

THE PROMISE OF FANFICTION: COUNTERING TRANSPHOBIA AND NARRATIVE
ERASURE ONLINE

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Abstract

Studies on fanfiction acknowledge its potential “as a tool of social criticism” due to an “explosion of postcolonial and ethnic American literature” as Western canonical texts such as Shakespeare’s *Tempest* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* are revised or extended to include the diverse impacts of colonialism and racism (Derecho 69). However, positive critical reception has mostly been relegated to published fanfics, with little consideration given to online ones, despite the fact that they too perform the same function and give a voice to marginalized communities that are either absent or crudely depicted in canonical texts. This thesis will therefore interrogate the political dimension of online fanfiction as the fan community (fandom) responds to real life and contemporary social issues by writing them into stories based on popular texts. Focusing on how fanfiction allows fans to react to world events in real time and process their impact by incorporating them into stories, this project will examine fanfiction based on J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series posted after two important fandom moments in 2015 and 2019. It will look at fanfics uploaded after the author’s transphobic tweets in 2019, that rewrite characters as transgender, and those uploaded after 2015 following the casting of a black woman as Hermione Granger for the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. This thesis will note what changes occur at the level of the text and the topics that emerge when transgender characters take centre stage by analysing 250 *Harry Potter* fanfics posted on *Archive of Our Own* with the tag “Trans Character” comparing them with 250 stories set in Rowling’s world that do not rewrite the characters’ gender identity. Additionally, it will interrogate 6 fanfics before the *Cursed Child*’s casting announcement marked with the tag “Black Hermione Granger” and compare them with 250 stories with a black Hermione uploaded after it to see what narratives of race emerge in these stories when a character is racebent with the author’s permission. Employing these fanfics as a point of departure offers the opportunity to debate the value of fanfiction as

a genre in bringing attention to contemporary issues such as transphobia and racism that can otherwise seem distant and unimportant by filtering them through the lives of fictional characters vis-à-vis digital humanities methods foregrounded by literary and cultural analyses.

Abstrait

Les études sur les fanfictions reconnaissent leur potentiel “en tant qu’outil de critique sociale” en raison d’une “explosion de la littérature postcoloniale et ethnique américaine” incluant la revision des textes canoniques occidentaux tels que *La Tempête* de Shakespeare et *Jane Eyre* de Charlotte Brontë, modifiés pour inclure les divers impacts du colonialisme et du racisme (Derecho 69). Cependant, la réception critique positive a surtout été attribuée aux fanfics publiées: les fanfics en ligne sont peu considérés malgré le fait qu’elles remplissent la même fonction et donnent une voix aux communautés marginalisées qui sont absentes ou grossièrement dépeintes dans les textes canoniques. Cette thèse interrogera donc la dimension politique de la fanfiction en ligne écrite par la communauté des fans (fandom) qui réagit à la vie réelle et aux problèmes sociaux contemporains dans des histoires basées sur des textes populaires. En se concentrant sur la façon dont la fanfiction permet aux fans de réagir aux événements mondiaux en temps réel et de traiter leur impact en les incorporant dans des histoires, ce projet examinera la fanfiction basée sur la série *Harry Potter* de J.K. Rowling postée après deux moments importants du fandom en 2015 et 2019. Il examinera les fanfics téléchargées après les tweets transphobes de l’auteure en 2019 qui réécrivent les personnages en tant que transgenres, et celles téléchargées après 2015 suite au casting d’une femme noire dans le rôle d’Hermione Granger dans la pièce *Harry Potter et l’Enfant maudit*. Cette thèse va noter les changements qui se produisent au niveau du texte et les sujets qui émergent lorsque les personnages transgenres prennent le devant de la scène en analysant 250 fanfics *Harry Potter* postées sur *Archive of Our Own* avec le tag “Trans Character” et en les comparant à 250 histoires se déroulant dans l’univers de Rowling qui ne réécrivent pas l’identité de genre des personnages. En outre, il interrogera six fanfics antérieures à l’annonce du casting de *l’Enfant maudit* marquées du tag “Black Hermione Granger” et les comparera à 250 histoires avec une Hermione noire téléchargées après cette annonce pour voir quels récits

de race émergent dans ces histoires lorsqu'un personnage est racisé avec l'autorisation de l'auteur. L'utilisation de ces fanfics comme point de départ offre la possibilité de débattre de la valeur de la fanfiction en tant que genre qui interroge des questions contemporaines telles que la transphobie et le racisme à travers les méthodes des humanités numériques mises en avant par les analyses littéraires et culturelles.

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Introduction

The history of storytelling has also been a history of reconstitution. Authors may pride themselves on creating original fictional works, but it cannot be contested that they often borrow from previously and currently existing stories and at times even expand upon them. From Virgil's *Aeneid* building upon the life of Homer's character Aeneas in *The Iliad* and expanding his story beyond the plains of Troy, to Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* being "a free adaptation of the *Menaechmi* of Plautus", stories can be understood as continuations and revisions of pre-existing texts instead of being seen as only discrete, standalone works of fiction (Bate 9). Since the late twentieth century, this kind of storytelling practice has been referred to as fanfiction. Broadly defined as stories produced by devout admirers based on the plot lines or characters of pre-existing texts—fanfiction (also referred to as fanfic)—has, with the advent of the internet, come to mean writing stories without any expectation of monetary compensation "for a community of readers who already want to read them, who want to talk about them, and who may be writing them, too" (Jamison 37).

Studies on fanfiction began in earnest in the 1980s culminating in Henry Jenkins's seminal work *Textual Poachers* (1992) which explored fanfiction as an attempt to read (and write) against dominant discourses and ideologies. Later, theorists such as Cornel Sandvoss saw fan studies as having eroded "the boundaries between audiences and scholars, between fan and academic more than any other field" (62). Studies on fanfiction acknowledge its potential "as a tool of social criticism" as Western canonical texts such as Shakespeare's *Tempest* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* are revised or extended to include the diverse impacts of colonialism and racism (Derecho 69). Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)—a feminist and postcolonial prequel to *Jane Eyre* from the point of view of Mr. Rochester's wife, a Creole heiress—can be studied as an example of fanfiction since it builds upon the universe of a pre-existing text. Therefore, building upon the interpretive and experimental

potential of this genre, my project will explore the political dimension of fanfiction by examining one specific fandom, i.e., the *Harry Potter* fanfic universe, to see how this fan community responds to real life and contemporary social issues by writing them into stories based on these popular novels.

I. A Brief History of Fanfiction Studies

Fanfiction's origins can be "traced back to science fiction magazines in the 1920s and 1930s" (Thomas 1). The term, however, had derogatory connotations and was used to differentiate between "crude, amateur sci-fi fiction and professional fiction, or 'pro fiction'" ("Fanspeak"). Scholarly work on fanfiction tends to be mostly in the field of media and culture studies though the fields of psychology and anthropology have also been employed to understand the motivations and behaviours of fans (Thomas 2). Discussions about the relationship between "academic" and "fan" are a common area of study in this field with a focus on rescuing the "castigated category of the 'fan'" (Thomas 3). For Henry Jenkins, fans can, through their "participatory culture", serve as a new model of cultural production (*Textual Poachers* 290). Using Michel de Certeau's concept of the "poacher", Jenkins argues that fans are not mere passive, couch-bound consumers of media but renegades actively engaged in subverting popular readings of their favourite stories (*Textual Poachers* 23). He does, however, allow that not all fans are resistant readers. Other studies have tried to place fanfiction in relation to literary conventions; for example, Mafalda Stasi sees it as "canny, sophisticated and resonant with postmodern textuality" (129).

According to Cornel Sandvoss, the first wave of fanfiction studies is greatly influenced by Marxism and sees fanfiction writers as the powerless opposing the corporations that owned the rights to the stories and characters they loved (Thomas 3). This rather simplistic binary of powerless/powerful was later criticized by Alan McKee for "focusing unduly on the 'texts' of fan culture, rather than acknowledging that those texts and the way

they are perceived are themselves the result of larger discursive formations” (Thomas 4). Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and S. Lee Herrington label this first wave “Fandom Is Beautiful”, noting scholars’ preoccupation with casting fan activities as creative and thoughtful exercises instead of deconstructing the binary between fans and big media corporations (3). Moreover, this wave has come under criticism for treating fans as a homogenous group rather than a community with conflicting views and opinions (Thomas 4).

The second wave of fanfiction studies sees fans not as Jenkins’s resistant readers who subvert power structures and give a voice to marginalized communities, but a people mirroring the existing social hierarchies and systems of power. Drawing on French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the “habitus”, this wave, while still concerned with questions of discrimination, inequality, and power, asserts that fans’ practices are a manifestation of their socio-economic and cultural conditions (Gray et al. 5). These studies, consequently, “no longer portrayed fandom as an extraordinary space of emancipation and reformulation of gender relations” since “the taste hierarchies among fans themselves were described as the continuation of wider social inequalities” (Gray et al. 5). However, despite establishing the fandom as a space not inherently concerned with resistant readings, this wave pays little attention to the enjoyment and pleasure behind fan practices (Gray et al. 5).

The third wave influenced by poststructuralism is distinguished by “a greater self-reflexivity about the theorist’s own motives and positions and by a shift in emphasis toward exploring the contributions of fans to contemporary culture” (Thomas 4). Fan activities, instead of being treated as tangential, are seen as a fundamental part of everyday life as new media forms like the internet facilitate an exponential increase in fan interactions. Prominent third wave theorists Matt Hills and Jonathan Gray critique the existing terminology for fan studies and the practices of the fans themselves, which they see as contradictory to the idealized visions espoused earlier by other theorists. This wave takes into consideration the

diverse forms of fan engagement, paying particular attention to divisions between fans of “high” culture, such as Jane Austen’s fandom, and those of “low” culture like the Potterheads (Thomas 5). On a micro level, third-wave scholarship, through various psychoanalytical approaches, explores “*intrapersonal* pleasures and motivations among fans, refocusing on the relationship between fans’ selves and their fan objects” (Gray et al. 6). Meanwhile on a macro level, this wave expands its focus beyond questions of class and hegemony to critically evaluate fan consumption since it has become a ubiquitous feature of modern life due to technological advances (Gray et al. 7). Third-wave work studies fandom to gain “insight into modern life” and understand how fans relate to each other, themselves, and “the mediated texts” around them (Gray et al. 7). My project, in the spirit of the third wave, sees fanfiction as an online archive of cultural impressions that stores fan reactions to contemporary issues like transphobia and anti-Black racism by allowing them to explore these real-world events through stories based on the *Harry Potter* novels.

Due to fanfiction studies’ status as an expanding academic field, its scholars are interested in interrogating it from multiple angles. Studies on fanfiction are often thus interested in exploring its potential to create storyworlds that are “experienced within specific social and cultural environments” and “are subject to constant change” (Thomas 6). Fan writers expand on pre-existing texts, fleshing out the fictional world that the text inhabits by adding and subtracting characters as they see fit, changing events, playing with the chronological order of the story and so on (Thomas 9). Abigail Derecho emphasizes this ability of fanfiction to add new stories to a text considered already stable and complete and labels this genre of fiction as “archontic literature” (64). Archontic “relates to the word archive” taken from Jacques Derrida’s work *Archive Fever* and suggests that “any and every archive remains forever open to new entries, new artifacts, new contents. No archive is ever final, complete, closed” (Derecho 64). As Derrida himself explains, “[b]y incorporating the

knowledge deployed in reference to it, the archive augments itself, engrosses itself, it gains in *auctoritas*.” (68). Thus, the archive which is “a virtual construct surrounding the text, including it and all texts related to it” is endlessly proliferating as it continuously incorporates new texts into its ranks,

A literature that is archontic is a literature composed of texts that are archival in nature and that are impelled by the same archontic principle: that tendency toward enlargement and accretion that all archives possess...So all texts that build on a previously existing text are not lesser than the source text, and they do not violate the boundaries of the source text; rather, they only add to that text’s archive, becoming a part of the archive and expanding it. (Derecho 64-65)

Fanfics then are archontic texts that make up their originary text’s archive. This archive allows and even invites other writers to enter it and “select specific items they find useful, make new artifacts using those found objects, and deposit the newly made work back into the source text’s archive” (Derecho 65). *Archive of Our Own* (AO3), the fanfiction repository this project examines, thus augments and expands upon the *Harry Potter*’s novels, storing fan experimentations with this textual universe.

II. Fanfiction Repositories and *Archive of Our Own*

Fanfiction now receives a good deal of academic attention because of the vast number of people involved in its production and reception, i.e., its writers and readers. The internet and current advances in technology have enabled fan interactions to go beyond individualised, face-to-face encounters to build entire communities around fan experiences. As Joshua Meyrowitz puts it, “Electronic media have changed the significance of space, time, and physical barriers as communication variables” (13). Thus, there has been an explosion of fan writing as fans gather online to share their reimaginings of favourite stories. The sheer breath of creative content that fanfiction repositories like *Fanfiction.net* (FF.net) and *Archive*

of Our Own hold, in fact rivals the Google Books' fiction corpus which attempts to collect every fictional text published since the start of recorded history (Aragon and Davis 15). To underscore the prolific nature of this medium, Abigail De Kosnik writes,

At a rate of one story per day, it would take a fan...1,729 years to read all of the *Harry Potter* stories on FF.net, and 14,907 years to read all of the stories, in all 8,000+ fandoms, on FF.net. The number of unique authors who have contributed to FF.net (1.2 million) is 9.3 times the number of writers and authors who were employed in the United States in 2012 (129,100, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics [2014]). The number of reviews posted to stories on FF.net (139.5 million) over the past fifteen years is greater than the number of people who bought tickets to sporting events in the United States and Canada, inclusive of all games played in the National Football League, National Basketball Association, Major League Baseball, and National Hockey League, in 2012 (131 million)...This is a rate that no other traditional media industry or entertainment genre can match. (*Rogue Archives* 342)

While *Fanfiction.net* is the largest fanfiction repository to date, *Archive of Our Own*, the website this project examines, "is a faster-growing archive than FF.net" (De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives* 345) and averages 11.4 works per author as compared to *Fanfiction.net*'s 4.5 (De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives* 346). It is an open-source software run on the non-profit Organization for Transformative Works' (OTW) servers. Launched in 2008 by female fans and programmers who wanted greater control over their creative content, AO3 is a central archive meaning that it hosts a large variety of fandoms as opposed to a select few (Aragon and Davis 20). Plans for its development came into existence when \$3 million were invested to create *FanLib.com*, a website to host and profit from fan writings (Lothian 546). *FanLib.com*'s ties to media corporations' plans to use fanfiction as promotional material

incensed fan creators who saw their writings as autonomous and free from such marketplace considerations. As prominent fan writer, Astolat wrote in 2007, “[T]he people behind fanlib...don’t actually care about...anything except making money...[W]e are sitting quietly by the fireside, creating piles and piles of content around us, and other people are going to look at that and see an opportunity...We need a central archive of our own” (qtd. in Lothian 546). These circumstances make AO3 fecund grounds for investigating fanfiction as a transformative medium since it was established by the fans, for the fans, and to serve fan interests.

III. Research Methodologies and Chapter Overview

My research focuses on how fanfiction allows fans to react to political events in real time and process their impact by incorporating them into stories. By writing fanfics based on contemporary social issues—such as transphobia and anti-Black racism—fan writers make these concerns more immediate by filtering them through the lives of beloved fictional characters. As De Kosnik puts it, “Political fic authors battle the unreality of actual events. By merging the fictional with the real in their stories, authors aim to *transfuse* the interestingness, the attention-worthiness, and the liveliness of fictional characters and events into actual people and situations” (“Memory, Archive, and History” 277-278). By incorporating contemporary social issues into the plotlines of their stories, fan writers make the fanfiction medium a social and communal space of experience or both themselves and their readers. Moreover, since fanfiction builds upon the fictional universes of pre-existing texts, there is less need for it to engage in world building exercises, instead allowing it to delve directly into the characters’ thoughts and feelings, a feature which helps give the issue being discussed emotional weight. The emotional weight of these social issues is then kept alive and in circulation as fanfiction is produced, uploaded, and consumed in large quantities online.

Developing its arguments over three chapters, my thesis focuses on fanfiction related to J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), exploring it in conjunction with fanfics found on the popular fanfiction website *Archive of Our Own*. Rowling's work is taken as a point of departure for this project since her texts have engendered one of the most prolific fanfiction communities online, with over 350,000 fanfics posted alone on AO3. Stories based on her work continuously make fan-complied lists of must-read fanfictions. Additionally, Rowling's own status as a now-controversial celebrity author whose comments on social media incite polemical responses is an important extra-textual element that this project aims to explore while analysing the fanfics based on her series.

Literary analysis and fan studies serve as the frameworks of this research, with digital humanities methods used to examine the fanfics selected. Since this project looks at 756 fanfics in total, computational methods are necessary to review these stories. Employing distant reading for the fanfics based on Rowling's work, my thesis interrogates shifts in language and tone that occur when fan writers incorporate contemporary social issues into texts previously considered discrete and stable. Sentiment analysis and topic modelling—two digital humanities tools for distant reading—are used to analyse *Harry Potter* fanfiction. Sentiment analysis involves the contextual mining of text by identifying and extracting expressions of subjective character experience. This subjective material can include characters' sentiments, attitudes, and emotions (Liu 1). The SentimentIntensityAnalyzer from the NLTK Vader-Lexicon Library was used for this analysis. It assigns texts positive, neutral, and negative scores between 1.0 and -1.0. Conducting sentiment analysis on *Harry Potter* fanfics makes it possible to see whether a text's tone shifts positively or negatively upon introduction of new elements such as different characters or plotlines. Topic modelling meanwhile is used to discover latent topics that might be present but not immediately apparent in a text by analysing which words appear together and grouping them to infer

patterns (Duong-Trung 4). By using this method, topics that new additions to the text bring about and the larger trends they refer to are made apparent. Distant reading, in this way, allows me to focus on the patterns that emerge when fanfiction is triggered by real world events. These patterns then inform the close reading of individual texts for a more nuanced understanding of how social issues are perceived and incorporated by writers and the effects they have on the texts themselves.

My first chapter examines fanfiction based on the *Harry Potter* series, uploaded after Rowling's transphobic tweets in 2019, that rewrite characters as transgender. The *Harry Potter* fandom is one of the largest and most active online fanfiction communities. Continued reader interest in the *Harry Potter* textual universe has been augmented by Rowling's comments against the transgender community, which has generated stories by fan writers that manipulate the original text to add transgender characters with complex inner lives. This chapter interrogates 250 fanfics based on the *Harry Potter* series posted on *Archive of Our Own* with the tag "Trans Character" and compares them with 250 stories set in Rowling's magical world that do not rewrite the characters' gender identity to see what changes occur at the level of the text when such characters take centre stage. By searching through the tag "Trans Character", fanfics that rewrite *Harry Potter* characters as transgender are made visible. Sentiment analysis is then conducted on the 500 fanfics selected for study to analyse whether the text changes positively or negatively tonally upon the addition of a transgender character to the *Harry Potter* text. The results index how fan writers process Rowling's transphobia by writing stories with transgender characters that are generally positive in tone in an attempt to limit the negativity experienced by this marginalized group and normalize their existence. Topic modelling is also employed to see which words in these stories co-occur with others in order to sort them into different groups based on their co-occurring tendencies to understand what kinds of topics are present in stories with transgender

characters and vice versa. This method shows what topics emerge when transgender characters are added to *Harry Potter* and the patterns that form from such a disruption to the text.

My second chapter shifts focus to *Harry Potter* fanfiction that “racebends” Hermione Granger as black. This chapter assesses how racebending allows fans to decentralize privileged points of view by giving narrative space to ethnic others. Fanfiction writers, by privileging the voices and stories of characters belonging to marginalized communities, allow for a revaluation of Rowling’s text by making revisions that align with contemporary social issues like racism, especially when read in conjunction with the social shift inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement after protests in Ferguson in 2014. However, considering that in 2015 before the first performance of her play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, Rowling tweeted in favour of casting a black actress to play Hermione—an ostensibly white-coded character—any fanfiction with this racebent character ceased being as transformative since it became part of the author’s official text. Thus, fanfiction produced after 2015 that racebends Hermione would not exactly be rewriting the character as much as making her race explicit. To that end, this chapter interrogates 6 fanfics pre casting announcement marked with the tag “Black Hermione Granger” and compares them with 250 stories with a black Hermione uploaded after Rowling’s 2015 tweet. Only 6 fanfics have been selected for study because before Rowling’s tweet only 15 stories racebent Hermione as black compared to the 900 or so fanfics that rewrote the character’s race afterwards. Therefore, since Hermione’s character has been racebent with the author’s permission, this chapter notes what new narratives emerge around the concept of race vis-à-vis fan writing in the pre- and post-tweet stories. Due to the smaller data set of the pre-tweet fanfics, they are close read, with sentiment analysis and topic modelling employed on the larger post-tweet data set to understand the latent tone and themes of those texts.

My third chapter constellates the findings of the previous two to see how fanfiction serves to keep certain social issues in circulation, focusing in particular on their emotional aspect as stories that “shape and are shaped by capturing and celebrating daily emotional experiences”; this helps maintain the immediacy of the issues being explored (Kelley 3). As fanfiction is produced and shared for free, earning no money, this chapter also pays attention to who is considered the audience for these fan works since there is no need to appeal to a large audience for financial profit. Additionally, this chapter interrogates fanfiction’s merit as a writing practice through the space it allows to explore social issues, giving its readers and writers a platform to discuss these problems in myriad ways, keeping them relevant for a small but invested audience.

It is important now to study seriously the effects of this medium. As fanfic writers revise and expand upon Rowling’s texts, new layers of meanings are produced and contemporary social issues indexed as fanfics are geared towards incorporating people of colour and other marginalized groups. How this affects meaning-making and the reception of the author’s original novels can open new productive avenues of research as now more than ever fans all across the world are involved in producing vast quantities of fan writings and—with *Archive of Our Own* winning the Hugo Award for Best Related Work in 2019—are even gaining recognition for them.

Chapter One: Fandom and Transphobia

J.K. Rowling's seven-part book series about the young wizard Harry Potter took the publishing world by storm in 1997 with the launch of her first novel: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Quickly becoming one of the best and fastest selling book series in publishing history, these seven novels spawned movie adaptations, amusement parks, video games, action figures, websites, and more. Even sixteen years after the publication of the last *Harry Potter* novel in 2007, Rowling's wizarding world continues to hold audience interest. One site of this continued investment with the *Harry Potter* universe is fanfiction. These novels have engendered one of the largest online fanfiction communities, with over 350,000 stories posted alone on the popular fanfic website, *Archive of Our Own*. It is one of the most active fandoms with new stories posted almost daily.

I. J.K. Rowling's Online Anti-Trans Rhetoric

Continued reader interest in the *Harry Potter* universe has been augmented by Rowling's active presence on the social media platform Twitter, where she discloses information not found in the seven novels such as Ron Weasley's "patronus" being a Jack Russell terrier, Moaning Myrtle's full name being Myrtle Elizabeth Warren, and Harry Potter's uncle loving "Top Gear" (Ohlheiser). Rowling's online presence allows fans further insight into the inner workings of her magical world while simultaneously keeping them invested in her novels. In December 2019, however, Rowling's tweets polarized the *Harry Potter* fandom when she took to Twitter to support British researcher Maya Forstater, who had been fired for her transphobic tweet: "Some transgender people have cosmetic surgery. But most retain their birth genitals. Everyone's equality and safety should be protected, but women and girls lose out on privacy, safety and fairness if males are allowed into changing rooms, dormitories, prisons, sports teams." (Maya Forstater). Rowling tweeted: "Dress however you please. Call yourself whatever you like. Sleep with any consenting adult who'll

have you. Live your best life in peace and security. But force women out of their jobs for stating that sex is real?” with the hashtags “#IStandWithMaya” and “#ThisIsNotADrill.” This instance marked the start of Rowling’s anti-transgender rhetoric online. In June 2020, the author tweeted about an article referring to “people who menstruate” commenting: “I’m sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?” (J.K. Rowling). Rowling’s insistence on prioritizing natal women (i.e., women who were assigned the female sex at birth based on their external anatomy) proliferated in a series of blog posts and speeches where she conflated gender identity with sex and biology, undermining the struggles of transgender women: “If sex isn’t real, there’s no same-sex attraction. If sex isn’t real, the lived reality of women globally is erased. I know and love trans people, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives. It isn’t hate to speak the truth.” (J.K. Rowling). Her comments further disregarded the sufferings of trans people: “I respect every trans person’s right to live any way that feels authentic and comfortable to them. I’d march with you if you were discriminated against on the basis of being trans. At the same time, my life has been shaped by being female. I do not believe it’s hateful to say so” (J.K. Rowling). Rowling faced backlash from much of the *Harry Potter* community for these comments, with fans labelling her as transphobic. Fans expressed their discontent with tweets like: “Pssssst... your invisibility cloak has slipped off your prejudices...” (Scroobius Pip), “this is so damaging and heartbreaking as a harry potter fan. what do you gain from this? why do you need to say these things that you know are so hurtful to so many people? it’s one thing to think these close minded things, but another to spew them” (Meghan Rienks), and “Does expecto patronum work on TERFs” (Mae). Rowling’s refusal to consider trans women on the same level as natal women and her unwillingness to accept their existence as marginalized, forced the *Harry Potter* fandom to reevaluate the ways in which they had initially engaged with

Rowling's works. Fanfiction that rewrites Rowling's textual world to add transgender characters becomes one way then of responding to the author's transphobic rhetoric.

II. *Harry Potter* Fanfiction on AO3

It is important to preface the discussion that follows with an understanding of how fan sites, especially *Archive of Our Own*, operates. AO3—the “fan-created, fan-run, nonprofit, non-commercial archive for transformative fanworks, like fanfiction, fanart, fan videos, and podfic” (“Archive of Our Own”)—is the most popular platform for hosting rewritings of pre-published works. Stories are uploaded on AO3 in chapters or instalments. These fanfics overtly signal their connection to their source text through “identifying headers that precede and categorize individual fics” (Derecho 66). *Archive of Our Own* hosts more than 55,000 fandoms, so it uses tagging functions which allow users to indicate to which textual world their stories refer. Readers are updated when a new instalment of a story they are reading arrives, helping them keep track of their interests. These readers also comment on the stories posted online, critiquing them and at times offering advice regarding the plotline, characters, etc. Due to the serial nature of fan texts, most readers are likely to view these stories as “works in progress, and inevitably many stories are left unfinished” (Thomas 10). However, “[w]hile fans might urge each other on to bring a story to its climax, it is undoubtedly the case that continuity is preferred over closure” (Thomas 10). The existence of countless online stories and their work-in-progress (WIP) nature allows for a multitude of interpretations and meanings, as each story focuses and builds upon a certain aspect of the original text. Thus, on the same online platform, a reader is confronted with an almost unimaginable variety of stories originating from a single source text.

Fanfiction's current status as an online writing practice allows it to respond to any major disruptions in its chosen fandoms—such as Rowling's transphobic tweets—almost immediately by uploading stories that address this disruption. After Rowling's tweets in

2019, AO3 saw an upsurge in fanfics with the tag “Trans Character” as stories with transgender characters increased from 389 in number pre-2019 to 2861 post-2019. This sudden rise in stories pertaining to transgender people indexes how fanfiction responds to contemporary social issues by making that issue more visible through larger quantities of writing. This is not to say that fanfiction has purely an activist purpose or that fan writing is inherently political; rather it is to note that it serves as an important site of reader response to shifts in the social cultural landscape. Fan writing can be understood as a collection or an archive of how readers respond to real life events by rewriting stable, discrete texts to grapple with issues like transphobia. Hence, a site like *Archive of Our Own* serves to store these reader responses not only as creative, digital works but also as by-products of their social climates; as Lothian argues, “archives and archiving are always political, and to collect content is never only to store information. Rather, the ‘archivable content of the past’ is given meaning through the structure of the archive, which keeps its memory alive” (543).

Interrogating fan production before and after Rowling’s transphobic comments can help us understand how fanfiction, by incorporating real world events into pre-published, popular works, enables both fan writers and readers to grapple with the conditions and consequences of current social issues like transphobia. To that end, this chapter examines 250 fanfics (post-2019) based on the *Harry Potter* series posted on *Archive of Our Own* with the tag “Trans Character” and compares them with 250 stories (pre-2019) set in Rowling’s wizarding world that do not rewrite the characters’ gender identity to see what changes occur at the level of the text when such marginalized characters take up more narrative space.

The common-sense expectation about fanfics including transgender characters post-2019 would be that these stories focus largely on the prejudice and hardships that trans people face as a response to Rowling’s discriminatory remarks against the group, thus leading to a more negative emotional undertone. Likewise, it can be assumed that the topics of these

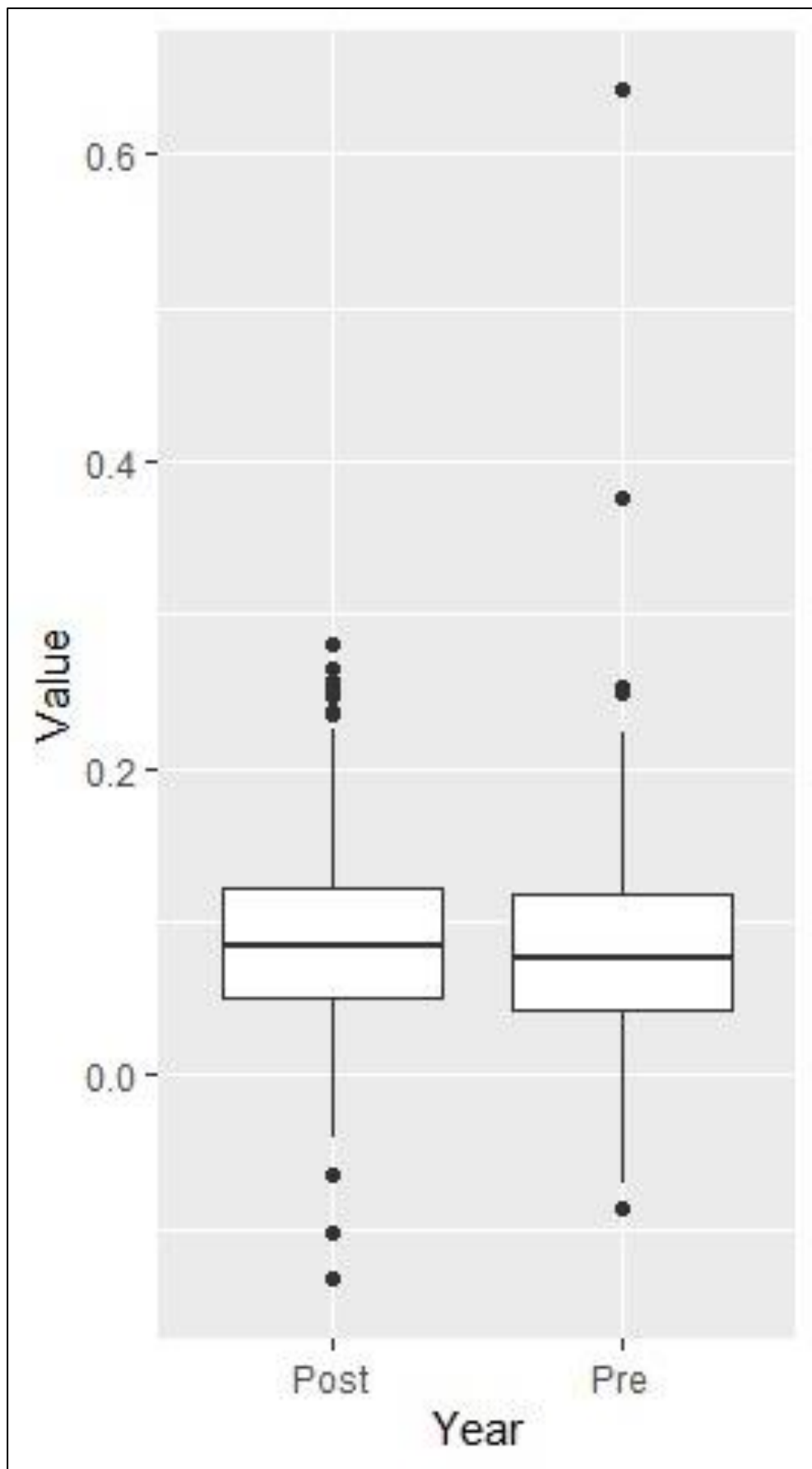
stories would have significant differences from those of the pre-2019 stories as fans rewrite Rowling's text to be more inclusive. Analyzing the 500 fanfics, though, suggests that the inclusion of transgender characters has functioned largely to normalize these characters by having their presence not change either the sentiment or the topics of these fanfictions. The post-2019 fanfics make trans characters more visible in their rewritings but do not diverge drastically from the pre-2019 fanfics' themes.

III. Sentiment Analysis Results for Pre- and Post-2019 Fanfics

I first conducted sentiment analysis on the 500 fanfics randomly selected for study to examine whether the text's tone changes positively or negatively upon the addition of a transgender character. A negative score on this analysis means that the story has a largely negative emotional undertone in terms of the language used, while a positive score means the opposite. A neutral score of 0 means that the story has equal positive and negative sentiments.

My sentiment analysis shows that, surprisingly, both fanfics with (post-2019) and without (pre-2019) transgender characters are generally positive with a score of around 0.1 on average (see Graph X). Pre-2019 *Harry Potter* fan writing did not have to grapple with J. K. Rowling's transphobic comments, however, writing fanfiction is not generally a political exercise and the results reflect that. Since most of the pre- and post-2019 fanfics are mildly positive it implies that even if Rowling's comments did upset her fandom, fan writers did not respond by writing stories that emphasized the harsh, lived realities of transgender people. This is what the graph at a glance tells us. Taking a closer look, though, we see several fanfics which do not conform to the average score and function as outliers with either very high positive or negative values. For the pre-2019 stories, there is only one negative outlier compared to the positive ones, with the latter reaching higher values and being more spread out across the graph. Meanwhile for post-2019, both positive and negative outliers are more

equal in number, though the graph still shows more positive outlier fanfics overall. It is important to take these outlier observations into account to nuance our readings of the results and arrive at a more holistic understanding of our data patterns. As Richard So notes, “What makes our “outlier” observation so interesting is that it...if that observation didn’t exist, our patterns would look very different. They would have a different shape” (22). To that end, I will close read three outlier fanfictions to better gauge why they show up on our graph and how they impact our readings of these results. I will also close read two fanfics that conform to the graph’s normal pattern to see if the outlier analyses disrupt our understanding of these results in any meaningful way.



Graph X. Sentiment Analysis Results for Pre- and Post-2019 Fanfictions

a. Outlier Fanfics

The most positive of the pre-2019 (without transgender characters) outlier fanfics is “The Protection of Joukriger”, with a score of 0.642. Written under the fan pseudonym KimpatsuNoHoseki, this fanfic is set in Harry’s sixth year at the wizarding school Hogwarts, though it departs significantly from the previous year’s events in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* by rewriting the death of Harry’s godfather, Sirius Black. It is ostensibly a story about Harry discovering he has a magical warrior soulmate, crown prince Ryosuke of the Joukriger tribe, who is tasked with his protection as Voldemort rises to power. Consisting of thirty-one chapters, this fanfic—which is a WIP—focuses on Harry’s burgeoning relationship with Ryosuke, often describing their sexual relationship in detail. Other characters from Rowling’s world such as Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Draco also feature, engaging in explicit sexual acts with one another or other Joukriger warriors. The plot mostly revolves around the unfolding of these romantic relationships with some references to the upcoming battle against Voldemort.

It is not difficult to see why “The Protection of Joukriger” would have a high positive score as the conflict which drives Rowling’s wizarding series, that is the battle between the forces of good and evil, personified by the fights between Harry and Voldemort, is absent. This fanfic focuses instead on the romantic relationships of its characters, paying little narrative attention to the struggles Harry originally faced in *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*. Moreover, since this fanfic rewrites Sirius’s death, Harry does not have to grapple with the grief that comes with losing a loved one. Even Voldemort poses less of a threat now that Harry has a powerful ally at his side in the form of his warrior soulmate. Characters in this fanfic, thus, are not as worried about their future as they were in Rowling’s novel and are able to devote most of their time to their romantic relationships. These circumstances make

this story's language exceedingly positive as there is little narrative space given to negative events.

"Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone" by the fan writer Quinnshifter is the most positive of the post-2019 outlier fanfictions, with a score of 0.280. It is based on Rowling's first book of the series with the same name and rewrites Harry's first year at Hogwarts by sorting him into the wizarding house Slytherin instead of Gryffindor and having him befriend Draco Malfoy. Ron Weasley is tagged in the fanfic as a trans character, though no explicit references are made to his gender shift in the text of the story itself. Quinnshifter reworks the events of the original novel by having Harry, Ron, and Hermione belong to different houses—Slytherin, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor respectively—and befriend Draco who is a budding seer yet unaware of his abilities. Over the course of seven chapters (this fanfic is also a WIP and hence unfinished) these four characters go on the same adventures that the original trio in Rowling's text did. The fanfic also hints at a future romance between Harry and Draco while rewriting the originally antagonistic relationship between the two as a friendship.

"Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone's" positive score is explained by Quinnshifter's decision to convert a major antagonistic relationship of the protagonists into a friendly one. Harry's rivalry with Draco in the original novel—their cutting, and often cruel remarks to each other—would be interpreted as negative language by the sentiment analysis results. This rivalry's absence then means that this fanfic's text is only populated with friendships which does not leave enough narrative space for negative emotions and language. Additionally, adding a transgender character does not decrease this positive score as Ron's experience as a transgender individual with all the trials and tribulations such persons experience are not depicted. The reader only knows of Ron's status as a trans character because of AO3's tagging mechanism which allows fan writers to disclose such information. The text of the fanfic itself does not allude to Ron's lived experience as a transgender person.

Tagging Ron as transgender then can be read as an attempt to normalize characters' gender identities without drawing attention to their differences.

The most negative of the post-2019 outlier fanfics is "A Light From the Shadows" by fan writer 21ShootingStars with a score of -0.133. It is a crossover fanfiction featuring Spencer Reid from the popular CBS crime drama *Criminal Minds*. It spans over the second and third *Harry Potter* novels, detailing Spencer's journey as a magical prodigy as he navigates the intricacies of the wizarding world coming from a muggle (non-magical) background. Spencer befriends Luna Lovegood, an important character from Rowling's novels, and discovers she is his cousin. The fanfic refers to Harry and his friends' adventures from the original two novels but through the eyes of Spencer as an outside, disinterested observer. An interesting addition to this story is Avery, an original character by the fan writer, who identifies as a transgender male. 21ShootingStars notes at the end of the fifth chapter where he introduces Avery that as a transgender male himself, he feels very comfortable writing Avery and plans to not just "leave him as a background character" ("A Light From the Shadows" chap. 5). "A Light From the Shadows", however, is a WIP and we do not see Avery as a main character in the seven chapters that have been uploaded on AO3 so far.

Interestingly, this fanfic's negative score can be attributed not to the negative issues that a trans character might face, but largely to Spencer's family background which aligns with his upbringing in the TV show. His father leaves his mother because she has schizophrenia and Spencer has to deal with this loss as well as take care of his mother. In "A Light From the Shadows", though, Spencer has to leave his mother to go to Hogwarts and worries constantly about her well-being. This anxiety of Spencer's, his fear of abandoning his mother, adds to the text's negative score. Moreover, throughout this fanfic, Spencer is concerned about being perceived as the 'other' due to his intelligence and ability to master

spells well beyond his age bracket. This concern of his also adds to the fanfic's negative score as he frets over fitting in at Hogwarts.

Avery's addition as a transgender character, though, does not account for any negative language or sentiment in this story. Spencer is most welcoming to Avery when he shifts from the girls' dorm room to the boys' and everyone in the Ravenclaw house is open to hearing about Avery's experiences and accepts him, "He had a thousand questions, but he knew better than to go asking people about their personal business like that unless he wanted to get beat up or hexed. He figured if there was anything more that Avery wanted him or the others to know, then he would tell them; simple as that" ("A Light From the Shadows" chap. 5). The boys in the shared dorm room furthermore respect Avery's boundaries and allow him to set rules to make this transition in living spaces easier for him, "if my curtains are closed around my bed don't open them. And if you guys could wear *something* when you're walking around then I would appreciate it. Oh! And don't touch me...Understood," the room's original three inhabitants said, all at once" ("A Light From the Shadows" chap. 5). This fanfic's negative score then cannot be attributed to Avery's presence as a transgender character, it instead appears to be a result of Spencer's difficult home life and his worries about navigating a magical environment.

b. Non-Outlier Fanfics

"The Meeting of Old Enemies" is the most negative of the pre-2019 (without transgender characters) non-outlier fanfics with a score of -0.048. Written under the fan pseudonym whentheynamemyjoy, this fanfic rewrites the events of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* by making Draco Malfoy spy on Voldemort for Harry and his friends. Consisting of only four chapters, this story develops a closer relationship between Draco and Hermione, with the former only giving reports on Voldemort's activities to the latter.

This fanfic's negative score can largely be attributed to its setting as it takes place during the seventh *Harry Potter* novel when Harry and his allies are in hiding and embroiled in the war against Voldemort. Tensions amongst characters are high as they make plans to defeat Voldemort, "Harry clearly reached his limit. 'Shut it, both of you!' he yelled, pulling them up short. 'It's been over a year since we left Hogwarts to bring Voldemort down, and we're no closer to achieving that now than we were then'" ("The Meeting of Old Enemies" chap. 1). Such expressions of frustration add to the text's negative emotional undertone. Additionally, this story features magical duels—such as the one between Hermione and Draco before the former realizes they are working towards a common goal—which include violent imagery. When Hermione initially fights against Draco, her spell almost destroys half of his face, "The left side of Malfoy's face where the spell hit him looked like it had exploded. A good chunk of his left ear was gone and the white hair on his temple was soaked in blood. The skin of his cheek was partly sticking out and partly peeled off completely in a wide gaping gash" ("The Meeting of Old Enemies" chap. 3). Details like these again add to the story's negative tone and make it a sombre rewriting of Rowling's original novel.

"Harry Potter and the Transing of his Gender" is the most positive of the non-outlier post-2019 fanfics with a score of 0.178. Written by scheelite, this story is ostensibly about Harry coming to terms with his gender identity and eventually coming out to the wizarding world. Set during the events of the first *Harry Potter* novel, this fanfic describes Harry's first ever trip to Diagon Alley, a prominent wizard shopping area, where he decides on a masculine name for himself and discovers the magical community to be an accepting and inclusive space.

This fanfic starts with the note, "A transmasc Harry comes out and the wizarding world supports him, as we all know it would (suck it JK Rowling)" ("Harry Potter and the Transing of his Gender"). Therefore, from the very beginning this story explicitly sets itself

against Rowling's transphobic comments and focuses on writing the wizarding world to be a safe space. Though there are some references to the Dursleys' transphobic attitudes, "he was finally free of Aunt Petunia's interjection of, 'No, that's my *NIECE*— a *GIRL*. *SHE* cut *HER* hair short *HERSELF*, the nasty little thing.'", the majority of the story emphasizes how the wizarding world allows Harry to present himself the way he wants to ("Harry Potter and the Transing of his Gender"). Harry's encounters with other wizards help him navigate his own gender identity and understand his preferred pronouns, "Ollivander smiled. 'Son, despite what the Muggles may tell you, there is no one body type associated with each gender. Take Hagrid. His body is wildly different from Griphook's, but they're both male, yes?'... 'Why can't you be a boy too?' questioned the wand-maker" ("Harry Potter and the Transing of his Gender"). Such supportive reactions to Harry's gender identity give this story a positive emotional undertone, explaining its high sentiment analysis score. Moreover, this fanfic posits itself as the start of Harry's new journey to a place not only filled with magic and wonder but also people who accept him as a transgender individual. Thus, the hope Harry feels for a better future is reflected in this story's positive score.

The most negative of the non-outlier post-2019 fanfics is "Harr(iet) Potter – Harry Potter Reimagined" by XBlakXTearX with a score of -0.0402. This fanfic rewrites Harry as a sarcastic, no-nonsense trans girl named Harriet who actively fights against rude and unjust behaviours. Set during the events of the first *Harry Potter* novel, this WIP fanfic details Harriet's first encounter with the magical world and its acceptance of her gender identity. This story shows the wizarding world to be an inclusive space as witches and wizards Harriet has never met before call her "the girl who lived" instead of misgendering her as "the boy who lived" ("Harr(iet) Potter – Harry Potter Reimagined" chap. 1).

This story's negative score is largely owed to its characters' caustic comments. Though this fanfic briefly mentions the discrimination Harriet faces at the Dursley household,

“Petunia, make sure that this...whatever, doesn’t go anywhere near Dudley. I don’t want some HeShe near our boy”, she never internalizes their prejudice and responds vitriolically instead, “Stupid fucking cunts you’re lucky I haven’t burned down this ugly fucking house” (“Harr(iet) Potter – Harry Potter Reimagined” chap. 1). Moreover, whenever Dudley bullies her she calls him a “Whiny cunt” under her breath. Dialogues like these are a constant refrain in this story, with Harriet telling Draco Malfoy, “Well I certainly don’t need glasses to see what a cunt you are” (“Harr(iet) Potter – Harry Potter Reimagined” chap. 2) to Ebony (an original character) bickering with Hermione, “No one insults Gerard like that you scum sucking poser muggle bitch” (“Harr(iet) Potter – Harry Potter Reimagined” chap. 3). Thus, the aggressive way characters engage with one another contributes to the story’s negative score as opposed to the Dursleys’ transphobic comments which make only a fleeting appearance in the first chapter. Consequently, even though this story reads as the most negative of the post-2019 fanfics, it is not dedicated to detailing the prejudice faced by transgender people. It instead focuses on the beginning of Harriet’s journey as a witch in a space where people respond vindictively but respect her gender identity.

The major difference in the post-2019 outlier and non-outlier fanfics is that when the former adds transgender characters to the *Harry Potter* universe, the characters’ gender identity is not the story’s main point of focus. In the outlier fanfics, Ron is only tagged as a trans character without this change in his presentation being explored or even directly referred to in the text. Likewise, though Avery is not supposed to be a minor character, he is only introduced briefly and not fully developed as an important character in the WIP fanfic. On the other hand, the non-outlier fanfics make the characters’ gender identity a prominent feature of the storyline. Both fanfics featuring Harry as a transgender individual constantly reaffirm his gender identity by making the wizarding community respect his pronouns. All of these fanfics, however, give little narrative attention to the harsh reality and lived experiences

of trans people. Instead, they show these people living normal lives free from prejudice. Thus, the outlier readings do not disrupt our results. They only indicate that fan writers may choose to not emphasize a character's gender identity but still show them living in a safe and inclusive environment. Moreover, these stories show how the sentiment analysis score is not affected by the presence of trans characters. The pre-2019 outlier and non-outlier fanfics' sentiment score is largely impacted by their themes of romance and war, implying that the absence of trans characters does not radically alter a story's positive or negative tone.

These sentiment analysis results challenge the common-sense assumptions that the post-2019 fanfics would have a largely negative score as fan writers depict the sufferings of transgender people. Since both the pre- and post-2019 fanfics have a positive score on average, it does not seem as if Rowling's fans responded to her transphobic comments by very explicitly drawing attention in their writings to the harsh, lived experiences of transgender individuals. These stories thus do not appear to engage readers' sympathies by filtering the discrimination suffered by this marginalized group through the lives of *Harry Potter* characters. The post-2019 fanfics respond to Rowling's transphobia instead by imagining a world where being transgender has little bearing on a person's life negatively. In all the post-2019 fanfics close read, Ron, Avery, and Harry as trans characters never receive any sustained negative attention from other characters in the stories due to their gender identities. In the stories where Harry is rewritten as trans, only the Dursleys respond negatively as fan writers expand these characters' hatred of magic in the original novels to include transphobia. Thus, the characters transgender status is never a cause for conflict; in Ron's case it is not even mentioned explicitly. Fanfiction activism, in this case, means featuring trans characters in normal, everyday situations—as much as that holds true for a magical world—free from instances of prejudice and discrimination. It is a rewriting of the

world's social systems to create a more progressive fictional reality where characters are not ostracized due to their gender identities or sexual preferences.

IV. Topic Modelling Results for Pre- and Post-2019 Fanfics

To explore this kind of activism in depth we will employ topic modelling to see which words in these 500 fanfics (pre- and post-2019) feature together to understand their co-occurring tendencies and examine the topic varieties present in stories with transgender characters and vice versa. This method will show what topics emerge when transgender characters are added to *Harry Potter* and the pattern that forms from such a disruption to Rowling's original text.

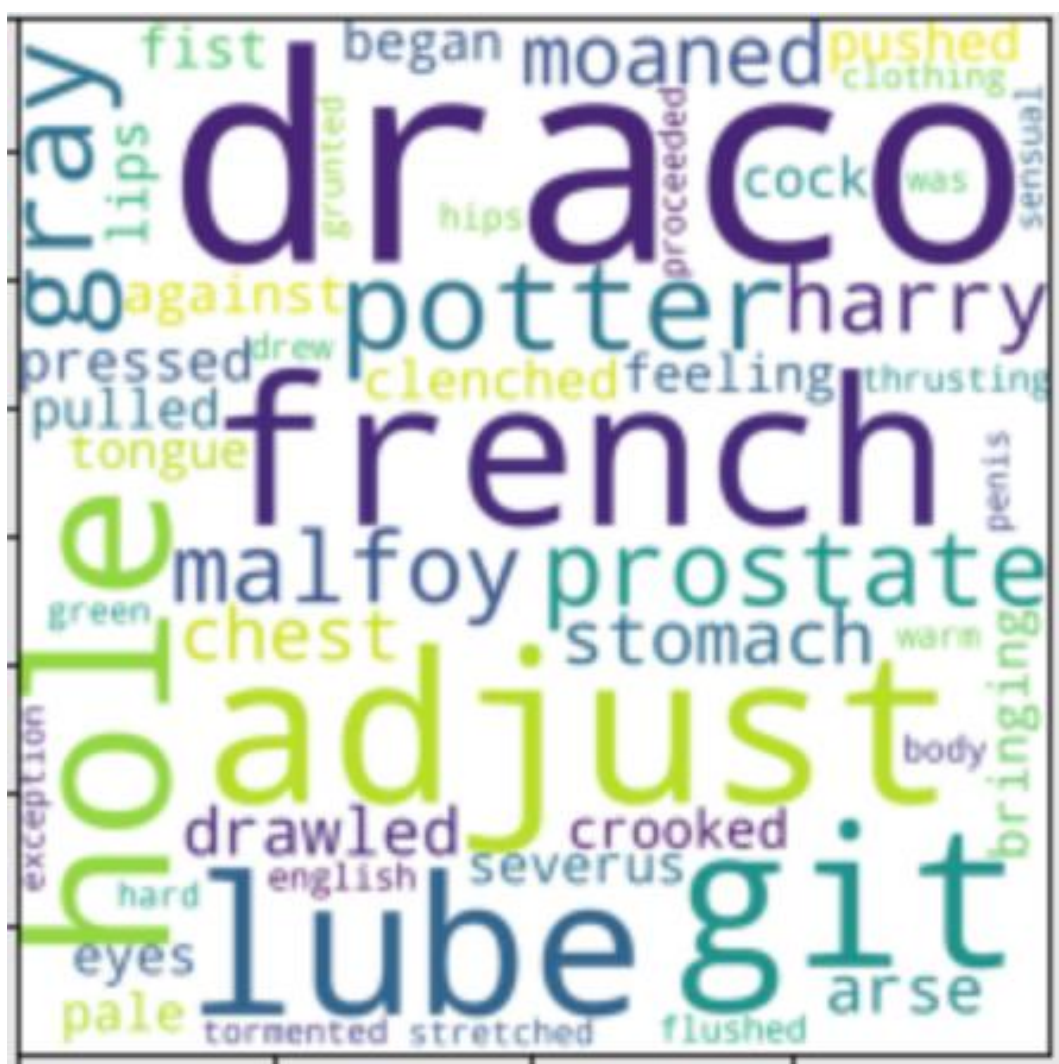


Chart A. Pre-2019 Topic Modelling Results



Chart B. Pre-2019 Topic Modeling Results

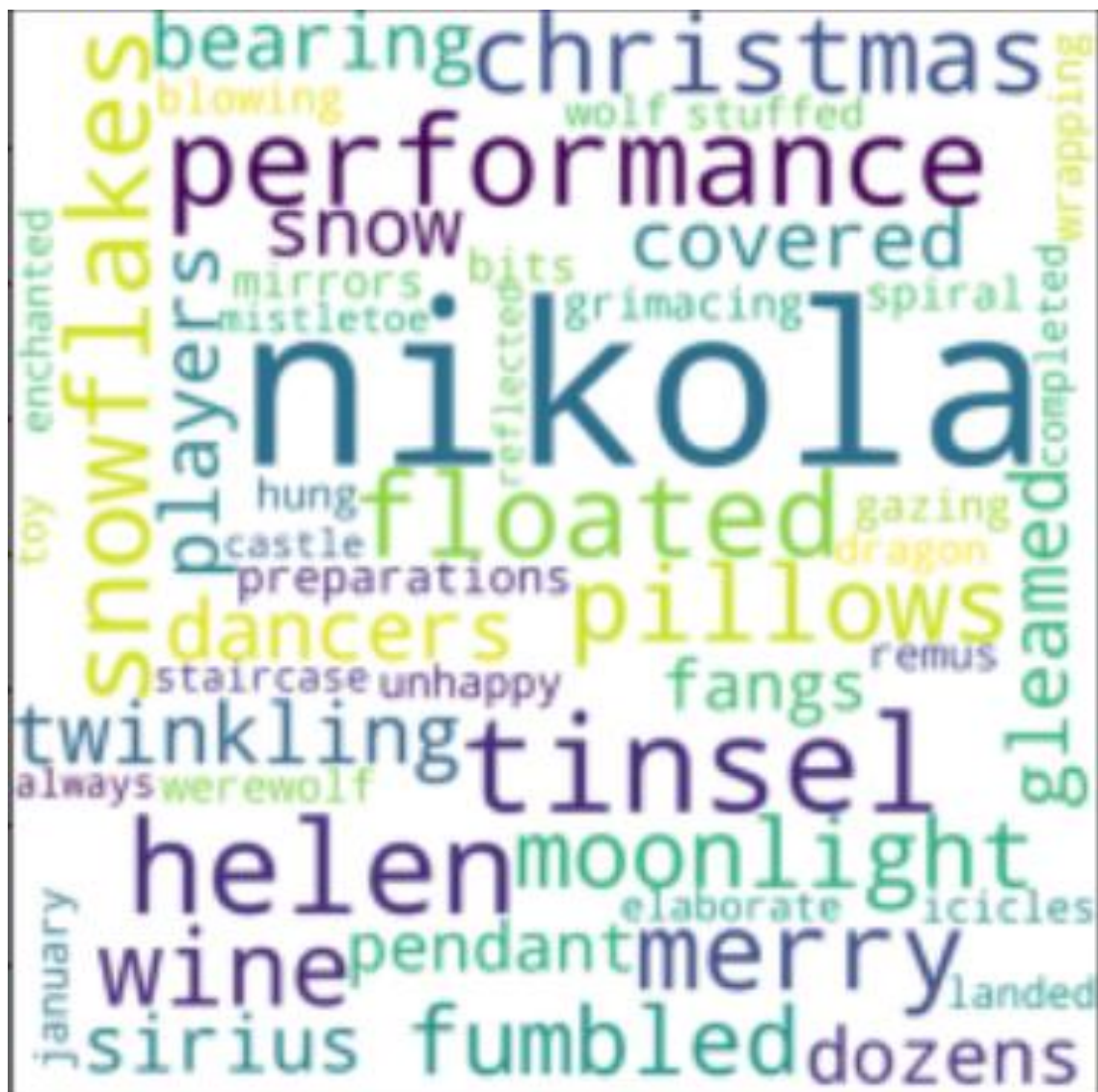


Chart C. Pre-2019 Topic Modelling Results

The pre-2019 topic modelling results for the 250 fanfics selected are presented as word cloud charts where the bigger and bolder words are ones that feature most often in these stories. Chart A has an abundance of language associated with sexual acts. Words like “prostate”, “lube”, and “hole” amongst others appear in a large font indexing the frequency with which they are mentioned in these fanfics. Considering our pre-2019 outlier fanfiction with the highest positive score, “The Protection of Joukriger” which detailed several sexual and romantic relationships between its characters, this is not an altogether surprising result. Chart B alludes to fanfiction’s potential for utilizing textual gaps, unwritten scenes—in short, all the possibilities and storylines a text suggests—and concretizing them in writing to create stories that fit in different categories than the text they were based on. It refers to fanfiction’s ability to merge texts from different genres into one unit or story i.e., crossover fiction. Words like “venom”, “peter”, “web”, and “slinger” featured on this chart refer to the Marvel Comics’ superhero character Spider-Man. Adding a superhero character from the comic book genre to a young adult fantasy series such as *Harry Potter* showcases fanfiction’s capacity to tell unique stories that can include themes and tropes from across a variety of genres. Chart C meanwhile includes words like “snowflakes”, “twinkling”, “tinsel”, and “christmas” in a bold font, referencing Christmas celebrations quite overtly. These words invoke a friendly and playful setting where the characters presumably relax and enjoy a sense of kinship while in each other’s company. This holiday is also a prominent feature of Rowling’s original novels, often as the calm prelude to an action filled climax where Harry faces off against the villainous Voldemort.

These results, when read in conjunction with the pre-2019 sentiment analysis results, show that the *Harry Potter* fandom before Rowling’s transphobic comments created stories that explored character relationships—even those concerning sexual intimacy—in great depth, even bringing in figures from different textual universes and mediums to see how the

Harry Potter characters' interaction with them changes the original story's plot and narrative structure. These fanfics are heavily character-focused with an emphasis on character reactions and emotions to events based on Rowling's book series. The topic modelling results imply a connection between particular plot scenarios and certain characters. For example, Chart A has Harry's and Draco's names in a bold font alongside words like "moaned", "arse", and "lips" that connote sexual acts. The co-occurrence of these words signify that based on the 250 fanfics analysed, Harry and Draco are often written as being sexually involved with one another. Chart A's results indicate that these two characters are usually featured in scenes that show them as romantically involved to some extent and that many stories explore this relationship no matter the differences in plot between multiple fanfics. Similarly, Chart B has the Marvel superhero Spider-Man and the antihero figure Venom along with Harry's and Draco's names and words such as "bloodied", "wounds", and "claws" that signal an adventurous or action-filled encounter between these characters. Here the results index that interactions amongst *Harry Potter* and Marvel Comics' characters are likely to feature plotlines involving action and adventure. What is important to note, however, is that these fanfics appear less driven by the impulse to experiment with different genre forms, for example, than to see how different characters would react in particular situations. The emphasis then would be on the character more than the plotline. I would argue then that these fanfics view characters "not as the central *person* whose story the literary text elaborates, but rather as a central device that acts as glue for the text itself, 'a sort of living support for the text's different motifs.'" (Woloch 15). *Harry Potter* characters therefore act as the glue uniting the various, divergent storylines detailed in fanfiction that allow fans to rewrite Rowling's textual universe but still have it recognized as based on it, even if only tangentially. Playing with these characters enables fan writers and readers to produce new plots and trends as seen in the topic modelling charts.

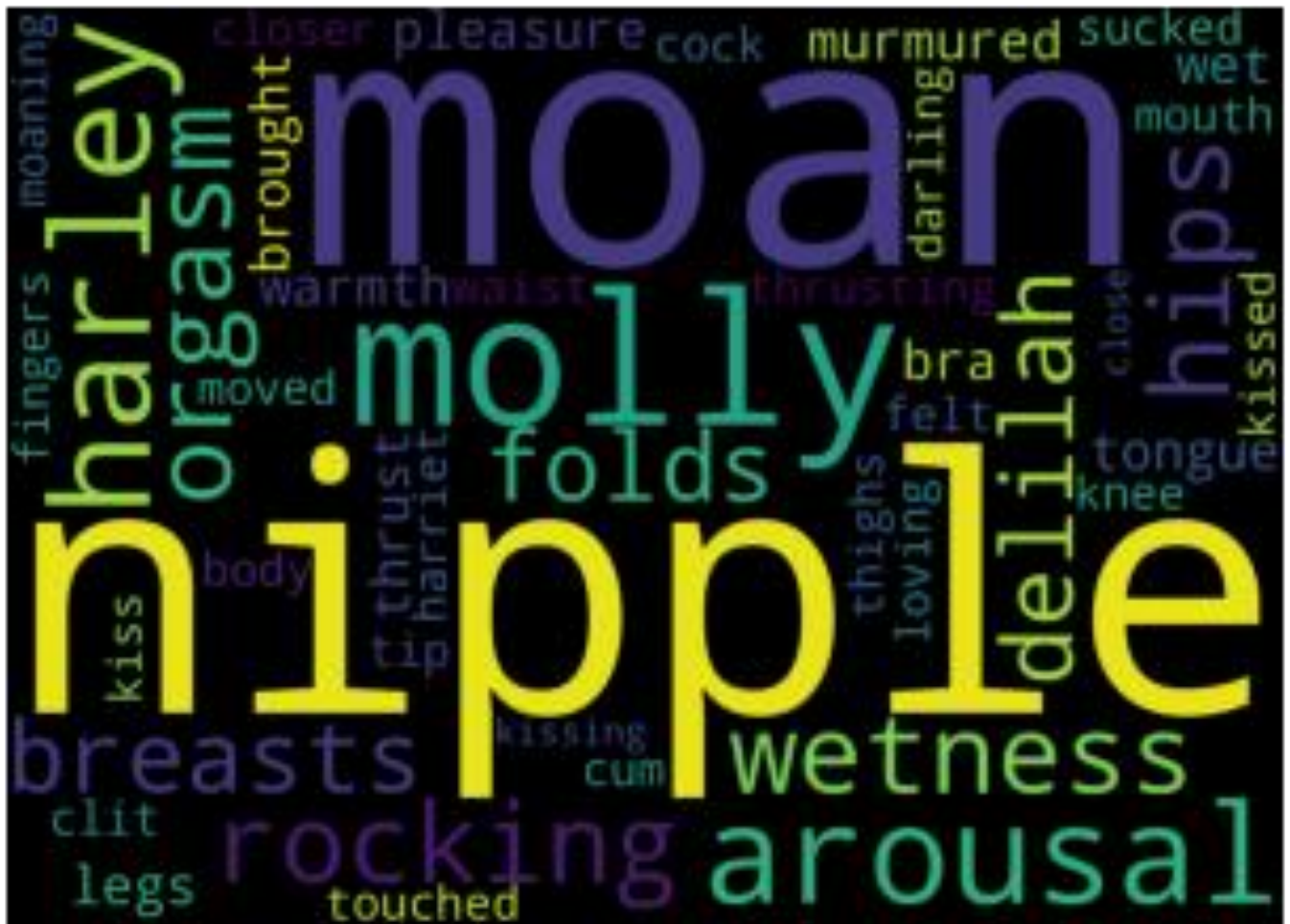


Chart E. Post-2019 Topic Modelling Results

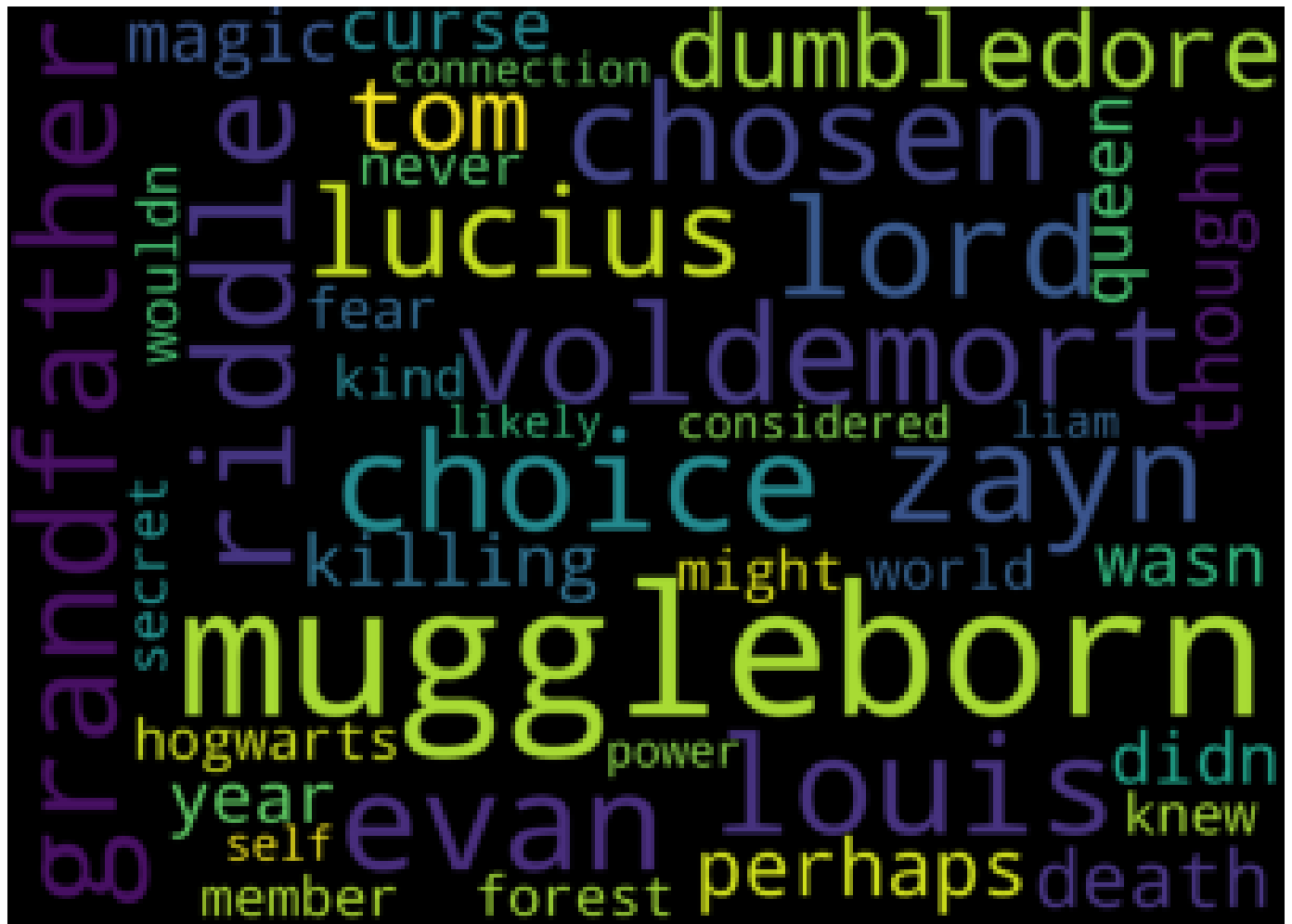


Chart F. Post-2019 Topic Modelling Results

The post-2019 topic modelling results for the 250 fanfics written after Rowling's transphobic tweets are not markedly different from the pre-2019 results. Chart D shows names like "luna" and "malfoy" alongside the words "gizmoduck" and "fenton"—the latter referring both to the Disney cartoon character Fenton Crackshell, superhero alias Gizmoduck, from the TV show *DuckTales* and the ghost-hunting hero Danny Fenton from the cartoon series *Danny Phantom*. Interestingly, this chart also features words like "pronouns" and "bisexual", though in a smaller and less bold font, indexing the presence of transgender characters. These words' appearance here indicates that the addition of transgender individuals to the *Harry Potter* universe prompts fan writers to include discussions of their characters' sexualities and their preferred pronoun use as part of the story arc. Their presence signifies that these words are used often enough in the 250 fanfics to feature in the results; however, the smaller font implies that their usage is not frequent enough to conclusively say that the addition of transgender characters significantly alters the plotlines or trends of stories produced post-2019.

Charts E and F continue the trends seen previously in Charts A and B. Chart E features mostly words with heavy sexual connotations such as "nipple", "orgasm", and "arousal"—very similar to the results seen in Chart A which had words like "prostate", "arse", and "hole". Chart E, though, seems to focus more on female pleasure as compared to Chart A as it includes character names "molly" and "delilah" and words such as "breasts", "clit", and "bra". Chart A, on the other hand, features male character names "draco" and "harry" alongside the words "chest", "prostate", and "penis". There hence appears to be a correlation between same sex characters and sexual acts in both Charts A and E, meaning that the fanfics produced pre- and post-2019 include scenes with characters being sexually intimate with one another, particularly members of their own gender. In the case of Charts F and B, the results allude to more adventurous situations, with Chart F including words like

“death”, “killing”, and “magic”. This chart also features antagonist character names such as “lucius” and “voldemort” alongside names of members from the popular English-Irish boy band One Direction: “zayn”, “liam”, and “louis”. The co-occurrence of these words implies the existence of crossover fiction populated with characters from real life situations and their interactions with characters from Rowling’s wizarding world. The presence of antagonistic characters and words like “killing” and “magic” index climactic, action-filled events which can include real life people i.e., “zayn”, “liam”, and “louis”. Chart B similarly has elements of crossover fiction with the inclusion of the comic book hero Spider-Man and words like “bloodied” and “claws” alluding to adventurous situations. Charts F and B consequently do not differ much in terms of the plotlines or trends of the stories they are representing.; both pre- and post-2019 fanfics thus share many similar elements according to these charts.

V. Conclusion

Analysing these post-2019 topic modelling results along with the sentiment analysis ones shows that these fanfics’ political function takes on a different shape than we would expect. These stories are not setting out to actively combat Rowling’s transphobia by writing about the injustices suffered by transgender people or the harsh conditions of their lived realities. In fact, trends seen in the topic modelling charts remain stable even after the addition of trans characters as topics concerning sexual intimacy, crossover fiction, and adventure writing feature heavily in both pre- and post-2019 results. Only Chart D alludes to the impact of transgender individuals on the writing of these stories with the words: “pronouns” and “bisexual”. These words, however, feature in a smaller, less noticeable font, indicating that they do not occur as frequently within these fanfics as the other bolder words which refer to trends already seen in the pre-2019 results. Their presence though does index that there is a discussion around gender norms and sexuality within these stories, which is how I argue fanfiction showcases its progressivism. These 250 fanfics give narrative space to

trans characters, making their lives and experiences more visible. Fan writers almost seamlessly incorporate trans characters into the textual universe of a reportedly transphobic author, showcasing how easy it is to normalize the experiences of transgender individuals and allow them to occupy space without always calling attention to their differences. By actively not excluding and marginalizing transgender people in their stories, these fan writers show how trans people are allowed to occupy space in any textual universe they might find themselves in. Their lives and experiences can easily fit into the plotline without upsetting the story's flow. These fanfics show how simple it is to make stories more inclusive and diverse without changing everything about their textual universes.

Chapter Two: Racebending and the Fan Community

Fanfiction is still widely considered a merely “appropriative” or “derivative” writing practice despite the genre’s interpretive and experimental potential (Derecho 63). The digital revolution and the advent of the internet, though, has started to shift this negative perceptive of fanfiction to a more positive light. As fanfiction websites like *Archive of Our Own*, *Fanfiction.net*, and *Wattpad* become more visible, boasting fan stories in the thousands, fanfiction has come to be seen less as a secret, distasteful practice and more as a transformative, progressive medium in its own right—a view that has been strengthened by *Archive of Our Own* winning the Hugo Award for Best Related Work in 2019. This post-internet age proliferation of fanfiction though has had the unintended consequence of strengthening the creative hold traditionally published authors have over fan writers and texts. Where previously, fanfiction was hailed as a subversive (though amateur) writing practice disrupting conventional literary readings, now it can be seen as—at least in some cases—upholding and maintaining the same social hierarchies and values as the original text. J.K. Rowling’s 2016 play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* serves as a good example of this.

I. *Cursed Child* and the ‘Black Hermione’ Debate

Harry Potter and the Cursed Child (2016) is an original story by J.K. Rowling, John Tiffany, and Jack Thorne adapted into a stage play format with four acts. Its script was the most pre-ordered book of 2016 in both the US and UK, showcasing the fans’ eagerness to re-enter *Harry Potter*’s wizarding world (Cooper). This play is set nineteen years after the end of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007) and ostensibly is about Albus Severus Potter, Harry Potter’s second son, his strained relationship with his famous father, and his friendship with Scorpius Malfoy—Draco Malfoy’s son. Important plot elements in the play include time travel, alternate universes, and a romance between Voldemort and Bellatrix

leading to the birth of their daughter Delphi. *Cursed Child* achieved critical acclaim for its theatrical set-up and actor performances, “should be labelled a magic show, as the tricks come thick and fast...moments of wonder are plenty” (Shepherd) and “Anthony Boyle as a wonderfully quirky Scorpius and Sam Clemmett as the Oedipal Albus carry the bulk of the story” (Billington). However, it was the casting of Noma Dumezweni, a black woman, as Hermione Granger that drew most of the media attention even before the first performance. When Dumezweni was cast to play the character previously portrayed by a white woman, Emma Watson, on stage, debate erupted on social media over Hermione’s race. The *Harry Potter* fandom was divided over this casting choice, with fans regarding the decision with both enthusiasm and disappointment. For example, twitter users @jellie_bee and @TheCosby applauded this casting decision noting: “Political or NOT, racial diversity should be employed constantly. Hermione has not changed in my eyes. She is strong and amazing” and “Great authors make characters in which people can see themselves in & see themselves as...Hermione is one of these such characters”. Fans like @iSmashFizzle, meanwhile, expressed their excitement in all capitalized letters: “THEY CAST A BLACK HERMIONE???? *BURSTS INTO BLACK GIRL MAGIC TEARS*” (qtd. in Peterson-Reed 5). Conversely, less enthusiastic responses included comments such as, “i’m offended by the casting of #CURSEDCHILD hermione is a white character. we may not make poc characters white so white should not be poc” (qtd. in Peterson-Reed 5-6). Others like @DonEsQue seemed to think that this was affirmative action taken a step too far, “Black Hermione? Why? Then fill the quota with Ronald Khan and make Harry Potter brown Indie”. Similar sentiments were echoed by fans like Mr. Eaton, “And so, another author has fallen. And you were a good one too. Now you've become just another sellout”.

Rowling in December 2015 entered this media frenzy over her character’s skin colour by tweeting: “Canon: brown eyes, frizzy hair and very clever. White skin was never

specified. Rowling loves black Hermione”. Rowling’s comment though ignored the absence of any racial markers of Hermione’s identity in her novels and the fact that all media adaptations of her works pre-2015 defaulted the character’s race to white. Rowling may love a black Hermione but none of the movie adaptations or book covers evidence that as the material conditions that make race a social category are overlooked. Despite these limitations, however, Rowling’s staunch support of a black Hermione and Dumezweni’s subsequent performances resulted in the number of fanfics on *Archive of Our Own* featuring a black Hermione Granger to explode, from 15 pre-casting announcement to 944 after the author’s twitter post. Rowling’s approval increased the number of fanfictions exponentially, calling into question fanfiction’s transformative abilities as fan writers aligned their stories with the author’s reimagination of Hermione—or in fanspeak, Rowling’s “racebending” of her.

This chapter will to that end interrogate six fanfics written before Dumezweni’s casting announcement that were marked with the tag “Black Hermione Granger” and compare them with 250 stories with a black Hermione uploaded after Rowling’s 2015 tweet on *Archive of Our Own* to see whether new narratives of race emerge in stories uploaded before and after the author’s explicit permission to racebend her character. Due to the smaller data set of the pre-tweet fanfics, they will be close read, while sentiment analysis and topic modelling will be employed on the larger post-2015 data set to understand the latent tone and themes of those texts. This chapter will show how both pre- and post-tweet fanfics do not greatly differ in terms of the themes discussed. Additionally, this chapter will explore how fanfics that racebend Hermione are largely harmonious with Rowling’s works (in that they reiterate, rather than revise, the narrative and thematic issues of the original novels) and how the pre-tweet fanfics are as aligned with Rowling’s ethical vision as the post-2015 stories.

II. Literalizing Rowling’s Allegories of Discrimination in Pre-tweet Fanfics

“Cause She’s a 90’s Woman” published in November 2015 is of the six pre-tweet

fanfictions featuring a black Hermione Granger. Written under the fan pseudonym Alsnorm, this story is about Hermione's efforts to cure lycanthropy—a magical disease in Rowling's wizarding world where a person upon the rising of the full moon would transform into a deadly and uncontrollable wolf. This fanfic unfolds over the course of the last five *Harry Potter* novels and chronicles Hermione's attempts to understand the root cause of the disease through both the scientific method and the wizarding skill of potion brewing, the latter of which is discussed in Rowling's original works. Consisting of two chapters only, this fanfic draws parallels between the prejudice faced by people in the magical community infected by lycanthropy and Hermione herself as a black muggle-born witch (that is a child born to non-magical parents) trying to navigate a world that sees her as an outsider both because of her magical lineage and skin colour.

Alsnorm begins "Cause She's a 90's Woman" with the note: "Hermione is and forever shall be a woman of colour for me. I have read many arguments for this and I think it it beautiful and wonderful" (chap. 1). Hermione's racebending is a focal point of this story because her motivations for curing lycanthropy—a disease no one before her has been able to meaningfully counteract—stem from her own experiences as a marginalized individual in both the wizarding and muggle worlds she inhabits, "The young witch knew a little bit about what it meant to be seen for something you weren't based on arbitrarily conditions. The magical world saw her as less for being a muggle born. The muggle world saw people like her dad as less for being black and they saw her as even less for being a woman of colour" ("Cause She's a 90's Woman" chap. 1). This fanfic, consequently, focuses on rewriting Hermione's ethnic identity to show how her sensitivity to issues concerning prejudice and discrimination inform her efforts to cure this disease. Considering that she works diligently on finding a cure in the midst of helping Harry defeat Voldemort, her commitment to this research goes beyond academic curiosity or a general notion of doing good to something

more personal, “For all these interviews I’m always asked why I wanted to do it... But I think I have a better answer for you today. I know what prejudice looks like. I know what it is to be looked at and be seen for the colour of my skin, for my gender, or for my blood status” (“Cause She’s a 90’s Woman” chap. 2). This fanfic thus racebends Hermione to emphasize the abilities and contributions of people of colour to make the world a better place. It also literalizes discriminatory allegories of “half-breeds” and blood purity prejudices in the original novels to anti-Black racism. By drawing parallels between instances of magical discrimination and racialized prejudice, this story applies these concepts to real-world social situations.

Moreover, since this fanfic was uploaded before Rowling herself racebent Hermione for the *Cursed Child*, Alsnorm’s work takes on a transformative quality as it takes narrative space from a white character to give to an ethnicized one, showcasing the positive impact characters of colour can have on the *Harry Potter* textual universe. Alsnorm’s Hermione is the same as Rowling’s both intellectually and in terms of magical ability, but it is her racial identity and her awareness of it that makes her go seek a cure for lycanthropy. Hermione being black makes all the positive difference in this story and can be read as a defense for racebending this implicitly white character.

“A Bunch of Maps and Mishaps” uploaded on *Archive of Our Own* in October 2015 by comixandco is another fanfic that racebends Hermione as black. Set in an alternate universe where *Harry Potter* characters sail the seven seas as either pirates or merchants, this WIP fanfic features Hermione as captain of the pirate ship S.P.E.W., i.e. “The Ship Purposed for the Exploration of Water” (“A Bunch of Maps and Mishaps” chap. 5). Ostensibly the story is about how Lucius Malfoy sends his son Draco aboard his merchant ship, Endeavor, after realizing how spoiled and luxury-loving his child has become. The Endeavor though is boarded by Hermione’s pirate crew and Draco soon becomes embroiled in a war to defeat the

Dark Pirate Lord Voldemort.

“A Bunch of Maps and Mishaps” is tagged on AO3 as containing “Period-Typical Racism” since the story’s setting is the 1700s. Racism is coded in terms of class divisions and power politics as the first overtly discriminatory exchange occurs between Lucius, the wealthy white employer, and Blaise, his darker skinned servant,

My family deserves this lifestyle, I have worked hard for everything we have, and you can tell your father that the Malfoy family is twice as pure as his family could ever hope to be. I bet your heart is as pure as the filthy colour of your skin. You’re lucky I gave you this job, that Draco needs somebody to keep him company and look out for him. Though I suppose a dog could look after him just as well. Even the most diseased dog would probably be cleaner than you anyway, slave. (“A Bunch of Maps and Mishaps” chap. 4)

Lucius Malfoy’s blood purity prejudice against muggle-born witches and wizards in Rowling’s novels is literalized here as racist tendencies towards darker skinned individuals. Where before Lucius was associated with Voldemort and his contempt for muggle-born magic wielders, this fanfic converts his discriminatory politics to white supremacist ideology. Lucius insults Blaise solely on the basis of his ethnic identity and feels no remorse for it, “Every word that left Lucius’s mouth was doing wonders for his temper...this experience had been very therapeutic” (“A Bunch of Maps and Mishaps” chap. 4). As the one in power, Lucius feels entitled to express his prejudiced views and Blaise is helpless to do anything about it.

Skin colour is a constant refrain in this fanfic, especially in the context of lighter skinned people getting sun burns being outside or working aboard ships. Hermione, whose physical description includes: “Brown hair like an explosion, brown skin only a shade lighter than Blaise’s, beaver teeth, and golden-brown eyes” notes how her crew had to teach Colin, a white character, to avoid sunburns when she first meets Draco and sees his blistering and red

skin (“A Bunch of Maps and Mishaps” chap. 4). The added sun protection needed by white characters at sea tips the balance of power towards darker skinned characters who are shown more suited to this life, “could you take Mr. Malfoy down below and fix his skin problem? Then bring him back up to my quarters, we’re going to have to have a little talk.’ Hermione ordered, before spinning on her heels and leaving” (“A Bunch of Maps and Mishaps” chap. 5). Thus, even though this story quite explicitly mentions racism experienced by ethnic others, at sea such behaviors are disrupted since power is held not by white characters but ethnicized ones. Consequently, Hermione as a black woman does not experience racism as she is mostly at sea or involved in other pirate activities like treasure hunting and as captain of her own ship she is in a position of power. This fanfic while racebending Hermione manipulates her circumstances to avoid her facing racial prejudice. Therefore, though this story is very aware of the discrimination faced by darker skinned people, Hermione and any other ethnicized character aboard her ship manages to escape such prejudice.

“Harry Potter and the Trouble With Neurotypicals” by Fayanora is a seven chapter fanfic published in May 2015 that also rewrites Hermione as black. This fanfic revises the text of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* to make existing main characters more diverse and adds transgender and Indian original characters. Hermione and Harry are coded as black, with the latter also described as having autism. These changes to Harry’s character alter the progression of events in the original text as Harry is now portrayed as a quiet, studious boy much more interested in intellectual pursuits than sports and outdoor adventures which overstimulate him: “The noise of all the screaming and booing, and the press of the flesh of all those people stuffed into such a small area, conspired to give him a headache so bad that taking twice the usual dose of headache potion was barely helping” (“Harry Potter and the Trouble With Neurotypicals” chap. 6). It is Harry’s academic curiosity instead of his impulsive, adventure-seeking nature (like in the original text) that ultimately leads to his

confrontation with Voldemort at the end of this fanfic. This shift in Harry's character means that Hermione is no longer his foil; they are both too similar. While this Hermione's characterization does not differ much from Rowling's—except for the skin colour—Harry in this fanfic undergoes a significant personality shift. Thus, Fayanora's Harry and Hermione both love reading books and are staid and calm preferring to think things through before rushing into them headlong. These similarities take narrative attention away from Hermione as the protagonist is already capable of everything she is. As such, Hermione's contributions to the fanfic's plotline are brief and rarely valuable.

Hermione's ethnic identity, despite there being several overt descriptions of her physical features throughout the story, does not have any significant impact on the fanfic's storyline. This is because Hermione, even as one of the main characters, is overshadowed by Harry due to their similar personalities. Moreover, with the addition of original characters, scenes previously featuring Hermione replace her with new characters, such as when Hermione serves detention along with Harry and Ron in the Forbidden Forest and finds puddles of unicorn blood. Excising Hermione from such story events leaves little space to explore her character fully, therefore her ethnic identity does not come into play. We do not see how she is informed by her lived experiences as a person of colour. Racebending her seems to be to give Harry, who is also black, a more diverse group of friends than in the original text. It is Harry instead whose racebending shapes his decisions and motivations in this fanfic. His guardians, the Dursleys, are racist, and whip and starve him for both the crime of being a wizard and black,

But you're not normal, are you boy? Of course not. Ugly, no-good, worthless... just like your horrible father. Why your damned mother had to marry someone... someone like *him* ...Harry ignored this rant; it was as familiar to him as Vernon's belt was to his backside. It was unpopular to be openly racist, so of course his uncle could not go

right out and say what was really on his mind; he had to talk around it. (“Harry Potter and the Trouble With Neurotypicals” chap. 1)

This abusive treatment by the Dursleys is one reason Fayanora’s Harry loves books as they offer a temporary escape from his racist relatives. The Dursleys’ racial prejudice prevents Harry from experiencing positive familial relationships which is why in this story he is eager for companionship and befriends other than Ron and Hermione the fan writer’s original characters as well. Thus, Harry’s racebending directly influences the fanfic’s events. Fleshing out these experiences for Harry, however, means that Hermione’s racebending is given less space. Therefore, “Harry Potter and the Trouble With Neurotypicals” is transformative for the way it deals with Harry’s character alone; other important characters, including Hermione, are not given the same narrative attention.

III. Race as a Background Feature in Pre-Tweet Fanfics

“Quest for Glory”, published on AO3 in November 2014 by thepixelatedfanficwriter, is another fanfic that racebends Hermione as black pre-Rowling’s tweet. Set sometime after the seventh *Harry Potter* novel, this story features Hermione in a romantic relationship with other characters from Rowling’s books, Ginny Weasley and Luna Lovegood, as she tries to decide whether to spend time with her loved ones or go on a quest to retrieve the wand of a 16th century English soothsayer as ordered by the Minister of Magic. This fanfic is ostensibly about female friendships and more importantly, healthy queer relationship dynamics, as Hermione eventually decides to break the rules and bring her lovers on the quest with her. Hermione and Ginny are both rewritten as women of colour in this story, with the latter being of Polynesian descent. Overt descriptions of race are few with Hermione “yanking a brown hand through her kinky hair, winding loose, fat chocolate coils of hair in between her fingers” and Ginny’s “brown cheeks” flushing red (“Quest for Glory”). Hermione’s ethnic identity does not seem to play a large role or inform any decisions she makes in the fanfic. Her and

Ginny's racebending instead appears as an attempt to open up Rowling's textual universe to allow characters of colour to be the story's heroes or protagonists. "Quest for Glory" presents Hermione as a black woman in charge of an important quest with well-defined love interests—as befitting any story's main character. Giving this kind of narrative attention to a black character instead of a white one showcases how this fanfic is transformative since the fan writer racebends Rowling's character before her tweet approving of a black Hermione Granger.

"Of Friendships and Letters and Late-Night Stargazing" by librarylexicon also rewrites Hermione as black. Posted on AO3 in September 2015, this epistolary fanfic takes place during the events of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, consisting of Hermione's letters to her parents describing her travels with Harry and Ron to find and destroy Voldemort's Horcruxes. This story is ostensibly about Hermione's relationship with her parents—whom she feels she neglected in favour of the wizarding world—and her friendship with Harry. The letters function almost as a sort of personal diary for Hermione since she never intends to post them and only writes them to feel closer to her parents whom she spelled to forget her for their own safety. Race plays a negligible role in this fanfic with the only mentions of it being: "tears glistening on her own still dark cheeks" and "*Mr Granger – tall, dark-skinned, kindly*" ("Of Friendships and Letters"). Racebending has no discernable impact on this fanfic's plot or the character's motivations; Hermione's letters do not reveal that her experiences as a person of colour inform any of the decisions she takes or her relationships with her friends. There is not much difference between librarylexicon's Hermione and Rowling's besides a change in skin colour despite the reader having more insight into Hermione's thought processes, due to the fanfic's epistolary style, which contrasts with the original author's work. In fact, Hermione's ethnic identity is easy to overlook in this story if not for *Archive of Our Own's* tagging system which lists this fanfic

as featuring a black Hermione Granger. Keeping in mind the “default whiteness of mass media productions” which allow for “color-blind interpretations of the source text, even within queer fan spaces that celebrate diversity and the subversive pleasure of queering a heteronormative space”, this explicit tagging of Hermione as black could be read as an attempt to diversify the *Harry Potter* fandom by removing this default whiteness (Pande and Moitra 4.4). By changing Hermione’s physical characterization from white to black—even if only in the most subtle of ways—“Of Friendships and Letters” challenges reader expectations of always encountering white protagonists. Moreover, considering this fanfic was posted before Rowling herself racebent Hermione, this attempt to interrupt a white reading of the main *Harry Potter* characters could be read as subtly transformative on part of the fan writer.

“Ivy” is another one of the pre-tweet fanfics featuring a racebent Hermione Granger uploaded in February 2015 through the orphan_account feature, indicating that the fan writer removed this fanfic from their personal account but left it up on AO3 to still be accessible for readers. This fanfic rewrites Hermione as black and autistic, with the story mostly taking place during the character’s fifth year at Hogwarts before briefly flashing forward ten years later at the very end. “Ivy” explores Hermione’s desires for the future—an ivy-covered, brick house to share with her partner and children—and how misunderstood she feels in her friendships with most people (including Harry and Ron) except for Ginny Weasley. This story focuses on Hermione’s burgeoning romantic feelings for Ginny, culminating in a final vignette of Ginny and a pregnant Hermione standing in front of the latter’s dream home in the future. Hermione’s race is only overtly referenced once in this short story, “At least her dark skin and the dark common room, lit only by the tip of her wand sticking out from where she’d tucked it behind her ear, hid the bags under her eyes that were becoming a regular fixture” (“Ivy”). “Ivy” not only racebends this main *Harry Potter* character but also rewrites her as neurodivergent, and the story is more attentive to the latter quality. Consequently,

while this fanfic showcases how Hermione finds it difficult to maintain eye contact and navigate social relationships—highlighted in passages like: “Hermione shifted uncomfortably. Eye contact was important, her parents always said, but that didn’t mean she had to enjoy it” and “She’d never been able to so much as carry a conversation with Parvati or Lavender until Ginny had come along and taught her the finer points of female socialization”—it does not give the same attention to how her ethnic identity might have shaped her experiences at Hogwarts. The character’s racial representation thus is sidelined and not fully explored in this story.

These six pre-tweet fanfics fall into two distinct categories: one in which the racebending is significant to the storyline and the second where Hermione’s changed race is barely noted and does little to change the narrative structure and trajectory of these stories. When the racebending does have thematic consequences for the fanfics, Rowling’s metaphors for racial discrimination (whether that be lycanthropy or prejudice faced by muggle-born magic wielders) are developed into literal examples of racism by fan writers. Lucius Malfoy’s vitriolic remarks to the darker skinned Blaise or the Dursleys’ abusive attitude towards a black Harry both serve as good examples. All these six fanfics, however, align with Rowling’s ethical vision by combating discrimination at least in some way, even if it is just allowing ethnicized characters to take up more narrative space than they did previously in the original novels. These stories also all have an introspective element whether it be about exploring different relationship dynamics or touching upon social issues. Bringing race into the mix thus makes these fanfics more attentive to characters’ thoughts and feelings.



Chart G. Post-Tweet Topic Modelling Results



Chart I. Post-Tweet Topic Modelling Results



Chart J. Post-Tweet Topic Modelling Results

IV. Topic Modelling and Sentiment Analysis Results for Post-Tweet Fanfics

Shifting focus to fanfics uploaded after Noma Dumezweni's casting announcement, it is apparent that the themes for these stories are not drastically different from those of the pre-tweeted ones. I ran a topic modelling algorithm for the 250 randomly selected fanfics marked with the tag "Black Hermione Granger" uploaded after Rowling tweeted in support of a black Hermione Granger to create word cloud charts and compare these pre- and post-tweet fanfics. Chart G includes words such as "think", "maybe", and "feeling" in a large and bold font indexing the frequency with which these words occur in the 250 stories. These words imply that fanfics with a racebent Hermione are more contemplative in tone and give more narrative space to characters' thoughts and feelings. Other words in Chart G like "feel", "hope", "pain", "grief", and "love" indicate as well that these stories' texts explore characters' emotions in some detail. These results are similar in topic to pre-tweet fanfics like "Of Friendships and Letters and Late-Night Stargazing" and "Ivy" which explored Hermione's friendship with Harry and her romantic relationship with Ginny respectively, paying particular attention to how different characters' navigated these social relationships and their thought processes.

Chart H features words such as "pain", "focus", "petrified", "basilisk", and "mirror" amongst others in bold font, referencing events from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* when a large snake hiding in the school's plumbing system attacked students at the behest of Voldemort's magic diary. This chart also includes words like "war", "forcing", "cruel", and "betrayal" alluding to other battles against Voldemort over the course of the seven novels. These words index that fanfics with a black Hermione have storylines involving action and adventure, implying that rewriting the character's race does not always change the story's genre and that characters still take part in various fights and battles. Considering "Harry Potter and the Trouble With Neurotypicals" rewrites Harry Potter's first

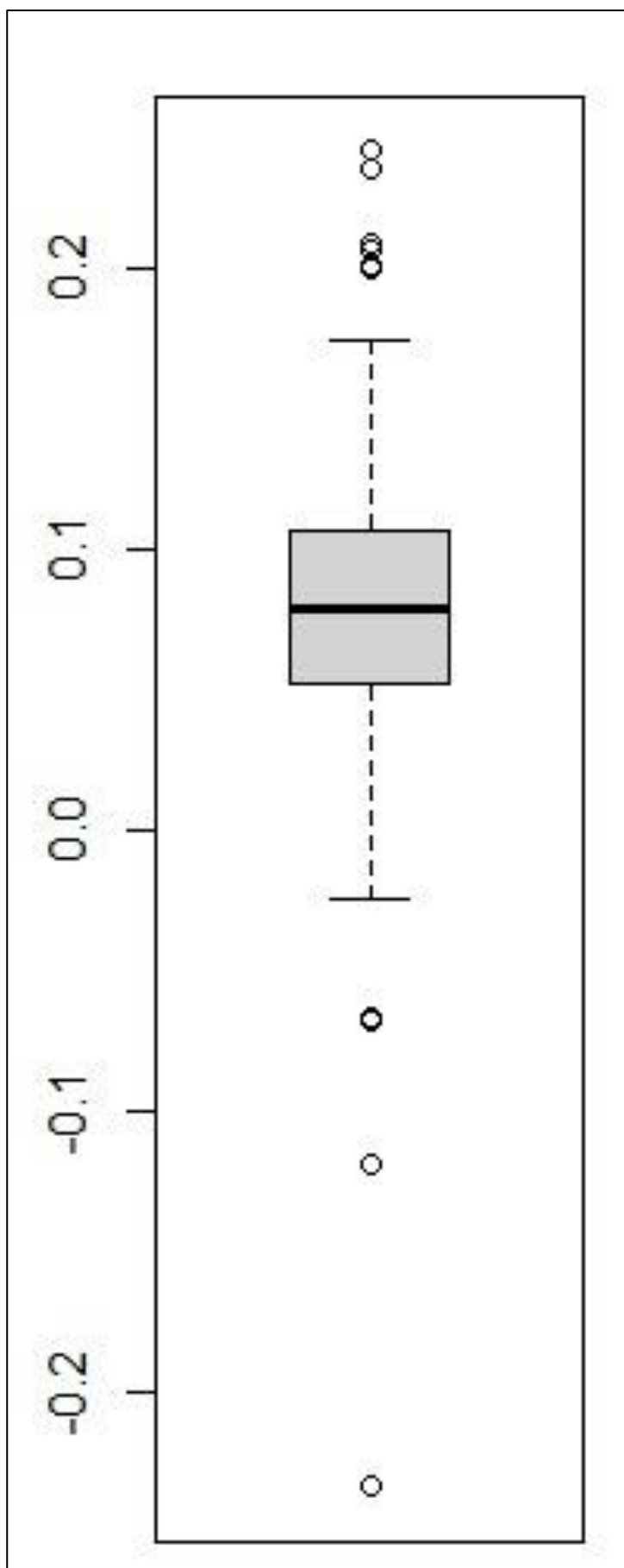
year adventures by racebending Hermione and Harry, plotlines involving such elements are not uncommon in pre-tweet fanfics either.

Chart I prominently displays words like “toad”, “compartment”, “sorted”, and “classes” referring to everyday life situations at the wizarding school Hogwarts. The word “toad” most likely shows up in relation to Neville Longbottom’s pet toad, Trevor, whose getting lost facilitated the first meeting between the main trio (Hermione, Ron, and Harry) on the Hogwarts Express train. The rest of the words, “compartment”, “sorted”, and “classes”, allude to the train compartment the trio usually sat in on their way to school, how they were sorted in their specific wizarding house (Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin), and their day-to-day school life respectively. Other words from this chart are: “platform”, “professor”, “password”, and “nervously”, indexing that this might be the characters first few years at Hogwarts as they are still learning to navigate Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ —the magical gateway which separates the muggle station from the wizarding one—along with familiarizing themselves with their teachers and the various security features of Hogwarts like passwords to enter shared common room spaces. Since these fanfics racebent Hermione, it makes sense for some of the fan writers to start rewriting Rowling’s text from the beginning to better fit Hermione and her experiences as a character of colour into the series’ events instead of just starting in medias res. Both “Cause She’s a 90’s Woman” and “Harry Potter and the Trouble With Neurotypicals” from the pre-tweet fanfics are examples of this as they cover events starting from the third and first *Harry Potter* novels respectively.

Additionally, Chart I features words linked with physical character descriptions such as: “haired”, “brown”, and “hair”. Considering racebent Hermione has been portrayed as having brown, kinky hair in the pre-tweet fanfics, these words on the chart most likely refer to her physical description in the 250 fanfics selected for topic modeling. The presence of these words on the chart indicates that they occur repeatedly throughout these stories, which

in turn suggests that fan writers do to some extent overtly signal Hermione's ethnic identity. Visibly coding this character as black then is an important if minor element of these 250 fanfics.

Chart J, meanwhile, significantly departs topic wise from previous ones and includes words like "clit", "cock", "orgasm", and "moan" in a large and bold font connotating sexual acts between characters in the *Harry Potter* universe. These results are not unusual and seem part and parcel of the fanfiction experience as readers and writers are allowed the space to explore themes of sexual intimacy that most traditionally published texts may shy away from. Charts A and E from Chapter One also featured words heavy with sexual implications like "prostate", "lube", and "hole" and "nipple", "orgasm", and "arousal" so this trend is not limited to just these 250 stories with a racebent Hermione Granger. Moreover, at least two of the pre-tweet fanfics not selected for close reading—"Bed Krums" and "A New Kind of Frustration"—are about Hermione pursuing sexual relationships with Victor Krum, a world-famous Quidditch player who is first introduced in the fourth book, and Ron Weasley. Racebending Hermione then does little to change this aspect of fan writing. As Lev Grossman explains, "[fan writing] isn't just about making porn out of things that weren't already porn. It's also about prosecuting fanfiction's larger project of breaking rules and boundaries and taboos of all kinds" (qtd. in Jamison xiii).



Graph Y. Sentiment Analysis Results for Post-Tweet Fanfictions

Sentiment analysis conducted on the 250 fanfics uploaded post Rowling's tweet show that about 95 % of these stories are positive in terms of the language used. On average the fanfics have a score of 0.79 which means that they are generally positive. There are also 6 outlier fanfics out of the 250 with a positive score and 3 with a negative one. These results are in line with the topic modelling ones indicating that racebending Hermione does not mean that the fanfics become largely negative in tone. Hermione's reality as a person of colour does not negatively inform the fanfics' texts as fan writers do not always appear to explore the discrimination or prejudice she may face due to her skin colour. The word cloud charts show no mention of any discriminatory language. Chart J includes the words "sneer" and "spat" but since these words are commonly associated with Severus Snape in the original novels they cannot be included as proof of prejudiced language against a black character. Thus, the majority of the 250 fanfics have a positive score as they mostly deal with subjects found in Rowling's own books.

V. Conclusion

Close reading the pre-tweet fanfics and analyzing the topic modeling and sentiment analysis results for the post-tweet ones shows that they are largely similar in terms of their themes and topics. The biggest difference that resulted from Rowling's explicit support for a black Hermione Granger was the sheer number of fanfics produced. On AO3 there are only 15 pre-tweet fanfics compared to 944 post-tweet ones with fan writers still adding to the latter number. Rowling's support for a black Hermione gave the fans in a way permission to racebend her character resulting in an exponential rise in volume of fanfiction produced. While the texts of the pre- and post-tweet fanfics do not differ dramatically or change after Rowling's tweet, they do indicate that having the author's official backing concerning a character's race increases their visibility in the fandom at large. More fan writers rewriting Hermione as black after Rowling's announcement might still be a transformative act in and of

itself as they are giving narrative space to a character of colour as opposed to a white one, but it becomes more commonplace or acceptable after Rowling's approval. The influence Rowling's approval has on the fandom challenges fanfiction's progressiveness as a medium if it requires the permission of a white author to racebend her character. Fan writers' capacity to be culturally autonomous and create unique, creative works becomes suspect if Rowling's support influences fan practices to this extent. Furthermore, it limits fanfiction's ability to subvert social norms and defy the restrictions of traditionally published texts. However, since the themes of the pre- and post-tweet fanfics are not very different it is possible to say that Rowling's support for a black Hermione Granger did not so much as give the fan writers permission to racebend her in their writings but made this option more visible to them, hence the increase in stories featuring a racebent Hermione.

Chapter Three: Fanfiction as a Cultural Archive

The results of my examination of various *Harry Potter* fanfics lead me to reflect that what fanfiction largely functions as is an archive of counter narratives. It collects transformative content based on fictional works that have made a large enough cultural impact to be stored in that archive in the first place. When fan writers play or experiment with the plotlines and characters of pre-existing texts, it indexes not only their positive or negative reception of those works as readers but also what they feel is missing from those texts and what they would like to read instead. Fan writers make up for this absence by experimenting with different genres and creating tropes or trends that fulfill their desire for what they want to read instead, such as homoerotic romances (referred to as slash fiction) or texts with people of colour as protagonists, which is called racebending. Lev Grossman, a fan writer turned published author, writes in TIME magazine about this ability of fanfiction to talk back to creators who hold the rights to stories the fans are fond of:

Fan fiction is what literature might look like if it were reinvented from scratch after a nuclear apocalypse by a band of brilliant pop-culture junkies trapped in a sealed bunker. They don't do it for money. That's not what it's about. The writers write it and put it up online just for the satisfaction. They're fans, but they're not silent, couchbound consumers of media. The culture talks to them, and they talk back to the culture in its own language.

Studies conducted on fandom culture have observed fans engaging with political issues by writing queer and feminist versions of their favourite fictional worlds (Lothian et al.; Penley). By situating their fictional heroes in the midst of real-world social issues, fans process the impact of these events through the lives and experiences of these characters, potentially transforming “the sphere of real-world politics from a dry, dull, remote, and abstract space into a universe as exciting, and as inviting of participation, as any fantastical

fictional realm—a sphere worthy of fandom” (De Kosnik 270). Reframing fanfiction writing as an archive of dominant cultural impressions (especially in regards to fanfics stored on *Archive of Our Own*) allows us to see how the proliferation of a certain type or genre of fan writing around a particular time often indexes people’s sentiments towards prevailing social issues. Just as fans are more likely to produce fanfiction in anticipation of the next novel in their favourite book series, they are spurred to greater action and participation by current events. For example, as discussed in Chapter One, after J.K. Rowling’s transphobic comments in 2019, *Harry Potter* fanfics with transgender characters on AO3 increased from 389 in pre-2019 to 2861 post-2019. Fanfiction thus acts as a gauge of sorts for people’s reactions towards current issues or events.

Fan fiction writers use “languages of ‘fantasy and spectacle,’” not “empiricism and argument” (De Kosnik, “Memory, Archive, and History” 282) to discuss prevalent social issues—a move which according to Stephen Duncombe has become “the lingua franca of our time” (Duncombe 9). Results from Chapter One and Two serve as evidence of this, as fan writers write transgender characters and a racebent Hermione Granger into the *Harry Potter* universe to normalize these characters’ existence and make their presence more visible. Rowling’s transphobic tweets in 2019 incited a greater number of stories with transgender characters populating the author’s wizarding world. Their inclusion though disrupts previously understood readings of the text and opens it up to new possibilities. Artifacts from the *Harry Potter* universe, such as boys and girls having magically separated dormitories, are reinterpreted to fit in these new characters, for example by letting Hogwarts give transgender students the choice to choose their dorm room based on their gender identity. Similarly, fanfics featuring a black Hermione Granger at times include racial discrimination along with the blood purity prejudice she usually faces. This capacity of fanfiction to displace original meanings and substitute new, unsuspected ones can be explained using Gilles Deleuze’s

concept of the “virtual” and “actual” where, “[t]he virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual. The virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual” (qtd. in Derecho 74). Essentially, the point Deleuze makes is that different possibilities or virtualities exist at the same time as the actualities. The virtual is the possible, it is what can happen or has the potential to happen at a given point in time. Meanwhile the actual is that which is already happening at that point in time. Hence, since both the virtual and the actual exist, they are real. Fanfiction allows these virtualities to become actualities, “Alternate universe stories, stories that pair different characters than are paired in canonical texts...stories that ignore large parts of the canon—all are examples of virtualities or potentialities within the originary texts becoming actualized thanks to fanfic authors” (Derecho 74).

While fan writers experiment with originary works, filling in textual gaps to their liking, they do so in universes with defined sets of rules and procedures. Pre-published texts operate according to their own internal logic, dependent on the worlds created by their authors. *Harry Potter*’s wizarding world, for example, has its own rules about magic and how it functions in the story. Fan writers playing in this universe’s sandbox then do not have to do the world building themselves; Rowling has already provided them the basic building blocks in terms of wizarding lore, law, and practices that constitute the *Harry Potter* universe. This frees up space for fan writers to focus, sometimes almost exclusively, on character relationships and emotions. This is not to say that there are no fanfics that do the world building themselves to supplement the author’s work, but to emphasize that having the basic features of a world mapped out, with character backstories, allows fan writers greater flexibility to experiment with them. Fan writers can delve into a character’s psyche and their emotions more deeply, simply because they do not need to start from scratch and explain the character’s origins or how they fit into the story’s world. With fanfiction, character motivations and feelings can be the main or only subject of a story because the original text

has already laid the groundwork and explained the rules of world to the reader. As such they often “shape and are shaped by capturing and celebrating daily emotional experiences” (Kelley 3). Hence, we have racebent Hermione fanfics exploring queer relationship dynamics like in “Quest for Glory” and “Ivy” where the character’s romantic relationships or exploration of these feelings are the main focus. These stories prioritize character emotions, in passages such as the following:

Hermione...exhaled sharply through her nostrils, hands on her hips.

‘What’s *that* supposed to mean? *Of course*, I have to consider you! I can’t...I can’t just leave my friends—my *girlfriends*—behind!’” (“Quest for Glory”)

“The more time she spent with Ginny, the more she suspected...but that was ridiculous. They were friends. And even though Hermione had never really had girlfriends before Ginny, she was sure it was perfectly normal to notice how pretty your friends were, how soft their hair was, how the light reflected off of it and made it glow gold” (“Ivy”).

Brit Kelley notes that in both “public and popular discourse, emotions are individual” (5). Yet fanfiction moves emotion beyond the personal realm and into the societal. Not only are these stories often personal passion projects for their fan writers but they also respond to contemporary social issues as part of a community—a fandom—that will read and react to them and produce more works to understand the impact of these social shifts. For instance, after a black actor was cast as Hermione Granger in J.K. Rowling’s play—a decision which followed soon after protests in Ferguson in 2014 and the increased visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement—the number of fanfics on AO3 featuring a racebent Hermione went from 15 in number to 944. Fans reacted to Rowling’s casting announcement and the prevailing social climate by producing more fanfics that featured a black Hermione.

Considering the very low number of fanfics before this, the social element of fanfiction becomes heightened. Indeed, as my topic modelling results demonstrate, even as these stories align with *Harry Potter's* adventure and fantasy genre, they are also contemplative and introspective in nature, often featuring words like “think”, “maybe”, “feel”, “love”, and “grief”. The emotional aspect of these fanfics then is both personal and social as they tell stories delving into characters’ feelings while being connected through a fandom experiencing social shifts. As Laura R. Micciche argues:

I use *emotion* as the key term, rather than *feeling* or *affect*, because it best evokes the potential to enact and construct, name and defile, become and undo—to perform meanings and to stand as a marker for meanings that get performed. These are rhetorical activities because they have to do with consequences and effects, interpretation and judgment, change and movement
(14)

Fanfics are shaped by these elements of emotion; they are brought into existence because of social change and movement and are a consequence of these shifts in the cultural climate. Fanfiction thus provides an archive for how people respond to and process contemporary political events emotionally. Whether they normalize the appearance of transgender characters in Rowling’s text or have a black main character, such stories collect societal emotions in an online, easily accessible archive (AO3) making them more relevant and immediate for their readers.

Fanfiction’s immediacy is maintained to a large extent by its online nature which allows continuous publication of new material. As noted in previous chapters, not all fanfics are complete, and many are labelled WIP (work in progress) by their fan writers. This gives fanfiction “an aesthetic of unfinish” (Lunenfeld 20). Though this term has not specifically been used in the context of fanfiction, it can be easily applied here. Peter Lunenfeld explains

this term using the words of novelist Don DeLillo, “There is a tendency of plots to move towards death...the idea of death is built into the nature of every plot...The tighter the plot of the story, the more likely it will come to death” (20). Thus, the implication lies that by “loosening the plot,” death is defied (Lunenfeld 20). Lunenfeld expounds upon this with the help of the Italian critic Carlo Levi,

If every straight line is the shortest distance between two fated and inevitable points, digressions will lengthen it; and if these digressions become so complex, so torturous, so rapid as to hide their own tracks, who knows—perhaps death may not find us, perhaps time will lose its way, and perhaps we ourselves can remain concealed in our shifting hiding places. (qtd. in Lunenfeld 20)

Fanfics embody this “aesthetic of unfinish” in the way they expand upon the source text and never let it die out or end by filling in its textual gaps, writing new scenes, “fleshing out the backstory behind characters, situations, and events”, changing the choices made by the characters and so on (Thomas 13). By doing this fan writers do not allow the story to come to a close; they loosen the plot and keep it meandering. To do so requires intellectual engagement on the part of these readers and writers as they constantly go back to the source text to find more material for its expansion. This intellectual engagement keeps these stories in circulation and helps maintain the immediacy of the social issues being discussed. For example, WIP fanfics featuring transgender characters help keep the debate around J.K. Rowling’s transphobic comments alive in the community by continuously exploiting textual gaps in the author’s work to add these trans characters to almost novel-length, serial fanfics. The point as such is not that these fanfics need a specific end but that even if they did end, unlike pre-published works bearing the legal stamp of their author’s name, that ending is not considered absolute and will be rewritten the next time a fan writer plays with an author’s original work. Thus, fanfics that add transgender characters to Rowling’s universe are writing

multiple divergent storylines for her work and in doing so keeping the issue relevant for the readers.

Online fanfics, additionally, have more freedom as their production is not in any way tied to monetary gains. Fan writers upload their stories on websites such as *Archive of Our Own* for free where other fans can comment on them, critiquing or applauding their efforts:

comments are interlaced with emoticons and a liberal sprinkling of exclamation marks...The message boards therefore provide us with invaluable insight into the emotional journey that the readers undergo and suggest that their engagement with the narrative entails much more than merely processing the words on the page, encompassing their interactions with the author and with each other as the discussions unfold. (Thomas 19)

This online environment allows fanfiction to be “far more than the writing and reading of stories” as both readers and writers engage in discourse about the source text, discussing backstories, ascribing motives to the actions of different characters, speculating about their future lives, etc. (Thomas 6). This leads to what Matt Hills calls hyperdiegesis “the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension” (137). Fan writers and readers flesh out the narrative universe of the source text, sometimes even making two separate works by different authors exist in the same space. For example, there are *Harry Potter* fanfiction crossovers with stories from Marvel Comics, which show up in the topic modelling results in Chart B of Chapter One, as words like “venom”, “peter”, “web”, and “slinger” clearly refer to the superhero character Spider-Man. Fanfiction’s genre crossing ability means readers must interact with these works beyond a mere superficial level to appreciate their nuances, allowing for a more intellectual kind of engagement. According to Jenkins, fans participate in a type of “collective

intelligence” where they engage in the “social process of acquiring knowledge—which is dynamic and participatory, continually testing and reaffirming the group’s social ties” as they discuss elements of the source text like plot, characters, and so on, making the work produced more meaningful for them as it comes about due to serious intellectual engagement on part of the fandom (*Convergence Culture* 54).

Since, fanfiction is produced and read for free with an in-built audience of fandom readers interested in creative expansions on an author’s original work, this medium is not necessarily limited by the same restrictions as the traditional publishing industry. Fanfiction does not have to appeal to a large audience to be profitable or fit into marketable categories like science fiction, fantasy, literary fiction, historical fiction, etc. Instead, fan writing can blend different genres together and meld seemingly incongruent story elements. A good example of this is *Harry Potter* fanfics including members “zayn”, “liam”, and “louis” from the popular English-Irish boy band One Direction, as evidenced by Chart F in Chapter One. Fanfiction is thus open to free experimentation as it is not for sale and never has to be. This, however, means that even in the larger fandom, particular kinds of stories will generate more interest than others as they appeal to more readers. For instance, one of the most popular post-2019 *Harry Potter* fanfics with a transgender character is called “Best Friend’s Brother” and features brothers Regulus and Sirius Black falling in love with each other’s best friends, James Potter and Remus Lupin respectively. This fanfic has 856682 hits on AO3, indicating the number of times it has been accessed. Dominant themes in this story are love, friendship, and physical intimacy—trends which have shown up in topic modelling charts for both Chapters One and Two. These themes index this story’s popularity amongst readers and showcase how certain fanfics have a wider readership. Therefore, even in a fandom as large as Rowling’s, all stories are not given the same attention. Every story occupies its own niche with its select readership. Audiences for fanfiction then are as diverse as the stories they

choose to read. They may belong to the same fandom but not necessarily enjoy the same kinds of works. This is why fan writing cannot be treated as a homogenous practice with clearly defined goals. Its production and readership are as variegated as the kinds of stories hosted on different fanfiction websites.

Fanfiction's lack of homogeneity challenges its espoused progressivism; as Kristen Warner argues, "I am troubled by the notion that fandom wholesale operates as Other—especially when considering the fact that many fans are part of dominant identity groups—White, cis-gendered, and heterosexual" (qtd. in Stanfill 305). Fan writing cannot wholly serve a political purpose simply because it contains a wide variety of content; one cannot reduce such large quantities of text to one, singular type or goal. What fanfiction does do, as previously mentioned, is serve as an archive of cultural impressions sorted through fandom tags. *Harry Potter* fanfics featuring transgender characters and a racebent Hermione Granger then are cultural impressions that leave a large enough impact due to the sheer number of stories that depict these kinds of characters. As of 2023, *Archive of Our Own* has more than 3000 *Harry Potter* fanfics with the tag "Trans Character" and 900 or so stories with the "Black Hermione Granger" tag. Fanfiction's transformative ability lies thus in the space it makes available to discuss social issues like transphobia and anti-Black racism by allowing fans to add marginalized characters to the stories and plotlines of pre-published works. These fanfics do not always delve deep into these characters' experiences as marginalized people—

Chapters One and Two in fact evidence how fanfics do not give narrative attention to the harsh, lived realities of transgender or black individuals—but create space for fan writers to talk about such characters and write them into existence. This medium gives writers the opportunity to make these issues visible and keep them in circulation for a niche but invested audience. Fanfiction's goal then would not be to bring about political or social awareness but to process contemporary issues for those fan readers and writers interested in exploring these

problems through fiction. No matter what shape that exploration takes, what matters more to the fandom is that these issues are visible and discussed amongst readers who care about them.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to explore the political dimension of fanfiction by examining the *Harry Potter* fanfic universe to see how this particular fan community responds to real life and contemporary social issues by writing them into stories based on J.K. Rowling's novels. This project highlights fanfiction's function as a cultural archive that stores fan reactions to social issues like transphobia and anti-Black racism.

Chapter One challenges common-sense consumptions that fanfics written after Rowling's transphobic comments are largely negative in tone and detail the harsh, lived realities of transgender people as a way of validating the sufferings experienced by this marginalized group. This chapter instead shows how fan writers write stories mostly positive in tone, even after Rowling's anti-trans rhetoric, in attempts to normalize the existence of transgender people and show them living lives free from prejudice.

Chapter Two shifts focus to how racebending in fanfiction allows fans to decentralize privileged points of view by giving narrative space to ethnic others. This chapter notes the influence Rowling has as an author on fan production as her tweet in support of a black Hermione Granger exponentially increased the number of fanfics racebending this character from 15 in number pre-tweet to 944 post-tweet. Chapter Three, meanwhile, constellates the findings of the previous two and explores how fanfiction as an online, not-for-profit writing practice allows fans to process contemporary political events emotionally by giving them the platform to discuss these issues in myriad ways.

While this project is limited by the fact that it only considers the *Harry Potter* fandom, future research into fanfiction's political and cultural role can evaluate fanfics across different fandoms to understand more holistically the way this medium creates space to discuss contemporary events. Looking ahead, studies on fanfiction can explore if these discussions lead to tangible, real world results such as policy changes to address transphobia

and anti-Black racism. Essentially, fanfiction's function as a cultural archive means that it can no longer be relegated to the margins as a frivolous writing practice. The opportunities it allows fans to process social issues emotionally means that now more than ever this medium deserves academic attention. This project has been one attempt in that direction.

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