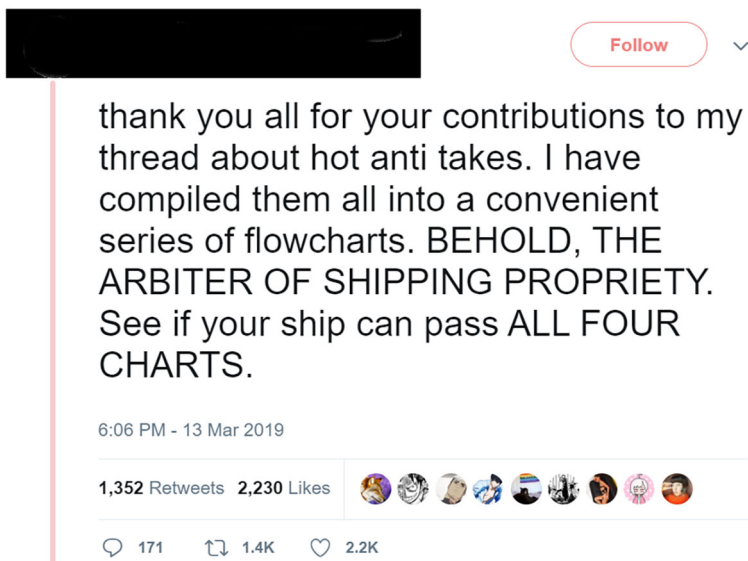


FIGURE 4. Screenshot of X (Twitter) post

The tweet went viral, with over a thousand retweets and two thousand likes at the time of recording it, though it reached substantially more people after that as well. The charts, as is perhaps obvious, set out to prove that the objections of antis to fandom practices were patently absurd. One flowchart for instance asked, “Did the characters in your ship know each other as children?” and if the answer to that was yes, the ship had failed the anti test of “propriety” as that fact proved that the ship was incestuous. The flowcharts were therefore designed to show that no matter what you shipped, you would inevitably be deemed problematic by these individuals. Hyperbole was employed to show that not only did antis oppose depictions of actual incest, they also applied bizarre definitions of it in order to police other fans. As the author clarified in a subsequent tweet, “Yes, this is absurd and that’s exactly the point.” The flowcharts are significant because they were not the product of any one fan but rather reflective of a broader consensus about what was considered anti behavior. They also received mostly positive feedback, until it was pointed out that the very first issue highlighted in them was that of racial identity. It is also this factor that makes them relevant to my argument.

To expand, the first question the flowchart posed was, “Are both your characters white?” If the answer was yes, the anti “arbiter of propriety” deemed that the ship was racist. However, unlike the other issues named,

the fact that media fandom spaces, particularly anglophone ones, have a distinct bias toward white characters is well evidenced. It is also a well-documented fact that fandom spaces will often pick side or background white characters to create thousands of pieces of fanwork while sidelining characters of color, particularly Black characters.<sup>45</sup> Within that context, for the very first red flag signaling “anti behavior” to be linked explicitly to discussion of racist bias, and further, to reduce that long work of documentation to “you’re racist if you ship white characters,” is an extremely effective derailing tactic. Further, it feeds directly into the idea that fans who do talk about race/ism in fandom spaces are doing it, a priori, in bad faith and should either be ignored and dismissed, or in some cases, be made targets for (deserved) harassment themselves.

Evidence of this pattern was also found across my interview sample as almost all respondents expressed frustration at facing continual derailment when they wished to highlight issues of systemic racism, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy in fandom spaces, shipping practices, and fanworks. This derailment could take various forms, ranging from a demand to talk about unrelated issues, such as the depiction of taboo subjects in fanwork, to accusing them of policing other fans in their enjoyment of shared spaces. As one respondent detailed,

It’s just very frustrating the way that fandom targets people of color that speak out and will twist their words and decide that they mean something else. It’s like “Oh, they’re just saying this because they don’t like this ship or they don’t like that ship.” But also, what they’re talking about is racism. You can read the post that’s talking about racism [in a fandom] and it’s [the response] like, “oh well it’s not racism because they don’t like it [the ship], because they’re an anti, they hate the ship.” And so that’s the only reason they’re writing it? It’s like, but they still experience racism! Only supporters and fans are allowed to criticize. But if you criticize, you’re not a fan anymore. So, it’s like fun little *Catch 22* that they create.<sup>46</sup>

The interviewee first points out a common dismissal tactic used against critiques that highlight racist patterns in shipping practices, also reflected in the example of the anti flowcharts. While well-substantiated by critical work on the area, the discussion of bias is diminished into being a ship war, and critical fans pointing out these patterns are immediately labeled antis of whatever they cite as an example. It also must be pointed out that if critical fans assert these patterns exist and do not cite examples, they are immediately

asked for the same, after which the inevitable labeling occurs. The respondent went on to note that they have witnessed even longtime fans, who create fanwork or contribute other labor for a particular fandom, being othered by the same mechanism and accused of “infiltrating” fandom spaces once they point out patterns of racism.

Another respondent spoke about their experience in the fandom of the *Star Wars* sequel films on Tumblr, particularly around the erasure of the character of Finn, played by John Boyega. Despite Finn being introduced with great fanfare as a central character in the first film, *The Force Awakens* (2015), there was a marked difference in the popularity between him and the white characters, and this extended to the creation of fanworks.<sup>47</sup> For further context, John Boyega has also spoken about the consistent harassment he received from large parts of the fanbase throughout his association with the film franchise.<sup>48</sup> This was also reflected in media fandom spaces, extending to targeting of those fans who pointed out the implications of his sidelining from the narrative. The respondent notes pushing back on Finn’s erasure was met with immediate labeling, followed by backlash.

And there’s the whole anti thing, which is, so it was supposed to mean that would put us as the aggressors who were trying to take them down. It was just ridiculous. . . . I’ve been told that I was responsible for everybody who didn’t like this character. And I’m like, that’s ridiculous. So, I’m the queen, queen of the antis? So that means that they all answer to me? . . . I’m just writing essays. I’m not leading anybody.<sup>49</sup>

In this case as well, the respondent pointed to their much longer history in *Star Wars* fandom (since the 1970s), which did not prevent them from being framed as an outsider. They also underlined a further point of the process, in which the term *anti* is also seen to identify an organized movement whose explicit aim is the policing of fan pleasure. This echoes the claim also made in the *Vox* article, which shows that it is a belief that has gained some traction in online fandom discourse, despite there being little evidence backing it up. Therefore, when the label is applied to fans who point out recurring racist patterns in fandom spaces, it allows fandom to ignore the systemic nature of those issues, instead deflecting those discussions into the realm of individual taste. Additionally, the respondent expresses frustration about all critique of a character or ship being lumped together, which was also a common thread in other interviews. Respondents disclosed that once they spoke about a certain pattern they had observed about a specific character or ship pairing as an

example of a larger problem in fandom behavior, they would then be held accountable for the actions of all other fans who expressed a dislike for the same thing, even if those fans expressed that dislike very differently.

In a related trajectory, another common perception of critical fans is that they engage in such activity in order to gain power in fandom spaces. Once again, this is related to the perception that these discussions are about policing and control of fandom activity. In this regard, respondents almost uniformly disclosed that they had cut back on their engagement with these issues over time. In some cases, this was due to harassment, but in others, perhaps ironically, it was due to the policing of *their* own fandom activity. That is, even when the feedback they received was positive, there was often the expectation that their subsequent fandom activities should focus almost exclusively on calling out fandom racism. This, perhaps unsurprisingly, led to burnout. One respondent noted that, “It kind of becomes a thing of you have to sacrifice yourself on the altar of a very particular kind of activism that is itself constantly judged.”<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, while there is a perception that critical fans doing this labor seek to have “clout,” this was not borne out in the experiences of fans who were interviewed. Further evidence that this is an erroneous assumption is seen in the way the activities of these fans are framed in fan-controlled historical archival sites such as the website Fanlore, which is part of the OTW. The site characterizes itself as an open source and editable platform to document fandom history from a plural point of view (PPOV) that foregrounds “fan-positive, balanced synthesis of multiple points of view that fans may have on a single topic. It acknowledges and reflects these potentially dissenting perspectives and does not privilege one fannish viewpoint over any other.” The website also maintains on the same page that, “We do not strive to establish a ‘true’ account of events, explanation of practices, or definition of terms. We do not believe this exists in fandom.”<sup>51</sup> However, in actual practice, due to the ephemeral nature of online fandom, where events can move very fast, Fanlore is an extensively used resource for both fans and academics. Therefore, its framing and accounting of fandom history carries significant weight. It is quite instructive then to examine how it has handled the documentation of racist incidents and how critical fans who have been part of these events are profiled on it.

It is certainly true that multiple perspectives are essential to reflect the wide range of fan reactions to any incident, but it is also vital to understand that these structures are not neutral, especially when it comes to documenting

incidents of racism or acknowledging patterns of white-centricity in fandom. For instance, it is significant that critical fans have been the target of malicious editing of articles about them, to the extent that their profile had to be locked against further changes.<sup>52</sup> This has an inevitable effect on how they and their work are perceived in fandom spaces. Additionally, popular fandom tropes with specifically racist histories are described extremely neutrally on the site, reinforcing the perception that discussions of racism are a recent phenomenon. This kind of description also erases the fact that racism has often played a constitutive role in many aspects of fandom pleasure itself.<sup>53</sup>

The next cluster of responses build on this point, as a core aspect of the backlash to antiracist critique in fandom is its perceived threat to fan pleasure. One respondent traces this process in their interview, noting the various deferral tactics that are used by individuals who understand and are seemingly attuned to the operations of systemic racism in other aspects of their lives but remain very resistant to acknowledging the same in fandom. The specific incident that this response is detailing is the backlash the interviewee faced when objecting to a list of fanfiction kink prompts that included racist examples such as “slave auctions,” and “Persian boys.”

I, I've heard a lot from people who consider themselves anti-racist that, “We believe in racism and fandom. That's not the problem. But this right, this particular [incident], you're framing this incorrectly.” And then going on to this narrative of, well, “My preferences or my pleasure isn't up for, isn't political in any sense, and this won't impact anything in real life.” Even if you're naming that it has already impacted you as a fan of color.<sup>54</sup>

What I'd like to highlight here is the defensiveness around fandom pleasure and the idea that antiracist critique specifically threatens it, that multiple interviewees recounted. In this example, the respondent points out that even when people may agree with larger critiques of fandom and race, it becomes very difficult for them to deal with individual incidents that might be closer to them.

In another mediation on the theme, a respondent articulated the idea that antiracist critiques of fandom pleasure are seen to be especially threatening because they question the self-identification of fans as socially progressive. They also underlined that this threat is framed as fundamentally existential to fandom itself. They note, “There's this idea that fandom is above critique. . . . And any attempts to look at it in a sort of critical lens is like, we are being attacked. There are missiles incoming from this group of people who want to take fandom down. It's like, no!”<sup>55</sup>

The final cluster of fan responses reflect the specific dynamics of these conversations in anglophone fandoms of nonanglophone texts. While these spaces have always existed within media fandom, the rise of streaming platforms and increased availability of translated material have meant that fandoms around Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and South Korean media texts, and other popular cultural industries such as K-Pop, have grown significantly in the last five years. Respondents spoke about the complexity of their own locations, both racial and geographic in relation to these texts. Their responses reflected a wide range of concerns spanning issues of white-centricity and anti-Blackness as reflective of colonial and neocolonial history, as well as similar frustrations, as already discussed, around the prioritization of fan pleasure over real engagement with those issues. For one respondent the dynamics, while often adversarial, are seen as necessary.

We keep having these conversations about, how colorism works for instance. . . . And so yes, I do think that there is pushback against Western fans coming in and “Telling us how we should feel about things.” And then there’s [US] Black fans saying, “But this is still not okay.” And I think it’s important to have these conversations.<sup>56</sup>

This cluster of responses is important in the context of the perception that discussions of race in media fandom, particularly anglophone spaces, remain USA-centric. This is also frequently a charge brought up within fandom spaces, often also functioning as a derailing tactic. However, as research has shown, there is adequate evidence that ideas of anti-Blackness and white-centricity intersect with neocolonial discourses and circulate in transnational fandoms.<sup>57</sup> In this context, fandom scholars need to be even more attuned to the way these, sometimes adversarial, conversations are taking place.

#### **#ENDOTWRACISM AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

The aim of this project was to explicate the ways in which discussions around racism, white-centricity, and anti-Blackness in media fandom are undermined through the deployment of rhetorical strategies and operationalizations of white-centric histories to characterize critical fans as antis. This deployment is not specific to any one fandom or platform and is enforced in both overt and covert ways through deferral, disavowal, and deflection. At the same time, the fanwork hosting platform AO3 and its parent organization the OTW have substantial influence on media fandom today and have faced

long-standing critique around perceived lack of protection from racist harassment, both direct and indirect.<sup>58</sup> Its response to these demands has been primarily that of silence, with a repeated emphasis on its ethos of “maximum inclusivity” of content.<sup>59</sup> This organizational position, in essence, sets up a direct and extremely harmful, correlation between *any* proposed moderation of racist content and censorship, something that defenders of the site then double down on.

In June 2020, in the wake of increased pressure around the worldwide Black Lives Matter protests, the OTW apologized for their inaction and pledged several steps, including hiring a diversity consultant to recommend possible structural changes to the organization.<sup>60</sup> There have been few updates since then, which prompted the launch of #EndOTWRacism, a campaign projected to run from May 17 to May 31, 2023, to demand accountability from the organization.<sup>61</sup> As the responses the campaign received in its first week reflected almost all the trends discussed in this paper, I have included a quick survey of the same.

The campaign has received a good amount of direct support to its specific call to action.<sup>62</sup> There has also been other support through individuals resharing the posts and sometimes adding personal experiences illustrating the need for action by the organization. However, there has also been a strong pushback. For instance, one fan posted about the campaign on a fanfiction focused forum on Reddit. The post was immediately flooded with responses, such as in figure 6, declaring that the campaign, regardless of its stated goals, was about policing and censorship.

Posters also speculated on the identity of specific people associated with the campaign, who have chosen to remain anonymous due to the high probability of harassment, with the ultimate goal of proving that they were in fact already ‘known antis,’ or rather, critical fans who have been labeled as such. The post was finally locked and then deleted by the moderators. Other posts on Tumblr, seen in figure 5, addressing the campaign asserted

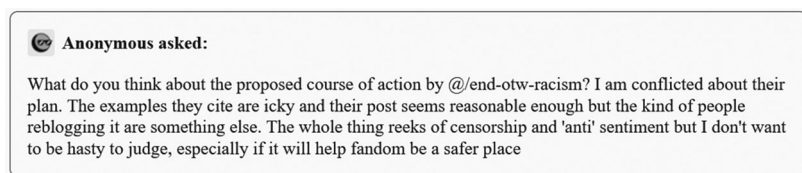


FIGURE 5. Screenshot of Tumblr post



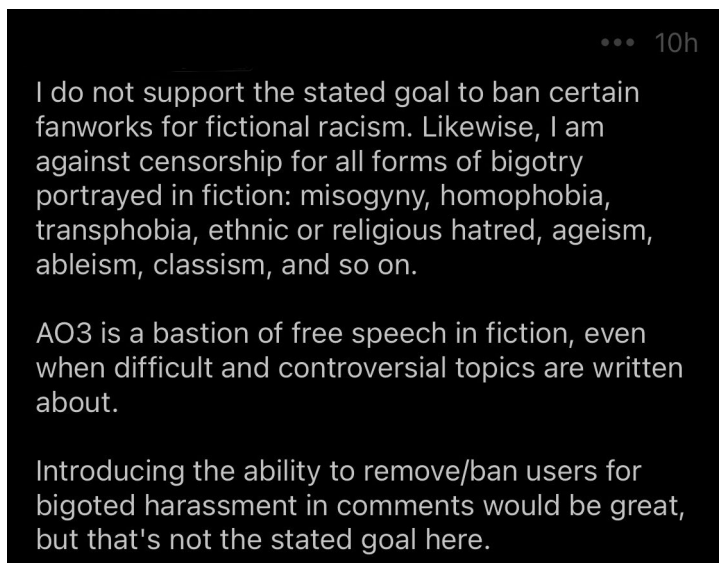


FIGURE 6. Screenshot of Reddit post

that even though the campaign goals were reasonable and the cited examples of racism on the AO3 were egregious, the effort still contained “anti sentiment.”

In conclusion, while not something that I expected to document, the campaign and the recorded responses illustrate and reinforce my primary argument around how these efforts are undermined. Antifandom scholarship has noted that many aspects of being a fan and antifan overlap, and that even in the case of fanworks, the urge to “fix” an original canonical text in some way grows out of dissatisfaction.<sup>63</sup> Gray also maintains that, “we should expect anti-fandom to at times be productive, progressive, and nuanced, . . . and hence to be a key site for understanding why, how, and when the media matters to us and why, how, and when it doesn’t.”<sup>64</sup> In such a theoretical frame, the idea of antiracist critique being part of antifandom could perhaps be reconciled.

However, this hope breaks down on examination of how the term *anti* actually circulates within fandom communities. Undeniably, it is an extremely effective shorthand for individuals who should and indeed must be dismissed for fandom’s imagined progressive identitopia to survive. If allowed to persist, the perpetual reinforcement of the idea that working toward ameliorating the operations of systemic racism in fandom’s

communitarian and technological infrastructures is equivalent to censorship of free speech, creative endeavors, and threatens the utopic ideals of fandom itself is extremely dangerous for participants in an increasingly reactionary globalized mediascape. More dangerous perhaps, than any antis, real or imagined. ■

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