Chapter 9

Re–Envisioning a Heroine's Journey:
Three Women in Fandom

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ABSTRACT

How are women rewriting myth as metaphors that fit the modern realities and circumstances of their lives? How and to what extent might sharing these stories in niche communities reinforce empowered ways of being in public life? This descriptive study follows the heroic journeys of self-discovery as experienced by three professionally successful women. Having found resonance with characters from popular stories that addressed inner questions of "who I might be in the world" and through participating as fans in niche online fandom communities, the women discovered self-empowerment, were able to act as models for and guides to others of the niche community, and were empowered to act with agency in their everyday lives and careers. Additionally, the women developed skills of writing and insights of storytelling; the stories they created re-ordered interpretations of how the world might be for future women.

INTRODUCTION

Writing one's intimate thoughts in diaries or journals has been a commonly recognized behavior of literate girls and women for centuries. Imagining new scenarios for popular stories of text and media, by envisioning oneself as protagonist of the tales, also is a common activity. Susanna Coleman (2010), for example, describes how from the age of eight, she "would watch a show and write or draw about it in [her] diary" (p. 95). Projecting one's emotional responses to real or imagined experiences into a narrative permits the reflective distance necessary to meaning making (Boyd, 2009). Behind closed doors, on pages of locked books, personal lives have been explored, feelings examined, relationships considered and

reconsidered, and the psyches and self-identities of thousands of girls and women have evolved (Schiwy, 1996).

The evolution of interest-based communities on the Internet permits a sheltered space where girls and women, who once secreted written expressions of their emotional lives on pages of locked diaries, might safely share these writings of hope, fear, and fantasy with others. Writing about real or imagined experience through the lens of a fictional character from a popular story permits an author privacy, since it is not her real persona but a fantasized self in the guise of a well-known and loved archetype that is shared. Thus, fan fiction writing, that is, writing that draws from characters of commercial narratives, permits authors to become full participants (Jenkins, 1992), interrupters (Coleman, 2010; Reynolds, 1998), and co-producers (DeBlase, 2003) of subjective texts. While anonymity protects the author from vulnerability and frees her to project thoughts and feelings into the world without exposing herself to public censure, it also iterates "the tale's concern is not useful information about the external world, but the inner processes taking place in an individual" (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 25).

As an art educator and researcher of adolescents and adults who participate in online fan communities where members share written and visual artworks inspired by media-conveyed popular stories, I am curious about the relationship between story manipulations that occur in the shelter of niche communities and public enactments of self that are presented in the everyday world[1].

I wonder about the extent to which texts that are selectively adored, appropriated, and rewritten by girl fans might be integrated into, inform, or otherwise contribute to self-efficacy in their adult professional careers. How might written or visual texts that are shared and social interactions that take place within niche fandom communities contribute to women's self-actualization of personal lives and positive agency[2] in their professional roles? In this chapter, I examine these issues through a descrip-

tive case study of three professionally successful women, Jade4813 (Jade), Catastrophia (Cata) and Sanalaya (Sana)[3], whose lives were connected by their shared fannish interests in popular narratives.

The writing and art making behaviors of these women will be explored as efforts of self and social meaning making. The characters and stories they are drawn to and the tales they invent present as mythic "images and narratives, metaphorical of the possibilities of human experience and fulfill-ment" (Campbell, 1993, p. 1-2) that are described by Campbell's agentic *monomyth* of the *Hero's Journey*. A conceptual model of how engagement with story-making, social interaction, and partici-patory behaviors within the niches of online fan communities might contribute to empowerment of these women proposes this development might follow the trajectory of a hero's journey through basic phases described by Campbell's four *functions* of myth. These phases also align with the four fundamental stages or *domains* from *Private Voice* to *Public Voice* conceived by Thurber and Zimmerman's (2002) feminist leadership model. Together the adapted Campbell and Thurber-Zimmerman models may reveal both how women develop empowered self-identities in their public careers and sense of self as skilled and respected artist-authors in their niche communities.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

During the last two decades, a large body of literature has grown in address of topics related to the participatory experiences and activities of adolescent girls and women fans of popular textual and media-conveyed stories. Particular attention has been paid to fan fiction writing and the creation of fanart[4] in online fan com-munities. Although fannish behaviors were critically observed by laypeople and academics throughout the 20th century (see Sullivan, 2013), intense academic interests in the appropriation of commercial works for private purposes, through

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