

A past that never was: historical poaching in *Game of Thrones* fans' Tumblr practices

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the textual and historical poaching practices by Tumblr fans of the novels *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the television adaptation *Game of Thrones*, a pseudo-historical fantasy series. Fans critique both the text (novels and TV show) and other fans' interpretations of the text, as well as parallel real-world history with the world and characters of the series. Tensions arise around the "historical accuracy" of the novels and show, along with the role that dominant narratives and cultural norms play in interpreting a past that never was through the lens of a real-world past. Fantasy and history intersect in layered ways and are used by fans to support a variety of textual points of view. Issues of violence, presentism, colonialism, gender, and "historical truths" are argued in relation to the ahistoricism or historicism of the novels/show.

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Michel de Certeau (1984) introduced the notion of reading as a form of textual poaching. That is, the reader is a trespasser on someone else's land in that the story is not his or hers, and the practice is

situated at the point where *social* stratification (class relationships) and *poetic* operations (the practitioner's construction of a text) intersect: a social hierarchization seeks to make the reader conform to the "information" distributed by an elite (or semi-elite); reading operations manipulate the reader by insinuating their inventiveness into the cracks of cultural orthodoxy. (p. 172)

Textual meaning is crafted somewhere between internal and external forces, how the collective (institutional) describes the content and an individual's own interpretive practices based on her or his personal background and biases. Certeau asserts that text "changes along with them [readers]; it is ordered in accord with codes of perception that it does not control" (p. 170). Henry Jenkins (1992) further expanded on textual poaching by tying it to the specific practices of media fans who appropriate, support, challenge, and/or reinterpret their favorite television show or novel through not only fan discussions, but the creation of new material such as fanfiction, fan-videos, and other amateur consumer–producer-driven works.

There has been a general trend toward understanding the audience as active participants in media culture rather than as passive receivers of information (Baym, 1999; Harris & Alexander, 1998; Jenkins, 1992, 2006; Kirby-Diaz, 2009; Sandvoss, 2005). Digital media

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can be a potentially democratizing tool, breaking down barriers between the artist and average fan, the professional and amateur, consumer and producer, the institution and individual, yet issues of equitable access and opportunity across different populations continue to be problematic (DeGennaro & Brown, 2009; Friemel, 2016; Jenkins, 2009; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014). Fan communities can also be stratified, with some fans' voices and perspectives heard – or privileged – over others (Bennett & Booth, 2016; Harris & Alexander, 1998; Larsen & Zubernis, 2011).

As such, Certeau's positioning of reading between social stratification and poetic operations should be redefined to reflect the complexities of the modern landscape, and that cultural orthodoxy is not determined by only class, but gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and other factors that are always in play. The *reading* of text is the result of tension between socialization into a cultural hegemony and how individual poetic operations interpret textual content based on one's status and experience within that hegemony. Textual poaching, particularly by fans, arises not only from their engagement with the dominant (or official) narratives of a media work, but from their understanding of (and subsequent embracing or challenging) the dominant narratives in popular culture more broadly.

Fan practices have become an increasingly widespread social activity. However, a question emerges as to whether previous descriptions of fan communities as spaces where non-dominant groups and populations could express themselves and resist norms (Harris & Alexander, 1998; Jenkins, 1992) apply to only *certain* groups and populations who still have a relatively high status in the cultural hegemony, or conversely, has fandom evolved and even been re-appropriated by the media elite to now reflect culturally dominant norms? The breakdown of barriers can work both ways.

Dominant narratives are dependent on who has power in a particular location and time to effectively produce and distribute content; what was or is dominant may not be so in the future. History as a discipline attempts to tackle this issue by contextualizing the actions and events of the past, teaching a mindset of approaching *narrative* through the lens of the time and culture from which it derives rather than from one's contemporary perspective and cultural norms; this remains a challenge for the average citizen, student, and society at large alike (Brooks, 2008; Endacott, 2014; Nilsen, 2016; Seixas, 1994; Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, & Duncan, 2007).

Yet stories about the past remain popular, as do pseudo-historical fantasies that are mashups of real-world historical elements and purely fictional content. History is *poached* like texts in popular culture and collective consciousness generally, from monuments and speeches to historical dramas and other forms (Lindley, 1998; Rees, 2003; Seixas, 2006; Wineburg, 1991; Wineburg et al., 2007). Understanding of the past is likewise situated between external and internal forces, between the dominant narratives of a cultural hegemony and the individual lens developed based on one's place within that hegemony.

This article explores both textual and historical poaching through fans' interpretive practices of content from the pseudo-historical fantasy novels *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the television adaptation *Game of Thrones*.

George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–present) is a best-selling fantasy series that takes place in a pseudo-medieval imaginary world. Five novels have been published so far that follow a huge cast of characters across two continents, Westeros and Essos. The primary storyline involves a political struggle for the Iron Throne of Westeros while the sinister, supernatural Others rise from the northernmost part of the

continent. Martin was inspired by the fantasy series *Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955), the historical War of the Roses (15th-century dynastic struggle for the English throne, which resulted in the rise of the Tudor dynasty in the late 15th and into the 16th centuries), Maurice Druon's historical novels *The Accursed Kings* (1955–1977) about the political struggles for the French throne in the 13th and 14th centuries, as well as additional inspirations in history and fantasy.¹ The television network HBO subsequently adapted the novels into a television show.

Historical and pseudo-historical works are fertile ground on which to expand upon conceptualizations of poaching. Though rooted in the study of evidence, the discipline of history involves a degree of imaginative work as historians must evaluate and interpret a range of sources in their reconstruction of a past they did not experience themselves (White, 1973). Imagination is needed in the attempt to piece together the “intentions and motivations of actors impelled by beliefs and values which may differ totally from anything the historian might himself honor” (White, 1982, p. 123), yet no matter the amassed evidence, the past remains unknowable in respects (Becker, 1931; Lowenthal, 1999; Schwebel, 2011), especially the innermost aspects of human lives (Cronon, 2013). Historical dramas have popular appeal because they offer “the fantasy of looking into the psyches of dead men,” a “scenes-behind-the-scenes” (Sturken, 1997, p. 73) reenactment of the past that audiences can experience. Yet this simulation can be a double-edged sword, for sometimes the “fantasy of history” (Sturken, 1997, p. 71) becomes genuine history for those who read or watch without the mindset that dramas are *products* crafted to espouse a specific message and point of view (Merkt & Sochatzy, 2015). No work can be separated from the era in which it was made (Davis, 2002; Rosenstone, 1995; Schwebel, 2011) or its audiences' contemporary aesthetic, narrative, and moral expectations of how the past (and narratives as a whole) should be presented (Seixas, 1994).

People are curious about the otherness of another time, yet historical works that are widely successful tend to provide a sense of the familiar, such as incorporating its *audience's* romantic, religious, sociopolitical, and other conventions into the narrative rather than reflecting the actual conventions and attitudes of the time in which the story takes place (Lindley, 1998; Rees, 2003). This familiarity can sometimes be equated with a work being seen as more realistic and accurate, with audiences accepting certain portrayals of the past more readily when it matches their preexisting notions and personal beliefs (Seixas, 1994). The “Middle Ages” as a historical drama seems to be especially plagued by ahistoricism in modern media (Lindley, 1998).

Pseudo-historical fantasies often serve as “a metaphor for the human condition – ripe with mythic structures, heroic cycles, and social and religious commentary” (Thomas, 2003, p. 60). Previous research has examined science fiction and fantasy stories' depiction of memory, technology, and historical representation in culture, such as in Novak's (2000) analysis of William Gibson's cyberpunk novels, Hoffman's (1968) work on Virginia Woolf and her use of “truth” in the historical fantasy *Orlando* (1928), or the ways in which time travel, immortality, and shape-shifting are a means to examine history, colonialism, and slavery (Govan, 1986; Robertson, 2010) in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980) and *Kindred* (1976).

George R.R. Martin takes a gritty, explicit approach to his pseudo-historical fantasy series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, in comparison to early/mid-20th-century fantasists such as

¹<http://www.assignmentx.com/2011/interview-game-of-thrones-creator-george-r-r-martin-on-the-future-of-the-franchise-part-2/> <http://entertainment.time.com/2011/04/18/grrm-interview-part-2-fantasy-and-history/> <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26824993>.

Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Lloyd Alexander. Sex, violence, corruption, the death of heroes, and moral grayness are among the traits of *A Song of Ice and Fire/Games of Thrones*. Martin himself has said that his work is “responding to him [Tolkien]²” in terms of worldview, and that as for the trope of Good versus Evil in fantasy:

... We all have good in us and we all have evil in us, and we may do a wonderful good act on Tuesday and a horrible, selfish, bad act on Wednesday ... there are very few pure paragons and there are very few orcs. (Bernstein, 2011)

Pseudo-historical fantasies such as *A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones* are often set in a “medieval” like world, and the interplay between fantasy and history that exists in these works offers the chance to study historical poaching as it applies to a past that never existed. Poaching occurs on multiple levels, from the author’s reading of history and fantasy traditions in the creation of a work, to the fans’ poaching of real-world history and popular culture narratives broadly as they make sense of the work. The internet allows for unique author–fan and fan–fan interactions, as well as the negotiation and co-construction of textual and authorial meaning and authority through online discussions (Wexelblat, 2002). Fans of *A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones* are passionate in their thoughts about the novels, TV show, other fans’ opinions, and even Martin himself, and their interactions with and views of Martin (and his with them in turn) have not been without controversy and polarity online.³ However, this paper focuses on fan–fan interactions, and how their historical poaching practices come into play as they discuss, interpret, and argue about *A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones*. Specifically, I ask the following questions:

RQ1) In what ways do fans of *A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones* conceptualize, interpret, and poach from real-world history in their interpretive practices of a past that never was?

RQ2) What, if any, role do cultural norms and awareness of dominant narratives play into fans’ poaching from history and fantasy as they make sense of the series?

Methods

Tumblr is a microblogging social network website⁴ founded in 2007. It was bought by Yahoo in 2013, though Verizon Communications acquired Yahoo – and thus Tumblr – in 2017. AOL was bought by Verizon in 2015; it, along with Yahoo, is now part of Verizon’s subsidiary, Oath Inc. Depending on personal interests, people search for, post, “like,” and reblog a variety of multimedia content on Tumblr. There are blogs devoted to famous

²<http://entertainment.time.com/2011/04/18/grmm-interview-part-2-fantasy-and-history/> .

³<http://www.vanityfair.com/online/oscars/2013/11/george-r-r-martin-the-winds-of-winter> http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/04/11/110411fa_fact_miller?currentPage=all <http://flavorwire.com/394460/10-things-george-r-r-martin-is-doing-instead-of-writing-the-next-game-of-thrones-book/> <http://journal.neilgaiman.com/2009/05/entitlement-issues.html> <http://scifisongs.blogspot.com/2009/08/sci-fi-song-20-george-rr-martin-is-not.html> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2013/01/10/why-i-wont-be-reading-george-r-r-martins-new-winds-of-winter-chapter/> <http://io9.com/5504626/best-song-ever-george-rr-martin-is-not-your-bitch>.

⁴<http://www.tumblr.com/about>.

quotes, a single actress, era, or artist. There are also blogs that are more eclectic in nature. Professional authors, fashion designers, TV shows, and magazines have official Tumblr accounts. A person can “follow” as many blogs that are of interest, or one can search for a topic, person, or image (e.g., “puppies” or “Marie Antoinette”) and see posts from across Tumblr connected to the subject. Like other social media platforms, Tumblr operates at the intersection between user-driven interests/practices and corporate ad-driven models/subtle messaging. Sources of revenue include sponsored posts that resemble normal Tumblr posts “except they are highly targeted” (Page, 2015 para 3) to users who follow blogs related to the advertised product, sponsored apps that are ads designed to lead users to the Apple or Google stores, and premium “themes” for users’ blogs that can be bought and sold online (Page, 2015).

A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones fandom is vast and encompassing of many sites and communities. In considering where and how to approach this study, I wanted to access data that was entirely self-generated by users and existed independent of the researcher’s interference. While interviews with fans – as example – would make for nice companion work, I wished to first see what people already say and do on the own without prompts and interference (Matthews, 2016). I also wanted to focus on a social media space where discussion occurs in an environment constructed between the institutional and individual, yet one that has so far been underutilized for this kind of research – a space that would allow me to explore a range of perspectives in a centralized manner that was not a traditional discussion forum. This led to my selection of the Tumblr blog ASOIAFuniversity.

ASOIAFuniversity is, in its own words, “A collection of metas (critical essays or analysis), gathered from across tumblr, about George R.R. Martin’s book series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (ASOIAF) and its television adaptation *Game of Thrones*.”⁵ ASOIAFuniversity was chosen because its topically focused on the novels/TV show, yet posts don’t come from a single blogger or source; instead the blog draws from across Tumblr and other websites (users can post links to wordpress blogs for instance, or upload videos), granting a sense of the different types of arguments that are occurring in this space. While there is a self-selected population limitation to this approach, arguably this is a problem of any site/community in research. It should also be noted that posts on this site tend to be longer than the average one would find in a discussion forum or on Facebook or Twitter. Additionally, Tumblr was conceptualized as a multimedia site, positioning itself between image-driven platforms like Instagram and Pinterest and more text-dominated blogs. Though Tumblr is in many ways image driven, the built-in affordance to use text heavily (as ASOIAFuniversity does) creates variance in terms of the ways posts appear, suiting individual needs.

Data collection and analysis

ASOIAFuniversity started in 2012. Every post tagged for *historical parallels* and *history* was collected from January 1, 2012, to November 15, 2017. This resulted in 165 separate posts, excluding overlap, with an average of 798.5 words per post. Collection by user-marked tags was a deliberate mechanism to filter the content that matched the study’s interests. It is an imperfect mechanism, for posts that may have qualified for the study

⁵<http://asoiafuniversity.tumblr.com/>.

might not have been tagged accordingly, nor was the labeling system one the researcher would have necessarily used. However, a critical aspect of this study, as previously mentioned, was to see what fans themselves do without any prescribed limits or instructions. Understanding the labeling habits of fans is important because it has become a key feature of how people communicate online, collect and archive their thoughts, and it provides insights into how they rather than the research interpret their acts (Weilenmann, Hillman, & Jungselius, 2013).

After an initial open coding and through an iterative process, all 165 posts were coded for the interpretive poaching practices fans used to make sense of *A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones*. These final codes were (1) *Critique of textual depictions/creator choices*, (2) *Critique of fan textual interpretations*, and (3) *Narrative parallels*. Additionally, the *Historical eras and topics* poached by fans were coded as their own categories.

Critique of textual depictions/creator choices

Text in this study is an umbrella for both *A Song of Ice and Fire* the novels and *Game of Thrones* the television show. The above code includes instances when fans analyzed, challenged, or justified depictions of characters, events, and thematic issues within the show or novels, along with how fans interpreted the perceived decisions made by the show's creators or George R.R. Martin as the author. A tension arose about whether the text's narrative was organic storytelling and/or "true" to history, versus deliberate creative acts by individuals with implicit or explicit connotations.

Below is an excerpt from a post about a line from season 2 of the television show:

"I decided not to waste my years planning dances and masquerades with the other noble ladies."

The line is meant to demonstrate that Talisa is not shallow . . . While being a battlefield nurse is undoubtedly admirable, the denigration of dances and masquerades here is part misogyny, part misconception . . . for Talisa to be a "worthy" love interest, she must express distaste for feminine-coded pleasures. . . The sheer history fail and textual comprehension fail of this line is so great it's hard to adequately express it. Throughout history, parties amongst the aristocracy have been anything but a waste of time . . .⁶

In the above example, textual critique occurs on multiple levels. The user interprets the intent behind the line (that it's meant to show "Talisa is not shallow"), but then interprets the social implications and connotations of what the text suggests. While the line is intended for character development, the poster sees it as feeding into larger cultural attitudes and stereotypes about gender, and how female characters in media are set apart or made "worthy" by distaining their own gender through the rejection of "feminine-coded pleasures." Poaching from real-world history is used to support the assertion that not only is the line feeding into misogynistic stereotypes, it is a "fail" of history. In a latter part of the post, the user says:

Balls, parties, dances, masquerades, feasts and tourneys are all a public exercise of power . . . After Catherine of Aragon died in January 1536, Henry VIII used parties to scorn his dead wife . . . Elizabeth I used to 'forgive' relatives of traitors by attending a feast, hunting party or other festivity at their estate . . . Anne Boleyn insisted her ladies-in-waiting wore French gowns to all public appearances. This showed not only her personal power by further isolating Catherine of

⁶turtle-paced <http://asoiafuniversity.tumblr.com/post/130357742540/a-waste-of-time>.

*Aragon from the day to day life of the Tudor court, but also her support for an alliance with France rather than Spain.*⁷

Here, the poster utilizes real-world examples, specifically from the 16th-century English Tudor dynasty (which included Henry VIII, two of his eventual six wives Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn, and Henry's daughter by Anne, Elizabeth I), to emphasize the political nature of "dances and masquerades" as a counterargument that such activities are shallow. But the very use of such examples carries an implicit suggestion that the text (the TV show) should be understood and analyzed as a sort of historical work. Yet the poster does show an awareness of this tension, further poaching from the other text (novels) to support the critique, too.

But this is a fantasy show! Who cares about stuffy old history, right? ... I see your historical parties and raise you a whole bunch of in-book-universe examples ... Ned Stark, who told his sons that the way to cement the hill clans' loyalty was through feasting with them. (ADWD, Jon IV) ... Catelyn Stark, who instantly sees that the poor food at the Red Wedding was meant to be an insult to Robb ... (ASOS, Catelyn VII) ... Much of Dany's ADWD arc involves her learning to perform Meereenese traditions correctly ... She can't just do the "right" thing, she has to be seen to do it, and in the right way.

The poster separates one text (the novels) from the other text (the TV show), with the novels used as a bolster for the "textual comprehension fail" critique of the TV show. The novels further act as a buffer against arguments that this is merely a "fantasy show," yet the "in-book-universe" examples simultaneously give weight to the real-world examples by showing a link between history and the world depicted within the text. The interplay between history and fantasy is fluid and complex; the two are distinct entities yet intertwined in this fan's interpretive practice.

Along with critiques about the text directly, fans' critique of other fans' interpretive acts was coded, too.

Critique of fan textual interpretations

These were agreements/disagreements on how members of the fandom did or should interpret textual depictions, how fans understood "the past" depending on their individual positions, privileges, and perspectives in society, in addition to critiques of the cultural attitudes, narratives, and assumptions in popular consciousness that have trickled into, been shaped by, or perpetuated by the media. These posts were fans' responses to fans' "reading" of the text and real-world history.

The following excerpts are from an exchange about whether the violence in *A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones* is realistic. One fan defends the level of violence in the text as "historically accurate" by poaching from the Hundred Years War between France and England (1337–1453).

*... Violence directed against civilian populations was a standard part of medieval warfare called the chevauchée- the point was to reduce the productivity of your enemy's territory ... George R.R Martin likely pulled straight from accounts of the Hundred Year's War for examples ...*⁸

⁷Catherine of Aragon was Henry VIII's first wife who was Spanish. Anne Boleyn was Henry's second wife, who was English yet had spent years in France. Anne's wearing of French gowns was a political statement around who the wives were and which countries they favored respectively.

⁸racefortheirthrone - <http://asoiafuniversity.tumblr.com/post/74864258387/asoiaf-and-realistic-violence>.

For this fan, the existence of a similar event from the Hundred Years War demonstrates there *was* historical precedence for violence (again, implicit is the assumption that the text is or should be understood as a historical work or within a historical context), and that it was “a standard part of medieval warfare.” However, another fan counters that it’s not specific instances in either real-world history or the text that make the violence of *A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones* ahistorical, but the level of violence depicted on a structural/societal scale.

*... *I* find it too violent to be realistic in the context it’s presented in, because the violence is too ubiquitous ... Their standards for levels of acceptable or expected violence don’t actually work within a functioning society, without the resources to actually enforce the structure, like coercing people to stay where they are and produce goods, food, services, et cetera ...⁹*

For this poster, it’s the ubiquity of violence in the text that’s unrealistic. The size of Westeros versus its social organization, and how that organization controls the population become areas for critique. *A Song of Ice and Fire* has the dressings of a pseudo-medieval world, but this fan challenges whether it operates like a medieval world based on real-world history’s structures.

... Westeros is trying to be the Roman Empire in sheer size and arm-of-the-law or social control type aspects, when really the social organization is Medieval, which doesn’t work on a massive geographical scale like Westeros.

Though critique of textual depiction occurs within this exchange, it is couched within the two fans’ dispute of *their* understandings of the text in relation to one another. Fan critiques that were unilateral, instances when interpretation focused on one direction and target only (the text) were coded as critique of textual depiction/creator choices. When fans’ critiques were bilateral, instances when interpretative acts were directed in two directions (text and fans with opposing views), these were coded as critique of fan textual interpretations.

Narrative parallels

Another practice that Tumblr fans engaged in was the explicit creation of parallels between the text and real-world history. This was seen in the previous examples, but fans also made parallels outside of their critique of the text/other fans’ critiques to simply make connections between the real-world and text to share with others, as in the below example.

One of the Basque people’s many distinct and interesting traditions includes the swearing of oaths under the important Gernikako Arobola ... Since its inception the oak tree has come to symbolize the identity, freedoms, and beliefs of a long marginalized and oppressed people ... In the book series there is a culturally distinct, marginalized ethnic group called Northerners who have a very close, even spiritual relationship with a distinct type of tree, the weirwood. Under the sacred weirwood people pray, bury their dead, and yes swear oaths.

Here, the poster draws parallels between the real-world Basque Country’s Tree of Gernika and the text’s weirwood trees in the North (a distinct region within Westeros). The user

⁹medievalpoc - <http://asoiafuniversity.tumblr.com/post/74856591324/why-do-they-find-the-violence-in-asoiaf-unrealistic>.

poaches from history to share with other fans the connection he/she sees related to both nature and ethnic identity, as well as further connecting the text to a real-world past on a larger scale.

*Westeros like Spain has experienced horrific civil wars ... fascists attempted to cut down the Gernikaka Arobola as it, like the weirwood is a symbol of resistance.*¹⁰

Narrative parallels might be about objects, nature, geography, social conventions, or individuals. Attempts to weave a thread between history and fantasy, whether within textual and fan critiques or outside of them, were coded under this category (there was also overlap with the previous two codes).

Historical eras and topics poached by fans

I tracked the eras, places, and topics poached by fans in their discussions.

Eras and places codes

War of the Roses/Tudor England was applied to any post which referenced the War of the Roses and/or Tudor era in England (1455–1603).

Britain Other were posters' use of non-War of the Roses/Tudor time periods in English, Scottish, Irish, or Welsh history. Medieval, Early Modern, and Modern eras within British history were sub-coded, too. Ancient (Celtic) Britain fell under a different code.

Medieval General referred to posts that discussed the "Middle Ages" or "Medieval Europe" as a generic, all-purpose entity, without invoking a specific country or date.

Antiquity was coded for Ancient Celtic Britain, Ancient Egypt, and Ancient Greece or Rome.

Europe Other included France, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries. Medieval, Renaissance, and Modern era distinctions were sub-codes.

The "East:" Similar to Medieval General, these were instances when posters used the "East" as a catch-all term, with no clarification or specification of which countries or regions in the world they meant beyond it was to the "east" of Western Europe. This was in contrast to:

The Middle East were direct references to Iran/Persia, Afghanistan, or other countries specifically in the region known as the Middle East today.

Asia and Africa as an umbrella code applied to discussions that (1) invoked "Asia" and "Africa" as generic entities or (2) when individual nations such as China or Japan were named and discussed in posts.

USA and Russia: Another umbrella code for references to the United States of America or Russia. As parts of Russia are included in both Europe and Asia respectively, it was not included in the previous Europe Other or Asia and Africa codes.

Topic codes

Social and legal customs included questions or statements about subjects such as education, the justice system, hair dyes and shaving, bill of rights, and other social or legal customs in both the text's world (Westeros) and real-world history.

¹⁰only-an-emigre <http://asoiafuniversity.tumblr.com/post/149408002855/the-real-world-weirwood>.

Women's issues were applied to posts about child brides and consent, feminism, misogyny, positive/negative female depictions, patriarchy, and gender dynamics more broadly.

Race and ethnic cultures included discussions of both (1) race from a colonial or post-colonial perspective, slavery, and the construction of "race" as a concept and (2) references to specific ethnic groups/identities such as the Celts or Basques.

Military/Orders/Warfare dealt with posts around war and mass violence in the text and history, armor and weapons, military practices, as well as orders such as the Knights Templar, etc.

Religion included groups, faiths, and institutions in the text and real-world history.

Historical narratives/sources applied to posts that dealt with historical materials – maps, genealogical records, chronicles and their credibility, and how "histories" are understood both within the text and real-world history.

Technology/progress were posts about whether the technological advancement/history of the text aligns with how "progress" has occurred in real-world history.

Other lit/media was the invoking of other literature and media in relation to the text, such as *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Trek*, or Arthurian literature.

Each post could contain multiple codes. An individual entry on ASOIAFUniversity could furthermore be two or more posts by multiple people from other sites or blogs that were gathered together and re-blogged as one "post" because they were part of the same discussion, or the majority of the content was a response to a shorter question or statement. As such, these multiple posts were still counted as a single "post," though the comments from the different users/sites would have its own set of codes.

Results

Of the 165 posts, there were 132 identifiable participants and 168 participants with the inclusion of anonymous posters (it cannot be determined if "anonymous" is the same, a few, or all separate individuals). There were 64 instances of critique of textual depictions/creator choices, 74 instances of critique of fan textual interpretations, and 114 instances of narrative parallels.

Figure 1 presents an overview timeline of the eras and places poached by fans generally.

The War of the Roses/Tudor England was the most dominant era/place poached by fans in 45 posts, while Britain as a whole was the most widely used locale (Britain Other appeared in 48 posts), with Medieval England the most common non-War of the Roses/Tudor era in 21 of the 48 Britain Other posts. Europe Other appeared in 41 posts, and Antiquity references in 24 posts. The US emerged in eight and Russia in four posts. "Africa" as a general term occurred in nine posts and "Asia" in four respectively, though an additional seven posts discussed individual countries (China in four, Japan, India, and the Philippines in one post each). The "East" appeared in six posts and the Middle East in eight.

Medieval General, which was invoked in 48 posts, was not included in the timeline due to no specific countries named. The Medieval/Early Modern division for British history is also murkier than the timeline demonstrates. The War of the Roses/Tudor eras are on the cusp of what's generally thought to be the transition between "Medieval" and the Early Modern period, and there were Tudor figures involved in the War of the Roses. The two periods were treated as a

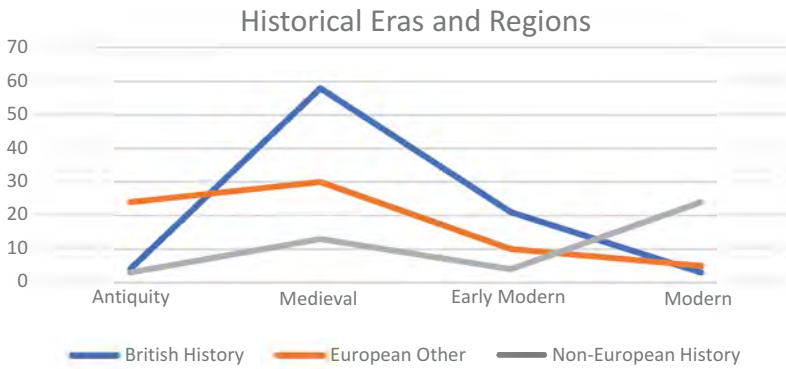


Figure 1. Historical eras and regions.

single code, with Medieval England otherwise under Britain Other, but for the timeline the War of the Roses/Tudor eras were split, as some of the period falls under Medieval and the rest under Early Modern. Thus, when combined with the “Medieval England” codes for Britain Other, Medieval is somewhat inflated for British history.

Social/legal customs occurred in 27 posts, race and ethnic cultures in 22, women’s issues also in 22, military/orders/warfare in 16 posts, religion in 13, historical narratives/sources in 12, other lit/media in 8, and technology/progress in 7 posts.

Critique of textual depictions/creator choices and critique of fan textual interpretations

Critiques of either textual depictions or fan textual interpretations tended to focus on socio-cultural topics around women’s issues and race, with religion and violence to a lesser degree. Positive and negative perspectives both poached from history to support their points.

The following example presents a positive interpretation of the text’s female character depictions by the author.

*Medieval fantasy specifically, is notorious for a more conservative representation of gender politics, as patriarchy is often seen as a ‘staple’ to the genre ... This emphasis on painting shades of grey is ultimately what renders Martin unique as a fantasy writer ... Martin achieves creating complex female characters ... he often appropriates traditional medieval fantasy through introducing classic fantasy character archetypes and then dissembles those characters so that they no longer fit into a simple category ...*¹¹

For this poster, the text deviates from the culturally dominant norms of female character representation perceived to be usually found in pseudo-historical narratives. *A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones* is positioned in contrast to the “conservative representation of gender politics” in other fantasies, with references to J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955) in the fuller post. While acknowledging that *A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones* makes use of “archetypes,” this poster believes Martin subverts them through “diverse and complex depictions of women who are trying to navigate themselves within a world that is trying to oppress them.” The poster does note that Martin and the text have

¹¹towerofthehawk <http://asoiafuniversity.tumblr.com/post/125709110183/feminism-and-misogyny-in-george-rr-martins-the>.

been accused of misogyny in the fandom and at large, and responds (including links to external sources that share this perspective):

... this graphic representation of female oppression is due to the misogynistic circumstances of this secondary world rather than the misogyny of Martin the author.

The idea that it's the world, and not the author, is also echoed in discussions around racial depictions in the text, with the implication that the text and its world are organic, "true" to history, and thus can be no other way. This interpretation gets challenged, as in the example below of two polarizing opinions about Daenerys (Dany) Targaryen, one of the main characters of the series; she is an exiled princess of the former ruling dynasty of Westeros who was sold in marriage to a "barbarian" lord and later becomes a conqueror and "liberator" of slaves on the continent of Essos to which she's been exiled. The fan exchange here focuses on Dany's storyline and the tension of her character being a feminist symbol (the princess becomes the heroine with agency rather than a damsel in distress), yet problematic and potentially racist as she is a conqueror and liberator of a people who are portrayed (especially on the show) as from traditionally marginalized groups in modern real-world history.

I've been a huge fan of Daenerys since the beginning ... her dark eyebrow, silver wig combination is gorgeous and her take-charge demeanor is inspiring, but crowd surfing over the arms of a thousands of shackled brown people is disgusting and not the sort of feminism I'm into ... It almost implies that one, little, silver-haired Daenerys is worth thousands of Yunkai people.¹²

An initial poster makes a comment about the final episode of *Game of Thrones* season 3, entitled "Mhysa," where Dany is lifted up by the thousands of people she has liberated. Dany is white while the crowd is composed of adult brown individuals who call her Mhysa ("Mother"). Defenders of the scene argue that it was filmed in Morocco and the extras were locals (and thus would be "brown"), but counter-arguments emerge that regardless of the location, the scene should have been recognized for the troubling racial image it presents. However, a further defense poaches from the "historical truths of Medieval society," and that the scene isn't racist in terms of textual depiction/creator choices, but because the world of the text is racist itself.

... you also have to take into account the historical truths of Medieval society that are constantly put into effect onto this show ... Medieval patriarchs (and matriarchs when they were necessary) were white, period, with brown people seen as a threat ... when you have a show comprised of kings, queens, knights, and incest boobs, you can't expect progressive rewrites such as powerful brown characters who aren't slaves ...

Again, this fan treats the text as if it should be understood as a historical work or through a historical context, writing under the assumption that its racial depictions are historically accurate. What's interesting is that while "Medieval society" is used in a generic, almost homogenous fashion, the poster appears to really mean Western Medieval society at best, for globally there were plenty of non-white monarchs, not even accounting for the complicated history of the Moors in Europe. Additionally, the phrase "progressive rewrites

¹²Ellomelissa, nothingsisnevergood, tortuugaconmuletas <http://asoiafuniversity.tumblr.com/post/83512908770/ellomelissa-nothingsisnevergood>.

such as powerful brown characters who aren't slaves" is based upon a generalized understanding of a historical system of purely-raced based slavery that arose in the Early Modern Era, after "Medieval society." As such, this post highlights how modern-day cultural normalizations and beliefs about the past shape the reading of text and the poaching of history. The reader's interpretive practices are firmly rooted in modern race conceptions rather than the "historical" views of medieval society, which is echoed in other posts such as:

... the idea of "Westeros" as anything remotely resembling history is only possible because we live in a post-colonial society, and this skews and warps our idea of what the actual European Middle Ages were like.¹³

This post reflects the sentiment that both textual depictions and fan interpretations are the result of living in a post-colonial society, and that it is through this lens that fans *and* the show's creators/author understand and construct the narrative. Returning to the Dany exchange, even fans who don't challenge the overall historical depiction/interpretation of "Medieval society" can still find the character's storyline problematic.

... Dany is blindly praised by viewers because of her Feminism and this is problematic ... just because something is racist incidentally, or as you're saying, within the workings of the story line, doesn't make it any less racist. Why did the story line put her in that situation? It wasn't chaos or coincidence, it was something intentionally created by a few people.

Here, the critique returns to textual depiction choices rather than an overall lens through which to understand the past and text. For this poster, the scene's historical accurateness or not doesn't "make it any less racist," and the text remains a product "created by a few people," suggesting that what's presented is a *choice* than an organic inevitability. Additionally, the poster critiques the previous critique that fans must examine and accept the text through a "Medieval society" lens:

... my original post was a moment of reflection as a female viewer of color after watching the season finale of a popular TV show, and it was rude to devalue my argument by telling me what I forgot, what I should have focused on instead ... I understand how Medieval Structures work. I understand how this show works.

This post highlights a tension within fan structures of members feeling their voices are "devalued," especially when those members come from a non-dominant group in the fandom and society at large. Textual interpretations and depictions are linked to positions of privilege, not only for fans' understanding of other fans' perspectives, but also in critiques about a lack of marginalized perspectives within the text when it comes to contentious issues, such as in the following example.

There are, at a conservative estimate, 214 acts of rape and 117 rape victims in ASOIAF to date ... the reader experiences rape through the perpetrator's point of view ... There are two examples in which rape victims tell us their stories ... The victims in question are both villains ... While it is true that most of the horrific events took place in history at one time or another, Martin is using horrific events from over the course of a thousand years – but squeezing them into a story with about a 2-year span (so far). In addition to cherry-picking his horrors, he's also

¹³Medievalpoc <http://asoiafuniversity.tumblr.com/post/74513642316/things-were-just-like-that-back-then-thoughts>.

*cherry-picking the social elements of society in a way that doesn't stand up to a historical analysis.*¹⁴

This post first critiques the text not for the inclusion of rape, but its presentation through the rapists' eyes, with the female victims' voices marginalized if not outright silenced. The only two female rape victims who are given a voice are "villains." The poster also critiques the historicism of so many rapes within the small time-frame of the text, and that Martin has condensed "a thousand years" of horror into a few.

Another argument that occurs in posts is whether "things were just like that back then," particularly around the depiction of child-brides in both the series and the medieval era historically, along with fans' romanticism or "shipping" of a pre-teen/teen female character with an adult male from the text. Arguments justifying the text's portrayal argue that girls were married young "back then." However, as one fan notes:

*... recent scholarship is actually refuting a lot of Martin's own perception about common marriages in the medieval world. There were, of course, child brides, but that wasn't as common as Martin's world makes it seem to be ... The medieval world wasn't as lawless and immoral as a lot of the media likes to portray it as.*¹⁵

Here, a critique again emerges around the *frequency* of textual depictions (in this case child marriage), with a further critique of how media as a whole presents narratives about the past. Poaching from real-world history is used to bolster another fan's similar position on this issue, as well as to add to the larger conversation around cherry-picking historically as a defense of textual choices.

*... noble and royal brides did marry earlier than peasant women ... some as young as fourteen (or, if you were poor Margaret Beaufort, twelve)...However, marriages were typically waited to be consummated until the bride was 16-18 years old ... Some marriages, like poor ol' Mags' or Caterina Sforza's, were consummated when the bride was much younger ... This practice was typically frowned upon and was a move of last resort, or done when the bride had no political (read: familial) support around her ...*¹⁶

Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII from the Tudor dynasty and a figure of the War of the Roses, is a common example deployed as evidence that girls were married young "back then." By acknowledging this example, and that of Caterina Sforza from the Italian Renaissance who was married at 10 and had the union consummated at 14, this fan is able to take an offensive position around historical poaching for child-bride marriage by stating that although these anomalies existed, it doesn't make them the norm for earlier eras or its frequent use in text as historically accurate.

Narrative parallels

Fans enjoyed creating parallels for both individual characters/historical figures as well as for events and places. Images were often used, with fans splicing together pictures of characters from *Game of Thrones* with images of historical figures (either a painting or an

¹⁴tafkarfanfic <http://asoiafuniversity.tumblr.com/post/119913626560/a-song-of-ice-and-fire-has-a-rape-problem>.

¹⁵renylslittlerose - <http://asoiafuniversity.tumblr.com/post/76817949257/in-your-post-earlier-you-said-sansa-was-too-young-to-be>.

¹⁶ofhouseadama - <http://asoiafuniversity.tumblr.com/post/56655240578/ofhouseadama-so-the-idea-of-but-it-was-normal>.

actor playing the figure in a historical drama). Parallels were a means of character analysis, to speculate for future directions of the novels and TV series, to support perspectives on the historicity of the text, or to share what fans perceived to be universal connections between fantasy and history. In addition to images, write-ups explaining character parallels occurred, as in the example below comparing the *Game of Thrones* character Tywin Lannister with the historical figure the Earl of Warwick from the War of the Roses.

... Immensely rich with everything at their disposal, they were used to having exactly what they wanted. When they were unhappy with their king, they put their efforts into a supporting another. Their support changed the tides of wars and made kings of out conquering young men. One held his power beyond his king's death; the other died fallen from power fighting to depose the one he had raised. But the story of both men raises the question of who is more powerful: the man who is king or the man who made him?¹⁷

Here, the fan compares how the actions and circumstances of Tywin/Warwick mirror one another while also posing a more pensive question about power and politics, though how much text and history might be simplified to fit into a clean narrative parallel must be considered. Fan practices reflect a general issue in any media depiction of a real-human life; there is not enough room to cover it all. Lives are condensed to fit the narrative conventions of popular culture, and fans' practices tend to align with this convention. Even when fans critique other fans' paralleling of characters/figures for this very reason, the critiquing party can also fall into the trap of simplifying history.

The following excerpts come from a post about Margaery Tyrell, a character in *A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones*, and whether she (and her eventual fate) would parallel that of Anne Boleyn, the second wife of Henry VIII from the Tudor dynasty. Anne was eventually beheaded, and there was speculation if that indicated Margaery would not survive the series. The following post was intended as a response to previous arguments in favor of similarities between Margaery and Anne:

I've read a lot of posts which compare Margaery as simply a carbon copy or a similar character to Anne Boleyn ... this will act almost as a response to it...¹⁸

The poster then proceeds to counter the points that have been made in favor of the parallel, but the refutes become a different parallel on text and real-world history.

Nobility status/family of both women: ... *In English Peerage, the noble ranks go ... King -> Prince -> Duke -> Marquis -> Earl and so on. Anne's father ... was in fact Earl of Wiltshire ... not as high as one would imagine ... The way I imagine the [Westeros] Peerage system would work ... **King->Great Houses**(eg Tyrell, Stark, Martell) ->**Noble House**(Frey, Baelish, Tarly) ->**Knighly Houses**(Seaworth, Fossoway) ... Margaery would be the equivalent to a Duchess, not a Countess, making a large difference between her and Anne ...*

The first point to be refuted by this poster is that the family rank between Margaery and Anne are dissimilar. Poaching from the English peerage system, the fan argues against parallels between the women by making *another* parallel between the Westeros nobility and English aristocracy.

¹⁷bethwoodvilles - <http://asoiafuniversity.tumblr.com/post/62487324639/bethwoodvilles-tywin-lannister-richard-neville>.

¹⁸olennatyrell - <http://asoiafuniversity.tumblr.com/post/84960583185/is-margaery-tyrell-another-anne-boleyn-and-will-she>.

Both of them are Ambitious: *I feel as though Anne was driven and fueled by others including her father. Margaery, on the other hand is very calm ... an extrovert and a charmer, unlike Anne. Historians report that Anne was very introverted and aggressive ...*

Again, the fan treats his/her opinion/interpretation as fact. “Historians” and their views of Anne run the gamut,¹⁹ and assessments are more complex than she “was very introverted and aggressive,” which is a blanket assessment that reflects the individual’s judgment rather than “facts.” Critiques of potentially nebulous historical poaching can result in further nebulous poaching, too.

Conclusion

The power of a drama to successfully connect with its audiences’ present concerns and interests is critical to its immediate influence and subsequent legacy in popular imagination. Historical novels such as *Johnny Tremain* (1943) and *My Brother Sam Is Dead* (1974) are both about boys during the American Revolutionary War, yet they were written for World War II and Vietnam War audiences, respectively, thus with diverging perspectives and portrayals of the same past (Schwabel, 2011). *My Brother Sam Is Dead* became one of the most challenged books of the early 21st century,²⁰ and *Johnny Tremain*, despite its many positive themes, has troubling racial interactions (Schwabel, 2011). A work well received by contemporary audiences may fall out of favor later, while others endure in popularity or have a resurgence when they again speak to a new audiences’ concerns.

Historical and pseudo-historical fiction can be a powerful tool to help us “scrutinize historical narrative as a construction” by contextualizing both “the historical setting of the novel and the historical setting (or contemporary) setting of its publication” (Schwabel, 2011, p. 138). Works like *A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones* can generate polarity of opinion among fans in how to understand its historicity, yet it is through that polarity we may gain insight into our own era’s historical consciousness. Examining the historical and textual poaching practices of fans can allow for the “opportunity to examine how people are thinking about their collective pasts and, thus, how they seek to position themselves for the future” (Seixas & Peck, 2004, p. 147).

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¹⁹For example, see Eric Ives, David Starkey, Retha Warnicke, David Loades, Tracy Borman, Amy Licence, etc.

²⁰<http://www.ala.org/bbooks/top-100-bannedchallenged-books-2000-2009>.

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