



**EVERYTHING  
I NEED  
I GET FROM  
YOU**

**How Fangirls  
Created  
the Internet  
as We Know It**

**Kaitlyn Tiffany**

MCD x FSG Originals  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
New York

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[A Note About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,  
and info on new releases and other great reads,  
sign up for our newsletters.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us online at  
[us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup](https://us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup)

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

**Life will be happier for the on-line individual because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity.**

**—J.C.R. LICKLIDER AND ROBERT W. TAYLOR, “The Computer as a Communication Device,” 1968**

**if i die tonight tell one direction I’ll see them in hell**

**—LISETTE HERNANDEZ, Twitter, 2014**

## Introduction

If you can stand it, I'm going to describe a six-second video.

It goes like this: the British boy band One Direction is onstage, on tour, in the summer of 2015. You can't actually see them—the camera is too far back in the crowd. You can only *kind of* see one of them, the then twenty-one-year-old Irish singer and sometime guitar player Niall Horan, bottle-blond in a black T-shirt, blown up on a stadium monitor and washed out into a bright white mess owing to a crappy cell phone camera attempting to record another screen. You can hear a downbeat in a sweet if unremarkable ballad about young love from the band's fourth album, *Four*, and then you see Horan wringing his hands as he steps to the mic to sing the line “We took a chance.” It comes out wrong and we'll never know why. The *a* is an *o*. He does not usually do this. He usually sings “chance.” Odd, but you wouldn't necessarily notice or care if it weren't for the fact that—in the tiny space between this phrase and the next—you then hear another voice, coming from at least several yards behind the camera and begging, credulously, in a molar-crunching scream: “What the fuck is a chance?” She must know. She won't. The end.

This video was posted originally on the Twitter-owned short-form video app Vine shortly after the concert, and was adopted as the One Direction fandom's latest and greatest in-joke. It was reblogged and retweeted, the footage was downloaded and reposted. Within a few weeks of the first upload, Harry Styles acknowledged the moment onstage, singing his line of the song as usual, then tossing to Horan for his part, and muttering into the mic, “But don't say ‘chonce.’” At that, the crowd screams as if they have just found out they're alive. On Tumblr, fans shared this clip—with all-caps “ASDFGHJKL” and similar expressions—and from then on, there were clips of Horan at

subsequent shows, nodding and laughing as tens of thousands of people sing at him, in unison, “chonce.” Though Vine has since been shuttered, “WTF is a chonce” persists on YouTube, where the comments years later are one-note: “Why do I still find this funny even though I’ve seen it millions of times?” The joke is *not* funny, but it is for insiders, and it has a special bittersweetness to it because the original footage was taken just a few months before One Direction’s final public performance.

The internet’s ephemera is often better left unexamined, not just because so much of it ends up having a disgusting or depressing backstory, but because so much more of it is impossible to explain at all. One Direction was known for its onstage mishaps and physical accidents, made funnier by their contrast with the band’s otherwise meticulously managed and physically grueling stadium tours. There are entire supercuts of Harry Styles falling over in catastrophic fashion, and of sophomoric pranks that involve two or three of the band members ganging up on another. Yet “chonce” became the single-syllable talisman, clung to even after everything was all over.

Four years after the first clip went viral, I scrolled past a tweet from an account with the handle @isasdfghjkl:

```
me::(  
niall: we took a chonce  
me::)
```

I retweeted it, even though the majority of the people who follow my Twitter account would have no idea what it was referring to.<sup>1</sup> It was a plain statement of fact—they could edify themselves if they wanted to live better. “We took a chonce” is so dumb—so pure a joke at the expense of someone who can take one and would love to—the weight of life lifts off of my shoulders when I’m reminded of it. Watching this video smacks me with a lingering hit of dopamine, like a gumball-machine-sticky-hand landing on a windowpane. When I need to, I can watch “We took a chonce” and experience what some people feel when they put their faces in front of a seasonal affective disorder lamp. What a different sort of person feels when they jog. If

it so happens that we arrive at a dystopian future in which always-on screens are embedded directly into our retinas, I'll spend every crowded train ride and mandatory all-hands meeting and one-year-old's birthday party washing my eyes with "We took a chance." That's the only way I can describe what One Direction does for me without saying something as useless as "I love them."

Even now, the serendipity of the Tumblr feed leads me to treasures: a watercolor painting of "WTF is a chance?" in curling bridesmaid script; a flyer with tear-off strips at the bottom that read "Chonce"—get it? Take one!—supposedly hung up by a pair of friends in their local bowling alley. "The only problematic thing about my fav is he can't pronounce 'chance,'" reads another post reblogged into my feed. "Other than that he's a chill little sun drop that loves sports."<sup>2</sup> A commemorative T-shirt cost me a mere \$19 plus shipping on Etsy—"WTF is a chance?" printed in white bubble letters, on pale blue. If you're the type of person who still peruses Urban Dictionary, you might notice that "chonce" is defined there: "An alternative for the word 'chance.' Commonly used by One Direction's Niall Horan."

★ ★ ★

A coldly assembled consumer product, One Direction was an idea that Simon Cowell takes credit for having while serving as a judge on the British reality competition TV show *The X Factor* in 2010. The five individual boys he met on the show were too bland and young and poorly dressed to make sense on their own, so he pushed them together and made them into a litter of commercially viable puppies. They released their first single in 2011, in the moment that social media was revealing itself as our new shared reality. It was the year teenagers started getting Twitter accounts, which happened just as Tumblr started selling advertising, which was around the same time that Instagram launched and exploded and was acquired by Facebook, while YouTube was cleaning up its design so that young people would have an easier time falling into algorithmic wormholes. One Direction fans—who seemed mostly to be young women—were mocked for embracing a boy band, an inauthentic thing pieced

together for money. They also used, as the means of their expression, a collection of websites that profited off them yet again.

“Women are the internet, and the internet is women,” the editors of *n+1* announced to start their winter issue in 2013.<sup>3</sup> “Supposing the internet was a woman—what then?” the writer Moira Weigel asked in *Logic* in the spring of 2018. The loose, woven structure of the internet, which enables things like whisper networks, reflexive personal sharing, and complex storytelling, has been more useful to women and marginalized groups than it has been to men, Weigel suggested. Men have always had easy access to other, more streamlined types of communication. But she cautioned readers not to romanticize the internet. It’s home to bad actors and misinformation, both given reach they would not have otherwise. It’s also where women are expected to perform tasks they’ve always been expected to perform, she noted: posing, preening, affirming, doing things for other people in exchange for the feeling of being loved. Women are the ones fueling the engine “for the accumulation of vast piles of capital,” Weigel wrote, and they are not the ones generally benefiting from it. “Yet the internet also provides tools that can be used as alternatives,” she pivoted. “In this sense, the internet is ambivalent. Fortunately, inhabiting ambivalence is something that women are good at, having had to practice it for so long.”<sup>4</sup>

Any examination of online fandom has to be approached with the same ambivalence. The cultural phenomena of fandom and the internet are braided together—one can’t be fully understood without the other. Both, in providing structure, have also produced chaos. Both, in providing meaning, have sometimes oversupplied it. Yet fans’ role in shaping our present culture, politics, and social life is often overlooked, and the roots of this oversight go back decades. When listing off pivotal subcultural movements, hardly anyone would think of fangirls. The mid-century sociologists who invented subcultural studies even literally considered rebellion the province of middle- and working-class young men, spending their postwar discretionary income on weird outfits and aggressive haircuts; girls—who at the time were screaming over the Beatles or sitting at home watching

soap operas with their mothers—didn't jump out as a compelling subject for study. Or, these activities did not seem subcultural. They looked generic.

Yet a fangirl still exists in contradiction to the dominant culture. She's not considered normal or sane; her refusal to accept things the way they are is one of her defining characteristics. She is dropping out of the mainstream even while she embraces a thing that is as mainstream as a thing can get. Publicly, the fangirl wastes money and refuses to make her time useful. With the advent of social media, she started publishing thousands of messages to idols who would never read them. The constant, ambient disapproval of the general population can sequester fangirls joyfully, in semiprivate spaces with like-minded and creative groups of fast friends; or dismally, in semiprivate spaces that are still open to scorn, and therefore lean on self-policing or outward-facing aggression to protect the boundaries of a sensitive community. All of this happens on platforms with a financial incentive to produce more and more of it, but not necessarily to foster its best and most inspiring characteristics.

The labor of fans, which makes no sense because it is performed for free, can confuse even friendly onlookers. In 2011, Maciej Cegłowski, founder of the bookmarking site Pinboard, was one of the first technologists to notice the business opportunity fans represented.<sup>5</sup> He saw that fans of various TV shows and film franchises and musical groups had created elaborate tagging systems on rival site Delicious, and he saw that Yahoo's corporate takeover of Delicious, and YouTube's subsequent takeover of the shell of *that* Delicious, had ended in the destruction of many of the tagging features that were so important to them. Fans lost the ability to build up vast collections of tags, sort them, and search them, which had been critical to the project of keeping open records of a fandom's history as it developed. So, in a stroke of genius, Cegłowski offered them the opportunity to do that somewhere else. He published a mass-editable Google Doc and asked all kinds of people, who wouldn't typically have any say or hand in the construction of the platforms they would later be expected to use and generate profit for,



to come in and tell him what features they would need if they were to make Pinboard their new bookmarking home. The Google Doc “ended up being fifty-two pages long,” he recounted breathlessly on his blog. “At times, there were so many people editing the document that it tucked its tail between its legs and went into a panicked ‘read only’ mode. Even the mighty engineers at Google couldn’t cope with the sustained attention of fandom.” The Google Doc had rules, color codes, a full index, and a promise not to write any fanfiction about Cegłowski unless he gave the okay. “The editors of this document were anonymous, but they somehow seemed to know each other,” Cegłowski wrote. He titled his account of the whole affair “Fan Is a Tool-Using Animal,” and concluded it with praise for what he saw as a DIY, punk-y energy: “Fans transgress. Fans never sold out, man!”<sup>6</sup>

Cegłowski’s praise of fandom as a practice became a more common perspective throughout the 2010s in part because of pro-pop trends in music criticism and pro-girl trends in marketing, but also significantly because of the way highly visible online pop music fandoms played to and existed within the media’s imagination of liberal politics, as well as its fascination with the overt goodness of youth. The everywhere-ness of fans was remarkable; they seemed to accomplish anything they wanted. But fans are not magical, nor are they a unified group. They are people. Online fandom can be progressive, and it can also be reactionary; it can foster creativity, and it can also smooth away individuality; it can create new tools and compel fascinating action just as easily as it can provide the dull, repetitive skills required for activities like media manipulation and harassment. The One Direction fandom has done all of this, and it has meant all sorts of things to all kinds of people who share one particular affinity but might not necessarily share much else.

★ ★ ★

Often described as the third British invasion—post–Spice Girls and post-Beatles—or part of a new 1990s-like boy band boom, One Direction was unlike either of those phenomena. The closest thing One Direction has to a predecessor is not any transatlantic act from a

previous century or the tightly choreographed boy bands of the generation prior, but Justin Bieber—discovered on YouTube in 2007, made famous by young women on MySpace, elevated to stardom by the relentless tweeting of millions of people who had boundless affection and plenty of free time. Bieber’s first album, *My World*, released in 2009, debuted at number six on the *Billboard* charts. One Direction released their first single in September 2011 and arrived in the United States in February 2012. A few weeks later, *Up All Night* made them the first British group to enter the U.S. charts at number one with a debut album. (It took four years for Beatlemania to hit the United States, and even longer for it to spread globally.) Their next three albums did the same, which had never been done by any group at all. “We all sat and watched the film of the Beatles arriving in America, and to be honest, that was really like us,” Harry Styles said in 2014. “None of us think we’re in the same league as them music-wise. We’d be fools if we did ... Fame-wise, it’s probably even bigger.”<sup>7</sup>

Five boys: for the time being, they all dress approximately the same, like mall kids who have only ever seen zip-up hoodies and loose khaki pants. Harry Styles is the youngest, with a baby face and the liveliest hair; he is the focus of tabloids and gossip accounts because he is often publicly dating. Liam Payne has the second-floppiest hairdo and a sweet obsession with rules, as well as an expressed fear that nobody will ever love him separately from his fame. Niall Horan is the Irish and fake-blond one, with the most boyish sense of humor—a love of farting and pulling down pants. Nominally, he knows how to play the guitar. Zayn Malik is the most interested in asserting that this is not a regular boy band, it’s a “cool” boy band, and he is regarded as *the mysterious one*, possibly because he is quiet and possibly because the media is inclined to cast the band’s sole Muslim member as the odd one out. Louis Tomlinson is the oldest, the least often spotlighted singer, the one with a longtime unfamous girlfriend, and the class clown, pulling pranks and shouting swear words.

Before One Direction, becoming a pop star took time, sacrifice, restriction, discipline. The boys of NSYNC lived on \$35 per diems under the thumb of a notoriously manipulative and coercive manager who also stole tens of millions of dollars from the Backstreet Boys and wound up in prison.<sup>8</sup> The Jonas Brothers, the next iteration of the boy band idyll, were the Disney-approved version, expected to give moving testimonials about their commitment to remaining chaste and drug-free.<sup>9</sup> One Direction had a punishing touring schedule and a strict album a year as contracted deliverables, but they were never beholden to the traditions of the genre in quite the same way—they were always permitted to eschew choreography and matching outfits and conversations about purity rings. They were “anarchic,” Cowell said in their 2013 documentary.<sup>10</sup> They had tattoos. They had sex. They even smoked! Niall Horan, unfamiliar as he was with the way Irish slang would translate in an American cultural context, was filmed shouting at some photographers at an airport that they were a “shower of cunts,” which became another fandom catchphrase.<sup>11</sup> This was all allowed, it seemed, mostly because it was what the fans wanted.

By the time One Direction reached the United States, they were the biggest subculture on Tumblr, a platform designed to let affections snowball through a dizzying system of additive reblogs and visual stockpiling. Each member of the band had well over 1 million followers on Twitter. Within a few years the platform was defined by the rivalry between Justin Bieber and One Direction fans, and the passions of fandom were impossible for regular users not to notice. In 2015, a four-year-old tweet from Louis Tomlinson—“Always in my heart @Harry\_Styles. Yours sincerely, Louis”—was retweeted enough times for it to become the second-most retweeted message in the site’s history—edging out Barack Obama’s 2012 reelection victory tweet but falling short of Ellen DeGeneres’s Oscar selfie.<sup>12</sup> At that point, it had been retweeted over 700,000 times. A number that’s now more than 2.8 million. (More on that never-ending story later.) This was a habit of the mythmaking One Direction fandom, which enjoyed selecting and recirculating key moments of its own history

even as it was still unfolding. Another was from Niall Horan, in January 2010: “applied for xfactorhope it all wrks out,” he tweeted six months before he’d even heard the words “One Direction” himself. The fans dug it up *after* they’d made him famous, and by the time I started going to One Direction concerts, it had become common—maybe even played out—to print poster-size enlargements of the tweet and wave them at Horan if he looked your way in the crowd.

In public, fangirls were a joke: a ball of hysteria, so noisy! On the internet, the joke was on everybody else. The Rihanna Navy moved over from a small co-run blog to a Twitter account called @RihannaDaily in 2009, the same year that the biggest fan accounts for Beyoncé and Lady Gaga appeared. At the time, Twitter had not yet decided what to be. These early Twitter-using fans often came from the cultural powerhouse of Black Twitter, or from insular fandom spaces like LiveJournal and Yahoo Groups, and initially found themselves in small, tightly knit clusters, discussing the movements of their heroes in circular conversations. They came up with the internet-age semantic convention of using an abstract plural pronoun even when speaking alone. As in, “We have no choice but to stan.” As their circles grew, they realized they could disrupt conversation and funnel attention at will, taking over the Trending Topics sidebar whenever they had a whim to. Eventually, they settled into a rhythm—Tumblr was the confusing and therefore secluded site for longer-form conversations and strategy sessions, while Twitter was the faster-paced site for a public-facing display, where they showed off their numbers and their no-limit capacity for posting.

When One Direction *lost* in the finals of *The X Factor*, its nascent fandom mimicked what previous fan groups had done but made it bigger and faster. “They lost *The X Factor* but won the world,” fans repeated to themselves like a mantra, willing the dream to life. From the beginning, their efforts hinged on direct participation from the stars they were centered on, which the One Direction boys provided in the form of intimacies, inside jokes, and regular online conversation—they disclosed how many hours they’d slept, the type of cereal they’d eaten and at what time, the game shows and cheesy film franchises they watched to turn off their brains. They spent so

much time talking to their fans in blurry behind-the-scenes livestreams and casual, crackling Twitter threads that some fans were genuinely shocked when they were unwelcome at Niall Horan's nephew's baptism.<sup>13</sup> They'd never been uninvited before.

★ ★ ★

For me, One Direction arrived just in time—like being yanked out of the crosswalk a second before the bus plows through. Or like waking up from a stress dream and realizing that your teeth have not fallen out: *Thank goodness, and why was I so scared?*

I was nineteen, home for the summer, working in the mall food court. I loved school, but I hated the event of *college*, and couldn't find a place to insert myself in a fraternity-dominated social landscape. Most Saturday nights, I would put on something ugly, drink two beers in a fraternity annex and wait for someone to say something I could throw a fit about, then leave. I watched so much television my freshman year, I received a warning email about exceeding my limit for campus internet usage. I hadn't kissed anyone, and I'd made only a handful of friends I wasn't sure I even liked. At the same time, I was obsessed with a coworker at the mall who was older and generally cruel. I'd driven home most weekends just to make minimum wage elbow to elbow with him, pulling weak espresso shots and drizzling caramel syrup over whipped cream. When I wasn't doing that, I was stewing on Tumblr, scrolling through moody imagery and photos of feminist-lite prose tattooed into rib cages. The year was a bad one for me in general, and I didn't have any idea why I—the gleaming try-hard of suburbia!—was suddenly failing at essentially everything.

But I still liked the feeling of being taken care of by my parents, sinking back into the arrangement of being one of four children, all girls, taken on outings and lectured for this or that. I still wanted to be a child, and to enjoy childish things. It was August, and the heat was insane. We weren't a summer activities family, apart from the travel soccer leagues we played in every year, but we were a movie theater family. So my mom's minivan took us to a matinee showing of

the One Direction documentary *This Is Us*. My younger sisters were already fans, but I wasn't. I didn't care about anything except the air-conditioning and the snacks and the fact that I wouldn't be paying, driving the car, or trying to be charming. I could just slump, maybe sleep, and occasionally wake up to ask someone to dump some more popcorn into the paper napkin on my lap.

Here's what I saw at first: five boys, impossible to differentiate. Boring. The songs blend together. There's too much shiny brown hair. But then, for whatever reason, One Direction decides to go camping. This is a physical comedy sequence—why would these boys know how to set up tents? (Liam does know, because competence is his signature.) When it gets dark, they sit around a fire and talk about how they'll “always be a part of each other's growing up,” and will *probably* stay friends forever. Then Louis says something incredible, which is that he anticipates someday being forgotten by most of the world, but that he hopes to be remembered, by “a mom telling her daughter” about the band she loved when she was young. “They just had fun, they were just normal guys, but terrible, terrible dancers.” At that, I felt a jolt. My covetousness of approval from men my age, maybe, or my sort of saccharine interest in intimate lifelong friendship, or my deepest desire, which was for nothing to fundamentally change—some combination of these things produced an outsized reaction to a twenty-one-year-old boy describing what he wants as the legacy of his time on earth: to stay in touch with his boys, for women to recall him sometimes as they age. It's not any easier to explain than other kinds of infatuation. In fact, it's harder, because it wasn't as if I'd developed a crush— in fact, I generally found Louis the least charming of the five. I'd only been enchanted by this one little idea of his, tossed off so casually.

It took a while for it to sink in. But a few months later, I sat in a high school friend's car in a parking lot outside of a Red Robin in Ohio, near the small art college where she was studying graphic design. We were dehydrated and exhausted, depleted from a night of celebrating both Halloween and her twenty-first birthday. It was a weekend together that was about to end—I was going to get on a Greyhound bus back to a college campus where I still loved no one

and was making no progress toward building an identity for myself that wasn't tied to sitting in cars in parking lots of chain restaurants with people I'd known all my life. On the radio, One Direction was singing about their mothers and sisters. My friend was already a big-time fan, so she knew whose vocal part was which. She picked them out quietly, forehead on the steering wheel. "The story of my life, I take her home, I drive all night to keep her warm," Harry Styles shouted—as she informed me. "The story of my life, I give her hope," he said next. If I focus, I can put myself back in that car and feel the hot rush of gratitude and surprise. I can see my oldest friend's hand on the dial, turning it up without comment while our waves of nausea passed.

★ ★ ★

One of the more evocative pieces of modern art I have seen in my life was posted to Tumblr shortly after One Direction's final performance together.<sup>14</sup> It started as an illustration from a 1967 issue of the DC comic *Young Romance*, the one showing a woman in a purple turtleneck with a close-cropped auburn bob, holding red manicured nails up to her lips while two long tears stretch down her face, out from under a pair of sunglasses. Reflected in her shades, usually, are two images of a couple kissing—she's torn up about it. Romantic jealousy, captioned "Can any man *really* be trusted?" But in this Photoshopped version, the image that bounces off the plastic is a GIF of Louis Tomlinson and Harry Styles hugging.

This was an act of public affection the two had abstained from for several years at that point, hoping to discourage the popular fandom theory that they were secretly in love ("Larry Stylinson" in shorthand). But apparently moved by the significance of the night and the moment, they gave in to feeling and embraced. In this remix, the woman's tears are of surprised joy rather than romantic betrayal. "I remember the whole fandom feeling so happy," the artist, Maëlys Wandelst, told me when I emailed her years after she posted the image.<sup>15</sup> She'd made it in Photoshop in under an hour while sitting in bed. It was just a hug, but now it is *the* hug. The hug, the hug, the

hug. Scroll through Tumblr long enough and you'll see—there's only one hug that needs no further identification. (Even the day *before* the hug's anniversary is celebrated every year on Tumblr, with well wishes of a happy Hug Eve.) The darker elements of the story are missing from the meme. You can't see how the Louis and Harry fanfiction community was subsumed by the Louis and Harry *truther* community, or how a conspiracy theory unfurled over the course of several years, incorporating new villains at random. At one level, looking at this image is a pure and singular sensory experience, like carbonation. It reminds me of having a crush. But looking closer, as part of the subculture that would really understand it, it reminds me of years of conflict and paranoia—it reminds me that something as beautiful as One Direction, brought to the internet, can somehow produce *years* of conflict and paranoia.

This is not actually a book about One Direction, for a couple of reasons: I don't think they'd appreciate it, and, as much as I love them, they are not so interesting. (They are boys, and we are the same age.) It's not a book about Twitter or Tumblr or the hundreds of years of technological innovation that brought us to free GIF-making software either. What I would like it to be is a book that explains why I and millions of others needed something like One Direction as badly as we did, and how the things we did in response to that need changed the online world for just about everybody who spends their time in it. The people, many of them young women, who catapulted One Direction from reality show failure to international pop stars did so with methods that had never been seen on such a scale before, and with a dedication and single-mindedness that defied easy understanding. They catalogued every wince and wink for years on end. They sent threats of violence to girlfriends and to journalists. They were warm and witty and generous, sharing in-jokes and spare dollars for iTunes downloads. They were cruel and stupid; they schismed and broke down. Like many of us, they had a habit of needing more than they could get, and of giving too much of themselves in spaces where they were unlikely to be rewarded.

One Direction fans, locked in a never-ending death match with Justin Bieber fans, pioneered the idea of a Twitter stan war. On



Tumblr, they created new language, spoke in code, and popularized the core phraseology of our time, including “I want [X] to run me over with their car.” The artifacts of their elaborate conspiracy theories published daily to Tumblr read stranger than a Pynchon novel. They invented new methods for getting what they wanted, which included such methodical and bureaucratic techniques as teaching international acquaintances how to fake American IP addresses and thereby accrue Spotify and YouTube streams that would count on the *Billboard* charts.<sup>16</sup> They were driven by passion, but also by a desire for control. Because of their role in promoting and financially supporting the artists they love, these fans have maintained a creator’s hand throughout those artists’ careers, treating them as collaborative projects. They take responsibility for every setback and share in the thrill of every success.

When I sat down in front of my Tumblr dashboard as an adult, looking at it for the first time as a reporter rather than a participant, I wrote two questions: *How did fans use the internet to create and accrue a new kind of power?* And then, *What are the characteristics and limitations of that power?* These questions cut at multiple levels; the way individuals experience fandom in their personal lives is much different from the way fans experience a community together, which is different from the way we *all* experience fandom, in its collective version, at its most visible and insistent. One Direction arrived at the same time as commercial social media, and they rose at the same time as a new wave of anxiety, isolation, and fractured attention. Their success in that context doesn’t strike me as a coincidence, but the mystery of how so many people were able to find happiness through watching them and talking about them deserves documentation. So, too, does the unfortunate side effect of that joy, which is its commodification—fanfiction websites cut deals with major film studios, brands trade merch for tweets from major fan accounts, “fan” is at this point an industry term for “consumer.” If fangirls seem powerful, that power still comes from taciturn platforms that want them almost solely for the ease of selling ads that align with their interests—it can be taken away at any time. See

Tumblr's acquisition by Verizon, which led to mass purges of "NSFW" fan content and is only a recent example in a long history of censorship in fan spaces.<sup>17</sup> Or the way moderation systems on Twitter and YouTube implicitly and explicitly favor rich copyright holders over those who might appeal to principles of fair use, placing strict boundaries around the way fans are permitted to communicate.<sup>18</sup> As one-dimensional "girl power" rhetoric and corporate feminism have once again succeeded in leeching real meaning from the women's movement, pop stars have also appropriated it for their own use, to charm greater allegiance from fans by embracing an extremely narrow idea of what it means to support women: supporting the beautiful women they've turned into stars, defending them on the internet by lashing out against anybody who would criticize them.

What can we expect under these conditions? Within the current arrangement, with full command of the tools now available, with the best possible understanding of the promise and limitations of the platforms that presently exist, years ahead of everyone else, fans wield a specific and fragile kind of power. What do we all stand to lose if it slips out of their grasp? And if they manage to hold on to it—well, what then?

★ ★ ★

My favorite One Direction song is from the band's fifth album, *Made in the A.M.*, released in November 2015, shortly before the start of their indefinite hiatus. It's called "I Want to Write You a Song," and it is earnest to the point of being nearly unpleasant. It really teeters on the edge. It's the discomfort of an adult writing a love letter in crayon, and I like it mostly because of the way it explains to me, in clear terms, my most enduring and childish hopes. "I want to write you a song," Niall Horan informs me matter-of-factly. "One to make your heart remember me." This is sort of the classic definition of a lullaby. "Any time I'm gone, you can listen to my voice and sing along." Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson would like to write me a song as well—and lend me their coats, or so they say. "So when the world is cold, you'll have a hiding place you can go." Liam Payne is

going to build me a boat—it's so my heart won't sink. This is all so generous, it's hard to believe I deserve it. The twist, as revealed in the song's chorus, is that I might. "Everything I need I get from you," the four of them say to me in turn. (Zayn Malik left the group with a farewell Facebook post, eight months prior to this song's release.)

Of course, this is too much. This is not a normal thing to say. This would not be a very mature thing to feel. It's pretty twisted, actually, playing as it does on the existence of an uncountable number of parasocial relationships, and each time I hear it, I think about the teenage fear I was swimming in when I went to see that documentary. But I also think about how much fun I've had, and how many times I've been surprised by what I've seen. For every disappointment or flare-up of viciousness, there have been days and days and years on end when most people who love One Direction feel only that, and it leads them to a desire to create things: art, writing, music, community, funny videos of people screaming. "One Direction reminds me that love, joy, giddiness, even hysteria are crucibles of intelligence," the novelist Samantha Hunt wrote on *The Cut* the year that song came out. "There's a darkness in this light music that stirs thoughts of life."<sup>19</sup> If I'm really honest, I like One Direction because their music reminds me of myself. I'm nineteen and I'm not nineteen; I get to hold the two images side by side and think about the ways in which I'm changing and the ways in which I will always be the same.

"I Want to Write You a Song" is a promise and an apology. Dripping with proactive nostalgia, it seems to admit that this is the last time we will be written a song, even though members of the band have always publicly insisted that they are only taking a break, embracing an opportunity to nurture their individual strengths and pursue divergent artistic interests. It's the coded language of the end of a romance—keenly felt but ultimately untrue. *I'll care about you forever. This will always matter as much as it does now.* It can't and won't! It's fitting because One Direction is just a band: special to the people who love it, ordinary to everyone else. The song, sweet as it is, has a cool remove to it that inclines me to believe that the performers agree. This music will not be remembered as particularly innovative.

These stadium tours will be eclipsed; these chart records will inevitably be broken.

The legacy is something else: the people who took the paragon of a commercial product and made it the foundational text of a new kind of culture. Their indefatigable belief that the dull, senseless pain of modern life could be undone—the world remade in the likeness of a pop song.

## Screaming

On the morning of August 25, 2014, a sixteen-year-old girl arrived at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in baffling condition. She was short of breath but had no chest pain. She had no history of any lung condition, and there were no abnormal sounds in her breathing. But when the emergency room doctor on duty pressed on her neck and chest, he heard noises like Rice Krispies crackling in a bowl of milk—spaces behind her throat, around her heart, and between her lungs and the walls of her chest were studded with pockets of air, an X-ray confirmed, and her lungs were very slightly collapsed. Somehow, the upper half of her body had become bubble wrap.

The doctors were confused until she said that she'd been screaming for hours the night before at the Dallas stop on One Direction's *Where We Are* tour. The exertion, they hypothesized, had forced open a small hole in her respiratory tract. It wasn't really a big deal—she was given extra oxygen and kept for observation overnight, requiring no follow-up treatment. But the incident was described in all its absurd, gory detail in a paper published in the *Journal of Emergency Medicine* three years later—titled “Screaming Your Lungs Out! A Case of Boy Band–Induced Pneumothorax, Pneumomediastinum, and Pneumoretropharyngeum.” The lead physician wrote that such a case had “yet to be described in the medical literature.” Doctors were familiar with military pilots, scuba divers, and weightlifters straining their respiratory tracts, but this case presented the first evidence that “forceful screaming during pop concerts” could have the same physical toll.<sup>1</sup>

This was a novelty news item: an easy headline and a culturally salient joke about the overzealousness of teenage girls. It was parody made real, and recorded with the deepest of seriousness, for all time, in a medical journal. I stumbled across that article while idly combing Google Scholar for stuff that would be personally interesting to me, a habit I developed in order to waste time at work while describing what I was doing as “research.” I probably typed in “One Direction” and “screaming.” It is kind of funny. When I tweeted about it, a woman I had already interviewed for this book replied immediately, “That’s worse than when I got so excited during ‘One Thing’ and bit down on a glow stick by accident, pouring viscous glow poison into my mouth.”<sup>2</sup> I don’t know precisely when that happened to her, but she was thirty-four years old when she wrote the tweet, which I only bring up because loving One Direction enough to cause oneself physical harm is not unique to the teenage years. It’s just teenagers we picture when we talk about it.

I know nothing else about the girl who loved One Direction so much that she collapsed her lungs over it. Her doctor wrote to me that he’d asked, at the time, for her permission to tweet about the incident to Jimmy Fallon—he’d argued that maybe she would get to meet One Direction. “But she was too bashful!!!! Classic teenager,” he said, adding a laugh-crying emoji.<sup>3</sup> I’ll never know who she is or hear her personal explanation of what made her scream so much. In this specific circumstance, that’s because of medical privacy laws, which are good. But it’s also emblematic of a bigger lack: we have had so many screaming girls. Every time we see them, we’re like, “They’re screaming.” And that’s it. It’s not that the image of the screaming fan isn’t *true*—we can all see it; it’s in the medical literature; many of us have embodied it. It’s that the screaming fan doesn’t scream for nothing, and screaming isn’t all the fan is doing. It never has been.

★ ★ ★

“Beatlemania struck with the force, if not the conviction, of a social movement,” Barbara Ehrenreich wrote in 1992.<sup>4</sup>

We've all seen the famous photos of girls open-mouthed and crying, arms draped over police barricades. Beatlemania was an on-the-ground occupation of Europe's and America's major cities. When the Beatles visited Dublin for the first time in 1963, *The New York Times* reported that "young limbs snapped like twigs in a tremendous free-for-all."<sup>5</sup> When they arrived in New York City in February 1964—a little over a month into the U.S. radio chart reign of "I Want to Hold Your Hand"—there were four thousand fans (and one hundred cops) waiting at the airport and reports of a "wild-eyed mob" in front of the Plaza Hotel.<sup>6</sup> "The Beatles Are Coming" posters and stickers were distributed all over the country before that first 1964 visit, with Capitol Records sales managers instructed to put them up on "literally" any surface, "anywhere and everywhere they can be seen," and to enlist unpaid high school students in the effort. (The sales managers were also asked to wear Beatles wigs to work "until further notice.")<sup>7</sup> On the night of the band's historic *Ed Sullivan Show* performance, 73 million people tuned in—more than a third of the country's entire population.<sup>8</sup>

"All day long some local disc jockeys [have] been encouraging truancy with repeated announcements of the Beatles' travel plans, flight number, and estimated time of arrival," the NBC news anchor Chet Huntley reported the evening the Beatles arrived. "Like a good little news organization, we sent three camera crews to stand among the shrieking youngsters and record the sights and sounds for posterity."<sup>9</sup> Ultimately that footage didn't air—it was deemed too frivolous for the nightly news.

At the time, the media couldn't figure Beatlemania out. They didn't see a reason for so many girls to be so obviously disturbed. For *The New York Times*, the former war correspondent David Dempsey attempted a "psychological, logical, anthropological" explanation of Beatlemania.<sup>10</sup> In it, he used German cultural theorist Theodor Adorno's famous words on the conformity and brainlessness of "jitterbugs"—which was originally a racist excoriation of the dancers in Harlem's jazz clubs. "They call themselves jitterbugs," Adorno had written, explaining one of the ideas of his that has held up least well

over time, “as if they simultaneously wanted to affirm and mock their loss of individuality, their transformation into beetles whirring around in fascination.”<sup>11</sup> Dempsey was misquoting him really, playing superficially off the available beetle pun. He was defending the teenage girls by calling their passions stupid and harmless, and he either didn’t know or didn’t remember that Adorno found jitterbugs dangerous, and had also described their movements as resembling “the reflexes of mutilated animals.”<sup>12</sup> (In their racism, however, the two were ultimately on the same page: Dempsey chided Black rock ’n’ roll artists for encouraging young white girls to act as vulgarly as “aboriginals,” and compared the Beatles to “witch doctors who put their spells on hundreds of shuffling and stamping natives.”)<sup>13</sup>

Nearly all the writing about the Beatles in mainstream American publications was done by established white male journalists—many of whom, at the most important papers, were not even music writers. One exception was Al Aronowitz, the rock critic best known for introducing the Beatles to Bob Dylan and to marijuana (simultaneously) in a New York City hotel room in the summer of 1964. That year, he reported that two thousand fans “mobbed the locked metal gates of Union Station” when the Beatles performed in Washington, D.C. Then, when the Beatles came to Miami, seven thousand teenagers created a four-mile-long traffic jam at the airport, and fans “shattered twenty-three windows and a plate-glass door.”<sup>14</sup> A plate-glass door! These are compelling images, but I found it challenging to sort through the details in some of the reports of Beatlemania, many of which read to me as improbable or at least difficult to prove. There was the actual hysteria of the fans, and then, it seemed, there was the mythmaking of that hysteria. According to unsourced early reports, some cities tried to ban the Beatles from their airports because of the cost of securing them; legend has it that carpets and bedsheets from their hotel rooms were sometimes stolen by the entrepreneurial, cut up into thousands of pieces to be sold with certificates of authenticity.<sup>15</sup> Supposedly, an entire swimming pool in Miami was bottled up and auctioned off after the Beatles swam in it.<sup>16</sup>



The media, having little to say about the Beatles' music, had a lot to say about the women who went "ape" for it. After the *Ed Sullivan Show* debut, the New York *Daily News* reporter Anthony Burton recapped the event, describing a "wild screaming as if Dracula had appeared on stage."<sup>17</sup> The Simon & Schuster editor Alan Rinzler reviewed the Beatles' equally famous Carnegie Hall performance for *The Nation* a few days later with a devastating description of what would become the popular image of a boy band audience:

*The full house was made up largely of upper-middle class young ladies, stylishly dressed, carefully made up, brought into town by private cars or suburban buses for their night to howl, to let go, scream, bump, twist, and clutch themselves ecstatically out there in flood lights for everyone to see and with the full blessing of all authority; indulgent parents, profiteering businessmen, gleeful national media, even the police ... Later they can all go home and grow up like their mommies, but this was their chance to attempt a very safe and very private kind of rapture.*<sup>18</sup>

It's all there: the disdain, the condescension, the awe, the panic, of course the screaming. There's even, amid the mocking, maybe a little sympathy: "this was their chance." The media's bewildered contempt congealed into reflexive disdain and flat dismissal. In *The New York Times*, a cartoon showed a young woman coyly crossing her legs and explaining to an older man, flat-faced, "But naturally they make you want to scream, daddy-o; that's the whole idea of the Beatles' sound."<sup>19</sup> Was the screaming the "whole idea"?

The conditions for the Beatles' arrival in America could not have been more ideal—meaning they were bleak. In November 1963, the band played "Twist and Shout" at the Prince of Wales Theatre with the queen and Princess Margaret in the audience—the concert, and the hysterics of its attendees, were rebroadcast on British television a week later, to widespread concern about the level of emotion on display, but American TV reports about the event were scrapped in the wake of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. There was

a pall of anxiety hanging over the entire country, and it was caused not only by the president's death. Barbara Ehrenreich, in her accounting of what made Beatlemania take hold in the United States, quotes Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in February 1963. Friedan had noticed "a new vacant, sleepwalking, playing-a-part quality of youngsters who do what they are supposed to do, what the other kids do, but do not seem to feel alive or real in doing it." She described speaking to many such teenagers, including a thirteen-year-old girl from a Westchester suburb, who seemed "not quite awake, like a puppet with someone else pulling the strings."<sup>20</sup> The Beatles, Ehrenreich argued many years later, had presented an opportunity.

Ehrenreich interviewed women who had been young at the peak of Beatlemania. While they had found the Beatles "sexy," and that was certainly part of the allure, many of them had also remembered a feeling of identification: they wanted to be, like the Beatles, *free*. They'd wanted to go on adventures and provoke feelings—"the louder you screamed, the less likely anyone would forget the power of fans," Ehrenreich summarized.<sup>21</sup> The band played into this explicitly: Paul McCartney reminisced about the group's first American tour in a 1966 interview, saying, "There they were in America, all getting house-trained for adulthood."<sup>22</sup> He relished relieving the girls of that imperative, even if he was more general rabble-rouser than sincere feminist. But his intentions are largely beside the point. Every generation's boy band serves a slightly different purpose, but if there is one unifying characteristic I can see, it's that a boy band opens up space. Infatuation is irrational but it can be a precursor to introspection. The experience of bodily joy is an invitation to reconsider the conditions that hold you away from it most of the time. Screaming at pop music is not direct action, and screaming does not make a person a revolutionary, or even resistant, but what screaming can and does do is punctuate prolonged periods of silence.

★ ★ ★

I wanted to know how the screaming fangirl became a trope.

“Being a fan is very much associated with feminine excess, with working-class people, people of color, people whose emotions are seen as being out of control,” says Allison McCracken, an associate professor and director of the American studies program at DePaul University. “Everything is set up against this idea of white straight masculinity, where the emotions are in control and the body is in control.”<sup>23</sup>

McCracken is an expert on the history of the “crooner” in American culture, and her 2015 book *Real Men Don't Sing* credits Rudy Vallée and Bing Crosby for making the blueprint for a pop sensation in the late 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>24</sup> (Vallée was the first, and became a star on NBC's national radio network. Crosby was positioned as his rival when he rose to fame on CBS's competing network a few years later.) The two were, she argued, gender blurrers, who performed emotion-filled and romantic music appreciated by women and feared by many men, who were threatened by this alternative mode of what masculinity could be. The kind of ardor they inspired in the early days of music radio was seen as a problem by psychologists, by educators, by the Catholic church, and by just about every major institutional power at the time—not least because of concern over whether the crooners' massive success meant that women had somehow wrested control of American popular culture. (McCracken emphasized that the idea that only women were fans of the crooners was a media invention—their style had long been popular with working-class white male ethnic groups, especially immigrant and first- or second-generation audiences who were “almost completely erased by the press and critics,” but who were similarly subjected to shame over their aesthetic taste.)<sup>25</sup>

As part of her research, McCracken visited the American Radio Archives in Thousand Oaks, California, to see Vallée's personal archive of fan letters, dating back to 1928.<sup>26</sup> She was fascinated by them because they were so full of questions—the women who were writing to Vallée were surprised by their own emotional reactions to

his music and were confused by the idea of falling in love with a voice they'd heard only over the radio. "They were responding to his voice and saying, *I don't understand why I'm so happy and joyous and why you're moving me so much,*" she told me.<sup>27</sup> "They were writing to him and saying, *Can you explain what's happening to me?*"

They were also writing to journalists, in ways that may sound familiar to anyone who has witnessed a Twitter altercation between a blogger and a fan army. In 1929, the *New York Daily News* columnist Mark Hellinger wrote a story about Rudy Vallée, calling him obnoxious and crossing his fingers that women would soon get over him and move on to someone else. ("He has women of 50 bouncing around as though they were 15," he complained.) "You are jealous. You are stupid. You must be insane," one woman countered. Fans wrote to him by the thousands. Some threatened violence or told him to hang himself. When Ben Gross of the *Sunday News* then wrote a negative column about Vallée, a fan reportedly wrote to him: "The sweetest music to my ears would be to hear Rudy play a march at your and Hellinger's funeral."<sup>28</sup>

"They didn't have the word *teen* yet," McCracken told me, so that wasn't how journalists mocked the largely female audience that adored these stars. "They used *moronic* at that time. Women were seen to have the minds of children." (She clarified that this was originally a clinical term coming out of the eugenics movement, used to indicate that a person's IQ had peaked when they were about twelve years old, and that they were "primarily emotionally rather than intellectually responsive.") The shift from "moron" to "bobby-soxer"—the term used in the 1940s, when Sinatra was king—didn't have anything to do with a rising estimation of women, but rather with the premise of Sinatra's marketing and publicity. It was a purely financial decision based on the even earlier age at which fandom was starting, with younger girls who were starting to receive some of their own spending money, and one that cemented the association between crooner idols and supposedly immature audiences.

Though psychologists had started describing adolescence as a unique stage of life in the early 1900s, the word "teenager" itself

wasn't widely used until the late 1940s, McCracken explained, and the most eager speakers of the term were also marketers. They realized in the postwar boom years that far fewer kids were dropping out of school to earn money for their families, and that far more were being given allowances and plenty of leisure time. The 1950s and 1960s saw more and more products marketed explicitly to teenagers, often reinforcing the idea that they were a distinct group of people with a separate identity from their parents, and with the rise of teen-marketed products came teen-oriented TV shows during which they could be advertised. The most popular of all was Dick Clark's *American Bandstand*, the after-school music and dance hour widely credited with bringing rock 'n' roll into the white mainstream and, according to Ehrenreich, making it "the organizing principle and premier theme of teen consumer culture."<sup>29</sup> In 1958, a review in the *Pittsburgh Courier* described the show: "The kids screamed and chomped gum. Dick Clark giggled and sold more gum."<sup>30</sup>

So long as teens existed as a lucrative market category, the industry would supply them with a "teeny-bopper" idol. When these idols were written about by journalists and critics, it was often with full acquiescence to their marketing, tinged with disdain. This was the case as recently as the 2010s, when the idol was Justin Bieber. When he performed his first sold-out show at Madison Square Garden that September, the *New York Times* music critic Jon Caramanica titled his review "Send in the Heartthrobs, Cue the Shrieks" and wrote that Bieber "teased the crowd with flashes of direct emotional manipulation."<sup>31</sup> Two years later, another *Times* reporter covered the release of Bieber's latest fragrance, *Girlfriend*, and the girls who camped outside Macy's overnight to be the first to purchase it. "Justin Bieber's *Girlfriend*" was "not only the name of the flowery fragrance," he observed, "but also the fervent wish of many of those who bought it."<sup>32</sup>

By that time, One Direction was battling Bieber for the number one spot on the U.S. charts, and in the hearts of American teenagers, and Caramanica started reviewing their output with equal attentiveness. He called their 2012 sophomore album, *Take Me Home*,

“a reliable shriek inducer in girls who have not yet decided that shrieking doesn’t become them.”<sup>33</sup> He panned their 2013 album, *Midnight Memories*, writing, “They play the part almost resentfully, with the mien of people who know better ... Whether this is transparent to the squealers who make up their fanbase is tough to tell.”<sup>34</sup> Aware of the machinations of the pop industry, he situates himself in alignment with the put-upon boys, and implicitly blames the girls who love them for the fact of their presumably beleaguered existence. Caramanica invokes history to make his point without having to make it; he understands that we all know what the shrieking girls look like. It’s easy to find photos of young Beatles fans with their hands out and their faces drawn into tearful shock. It’s also easy to find nearly identical photos of Backstreet Boys fans and Justin Bieber fans and One Direction fans and BTS fans—but placing them side by side to highlight their similarity does not feel satisfying to me. Visually, it’s a neat trick, but the timelessness of a scream isn’t much of an observation.

★ ★ ★

Daniela Marino was not impressed by One Direction when she initially learned about their existence. They were too popular.

“I didn’t like them at first because they were all over my timeline on Twitter and Tumblr,” she said.<sup>35</sup> She was eighteen at the time. But then she watched the music video for “What Makes You Beautiful” once or twice, and then she started tweeting a little bit, and a decade later she waves the rest of that history away, saying, “Now I’m here, it’s been, what, almost ten years I’ve been here with One Direction?” As a teenager in Colombia, she became one of the organizers of a major One Direction fan club, which hosted meetups, birthday parties in honor of each of the band members, and anniversary parties every July commemorating the day One Direction was formed. She was on Twitter all the time, and the president of the fan club became one of her best friends. She had no real expectation that she would ever interact with any of the band members directly, but she felt a powerful connection to them because they were the same age. “We

grew up together in a way,” she told me. “They’re just this amazing part of my history and biography.”

Daniela was twenty years old in 2013, when she moved to the United States with her mother and brother so that her mother could marry a man who lived in a large suburb of Atlanta. The transition was much worse than any of them expected. “We had a lot of moments where we just wanted to go back, and we questioned if we made the right choice,” she told me. She and her mother were unfamiliar with American culture, shaky on the language, and struggled to bond with a new stepfamily. “My mom was depressed for a while,” she said. “I was basically the only person she could rely on and she was the only person I could rely on. But I couldn’t tell my mom how I was feeling or cry because that would make it worse for her.” That was when she would go back to One Direction—the music, the videos, but also the online community she had built and the responsibilities she had assigned herself. She stayed in touch with the president of the Colombian fan club, whom she by then regarded as a sister. “They helped me stay put,” she said. “Their music was always there.” When she went to her first and only One Direction concert in 2014, in Atlanta, she went alone and screamed. “As soon as I set foot in that stadium, I lost it,” she said. “I was by myself; nobody went with me. That was the best moment for me, in my life, to be honest.”

Every scream has a personal context, but we rarely hear about it. The trope of the screaming fan also ignores the possibility that some fans know they’re being looked at, and that they don’t care. “My own family kind of judge me for still liking One Direction, but I’m obviously never going to not like them,” Freya Whitfield, a fan from London, told me breezily.<sup>36</sup> Jacob Gaspar, a fan from Ohio, told me everyone thinks it’s a joke when he says he’s a One Direction fan. “I’m a straight male, and that’s not a big demographic for One Direction fans,” he said. “But I’m like, listen, I could play you like five songs and change your mind right now.” “A lot of people think I’m putting it on but it’s a genuine thing I really enjoy,” he insisted. “They ask me stuff and I prove my knowledge.”<sup>37</sup>

This style of self-aware acquiescence to an irrational passion may always have been part of the screaming fangirl experience. In 1964, a group of girls in Encino, California, founded an organization they called Beatlesaniacs, Ltd. It was advertised as “group therapy” and offered “withdrawal literature” for fans of the Beatles who felt that their emotions had gotten out of hand. In a 1964 issue of *Life* magazine, the group is covered credulously. (The spread on Beatlemania features a full-page image of a girl kneeling on the ground, grass clenched in her hand, tears streaming down her face—whether or not she was actually thinking, “Ringo! Ringo walked on this grass!” that is how the photo is captioned.) The club is mentioned in a small sidebar, titled “How to Kick the Beatle Habit.” “What Beatlesaniacs Ltd. offers is group therapy for those living near active chapters, and withdrawal literature for those going it alone at far-flung outposts,” it read. “Its membership card immediately identifies the bearer as someone who needs help.”<sup>38</sup>

The club was *obviously* a joke. Its rules included such items as “Do not mention the word Beatles (or beetles),” “Do not mention the word England,” “Do not speak with an English accent,” and “Do not speak English.” So not only was it a joke, it was a pretty funny one! But nobody is primed to see self-critique or sarcasm in fans. Seeing them toy with their own image, recognize their own condition, or mess with anyone’s heads contradicts the popular image that has circulated for the last one hundred or so years. The Beatlesaniacs president Cheryl Tusso was later compelled to write a letter to the editor of *Life* clarifying that her group was *not* in fact attempting to stop loving the Beatles.<sup>39</sup> They were only “campaigning against any form of behavior which might endanger the Beatles or their fans (i.e., mob riots, throwing of objects onto the stage, attacking the Beatles, etc.).” Also, they were just kidding.

★ ★ ★

When I was in college, I had a small fight with my boyfriend because I wore a “Mrs. Horan” T-shirt to a One Direction concert in Toronto. My then twelve-year-old sister made it for me in advance, and she



was joking. The zebra-print letters ironed onto the back were crooked and crumbling by the time the shirt made it to Canada. It was gauche on purpose, the tackiness of “wearing the merch to the show” taken to higher heights to make for a good bit. Wearing it, I was joking. I couldn’t believe this wasn’t obvious. I was impatient texting an explanation, mostly because I was furious that I’d been made to feel embarrassed. I hadn’t really thought Niall Horan might like to *marry me* or that I would like to marry him—an Irish teenager whose tweets indicated that he could barely spell. In fact, at twenty years old, I didn’t think much of myself at all, so it felt like being called out for having an overly aspirational crush on the star of a sports team, or the president. I wriggled out of it by saying “Sorry” and turning off my phone. As my mom drove our minivan through the streets of Toronto, Sophie peered out the windows with my dad’s military-grade binoculars, saying it was just in case she could catch a glimpse of Niall in traffic six lanes over. Or Harry in a hotel-room window twenty stories above. She was not seriously hopeful—she was twelve, and she was kidding. She hammed it up, hunting. I laughed so hard I activated the child safety lock on my seat belt.

At the time, it wouldn’t have occurred to me to situate myself in a lineage of screaming fangirls, but it’s fun to try it now. Beatlemania was “the first mass outburst of the 1960s to feature women,” Ehrenreich wrote the year before I was born. They weren’t rioting *for* anything, “but they did have plenty to riot against.”<sup>40</sup> To see or hear me and my sisters at the One Direction concert that night, early August, you would say we were hysterical. We were screaming. I can’t speak for everyone in the crowd—the Rogers Centre holds more than fifty-three thousand—but for me, it wasn’t the sight of five famous boys that made me feel like something uncommon was happening. It wasn’t the sound of their voices, which I couldn’t even hear. It was the fifty-thousand-person shouting match disguised as a sing-along, and the thunderclap of sneakers hitting concrete on every downbeat, eliminating the need to speak or catch any individual eye. Outside, the strange things we were capable of feeling were sneered at or smiled off or commercially packaged as “girl power,” but here they

were rough and loud. The sounds were ugly. Our hairlines were damp and the tendons in the backs of our knees were screaming. One pair of hands looked just like every other, outstretched in the dark, lining the bottom of other people's camera frames. We knew that our lives would not be fantasies, except for the fact that they were right now. When we shrieked, it was at the knowledge that the moment would end.

## Deep-Frying

A girl you run into screaming at a concert may go home afterward and cut up the footage she recorded to make GIFs and memes that will pass through many other hands, becoming something entirely different and totally bizarre. Unsatisfied by One Direction's constriction in time and place and situation, screaming girls who are also fanfiction writers will cast them as employees of suburban coffee shops, or plop them into the 1960s to operate alongside that other famous British band, or go behind the scenes with totally imagined detail, drawing out what they imagine to be the emotional consequences of fame or the more universal pangs of secret love. The writer Zan Romanoff has interviewed women who dress themselves up in the spirit of Harry Styles—indulging in elaborate cosplay—as an expression of devotion that is also a prolonged creative exercise.<sup>1</sup>

The image of the screaming fangirl is so familiar and dramatic, it precludes curiosity. But for decades, fans have not just passively enjoyed or loudly desired the objects of their fandom. They've also edited them and recirculated them and used them as the inspiration for a range of creative works so enormous—and largely uncatalogued—that it can't even be grasped. The art, the stories, and the in-jokes are as much a part of what it means to be a fan as staking out an airport or memorizing dozens of songs. I would never, ever, *ever* want to meet a member of One Direction, and I actively evaded the opportunity one afternoon when a coworker messaged me on Slack to announce that Harry Styles was just sitting around in the coffee shop on the ground floor of our office building. But I would like to

spend every day online talking about them, and I've spent years now tinkering with my ideas about what they might signify.

The term “transformational fandom” comes from Dreamwidth—an iteration of LiveJournal, built using the same code in 2008, after LiveJournal's new ownership implemented draconian content guidelines. It was coined by a pseudonymous fanfiction writer who was trying to explain the origin of an ongoing conflict between copyright holders and the amateurs who were appropriating from their work to make new stories. It's “all about laying hands upon the source and twisting it to the fans' own purposes,” they wrote in 2009. “It tends to spin outward into nutty chaos at the least provocation, and while there are majority opinions [and] minority opinions, it's largely a democracy of taste; everyone has their own shot at declaring what the source material means, and at radically re-interpreting it.”<sup>2</sup>

Transformational fandom separates itself from “affirmational” or “mimetic” fandom that celebrates the “canon” exactly as it is, copying it with exact replicas or precise cosplaying. It sometimes takes the form of playful disrespect, and you can't always understand it by taking it at face value. Its practice takes many forms, some of which could reasonably be described as mutilation, and from the outside, it might not even look like love at all. The One Direction fandom, as I experienced it on Tumblr in the early 2010s, was playfully vicious and much grosser than you might expect. The images I remember best were surrealist—sometimes creepy or disgusting. There's Niall Horan, somehow flying through the air in maroon skinny jeans, doing a split, upper body completely rigid, face frozen with eyes dead ahead, a blurry still from a long-lost video. There he is hovering in the dark corner of a concrete structure, foregrounded by twin bundles of sticks, never explained. Or there are his teeth in close-up before he had braces, or the weird toe on his left foot that's shaped like a lima bean. Girls on Tumblr made use of these images as naturally as if they were words.

To take things to another level: one method for making a meme totally indecipherable to the uninitiated is “deep-frying” it. Though

“deep-fried memes” originated on Tumblr and were popularized by Black Twitter, they’re most often associated now with the boys of Reddit. The subreddit r/DeepFriedMemes had 1 million members and self-described as a living archive for “memes that imitate and exaggerate the degradation of an image,” before the moderators made the forum private in 2020. (In a farewell letter published via a public Google Doc, one mod wrote that the popularity of the subreddit had doomed it; “people began frying more lazily.”)<sup>3</sup> It’s a category of form, not content, and the original meme can be almost anything, but in practice the jokes skew toward the “bruh” and “too lit,” sex and weed and guns and Yoda. These images, crackling with yellow-white noise and blurred like the edges of a CGI ghost, evoke the distance between writer and reader on social platforms. Posts are refracted through filter after filter and pixels lost through screenshot after screenshot, singeing off the fingerprints. If a human face goes through this process, it never fails to come out the other side demonic. If this startles you, it seems to say, you haven’t spent enough time online. The deep-fried One Direction memes on Tumblr are “deep-fried” not just because of the way they look—like magazine pages forgotten in the pocket of a pair of jeans that have then gone through a washing machine—but because they announce the absurdity of knowing enough about One Direction to appreciate them.

While many of the biggest subreddits for niche interests in gaming and internet culture explicitly prohibit “normies,” to my knowledge no one on Tumblr has ever bothered to do anything like that. You simply wouldn’t wind your way to the center of a Tumblr subcommunity without effort—drive-by spectatorship is unlikely, and when it happens, it’s immediately checked by the indecipherability of the conversations and images it witnesses. One of my favorite deep-fried One Direction memes—which looks as though it might have been, at one point, several lives ago, a screenshot of a tweet—was posted to Tumblr with a fuzzy background, the color of an eyeball in close-up, and bold Times New Roman text that is chopped off on one side and decapitated all along the top. “Friend: i don’t like 1D

Because there not bad boy” is wedged into the upper left corner. “Me: oh really!” is squished up against the edge of a photo of a boy who is barely recognizable as Niall Horan in a cardigan—he has holes for eyes—sitting with his legs stretched out across a staircase, which has a red-and-white sticker on it reading “Do not sit on stairs.”<sup>4</sup>

Whoever made this image may or may not have had any fidelity to the stereotype of a screaming fangirl. All I know about them is that they were infatuated with or intrigued by One Direction enough to make something funny and weird using an image that most people would have considered pretty uninspiring. The resulting meme makes fun of One Direction and it makes fun of the people who love them—it may read in other ways to other fans, but to me it looks like a sardonic wink or a playful jab at fans’ ridiculous fervor for defending something that doesn’t really need defending. (Nobody was going to change their minds about One Direction just because we insisted they were “bad boys” worth loving; One Direction was not at risk of being viewed as unpopular even if various people in each of our lives were unimpressed.) Though the criticism of fangirls is that they become tragically selfless and one-track-minded, the evidence available everywhere I look is that they become self-aware and creatively free.

★ ★ ★

Theodor Adorno, the most famous cultural theorist associated with the mid-century Marxists of the Frankfurt School, did not find “music for entertainment” very entertaining. This is probably the opinion he’s cited on most often, and it’s become a useful straw man (he’s dead!) in contemporary essays in defense of popular things. Pop music “seems to complement the reduction of people to silence, the dying out of speech as expression, the inability to communicate at all,” he wrote in his 1938 essay “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening.”<sup>5</sup>

Though critics often deride him as a snob, this isn’t exactly true. He was disdainful of high art as well, which could be created only through patronage made possible by wealth accumulation. His issue was not exactly the quality of the music, though he sometimes

undermined himself with blanket statements about that too, but the cold, systematized manner in which it was produced and sold. To him, the culture industry— a term he coined so that he would not have to use the term “mass culture,” which implied too much agency on the part of said masses—was the exact opposite of possibility. It secured the status quo. It offered only a brief respite from work, providing the worker with energy to work more. It offered the “pretense” of individual identity and choice, but was really a force for making everyone agree that they thought and felt the same. He found this devastating and predicted a dark future in which love would be imagined only as it is described in the pop songs, happiness would be the car that the pop song advertised, and songs would eventually serve only as billboards for themselves and their industry. (The lyrics of the One Direction song “Better Than Words” are almost entirely made up of the titles of eighteen famous love songs...) Of the fans he saw losing their cool at live music performances, he wrote, “Their ecstasy is without content.” And of the type of person who could fall for all of this, he wrote with a tinge of sympathy that they must have “free time and little freedom.”

Adorno’s work has been the starting point for the last seventy years of pop culture analysis. When I read it now, I obviously see things I didn’t see as a college freshman, flipping through it to pull essentially random quotations for an English paper, before One Direction came so forcefully into my life. I feel an embarrassing knee-jerk defensiveness, and I also feel resistant to the central claim that culture is something that happens to almost everyone the same way, or that it is strictly possible for “ecstasy” to be “without content.” I can’t skim over what I recognize: One Direction fans, or Beatles fans, the screaming girls who went home and holed up in their bedrooms to make whatever they were going to make in response to their outsized emotions, did have plenty of free time and “little freedom.” That’s the default condition of a teenager, and it’s also the way I felt about my life when I was a friendless undergrad on a two-thousand-acre campus, confined to a narrow range of activities that didn’t make me happy. (This is obviously not exactly what he meant.) But the world opened up for me online in unexpected form; wanting to

understand what I loved so much about One Direction, I started asking rhetorical questions and observing my own reactions. At eighteen, I was ashamed to be exactly what everyone imagines when they think of a boy band fan, and I didn't think I was dreaming of making out with any pop stars, but what if I did? I didn't feel trapped or manipulated. I felt like I'd been given a jigsaw puzzle, and if I could put it together, I would understand something about myself, maybe even see the whole picture.

When I read fanfiction, I see others taking on this same task. This is a tradition of fandom that precedes the internet, and some of the earliest fanfiction involving real people—rather than fictional TV, film, or literary characters—was about the Beatles. It was circulated only in small batches, through letters, likely because of a powerful taboo applied to real person fiction (RPF) that lasted until the social media age. (“I’ve talked to one or two old fans who used to do that, and who would still hang out on fandom websites when I found the fandom back in 2010,” a popular Beatles fic writer who goes by ChutJeDors told me, but that was as close I got to any of them.)<sup>6</sup> Basically none of that writing has survived, and the Fanlore wiki notes that “not much is known about the players, fanworks, or fan activities of the community,” particularly in contrast to the well-documented *Star Trek* fanfiction community that emerged around the same time, largely among men.<sup>7</sup> Whatever might have been saved and posted to FanFiction.net at the dawn of online fandom would have been lost in 2001, when the website banned fiction featuring “non-historical and non-fictional characters.”

But decades later, the most popular category of Beatles fanfiction being disseminated through the proto-social network Yahoo Groups was slashfic—stories that focus on same-sex romantic pairings—that imagined a relationship between Paul McCartney and John Lennon. This kind of hypothetical romance is called a “ship,” a noun that doubles as a verb, as in “I ship Paul and John.” Today, the Groups service is impossible to access—the service was shut down by the parent company Verizon in 2020—and even the most famous fics are difficult to find. Some smaller fic sites are partially archived via the



Wayback Machine, but stories are often viewable only as snippets, and collections that were hosted on the fannish platforms Dreamwidth and LiveJournal are largely inactive now. Most *new* “McLennon” stories are posted on Archive of Our Own or Tumblr.

I am not a Beatles fan, but I enjoy clicking through the tags that bring me to stories as long as books, following the unlikely adventures of McLennon. Many of them are written based off of prompts, or requests, as is a common practice in fic-writing communities. A fan who enjoys the ship will ask a talented writer to craft them a story with a premise they have in mind, like “What about a fanfiction where Paul starts feeling ill but doesn’t tell anybody until he gets really sick and then John ... has to take care [of] him? That would be so cute!”<sup>8</sup> Or “Can you do a fic where paul is pregnant and going into labor?”<sup>9</sup> There are alternative universe—“AU”—stories in which the members of the Beatles are a bunch of college students or young wizards at Hogwarts, or in which Paul McCartney is a woman named Mary and the Beatles are a co-ed band. I found and could only skim a forty-nine-thousand-word story about Paul McCartney coming out in 1966—the same for a forty-three-thousand-word story about McCartney and Lennon living together in New York City from the mid-1970s to the present. There are Tumblr pages dedicated to curating and aggregating the best McLennon fiction from Archive of Our Own, LiveJournal, and Wattpad, and that specialize in finding “lost fics”—stories you have a vague memory of reading once and loving. The fic writer ChutJeDors describes her blog, called *Your Quality John/Paul-Library*, as a lost and found, as well as a place for recommendations and for fic-writing resources.<sup>10</sup> (She plans to add research materials about Liverpool and a dictionary of Scouse, its local dialect, to help writers who are interested in using authentic details.) *Your Quality John/Paul-Library* recommends a super-short story about John touching Paul’s butt, as well as a thirty-thousand-word story about John agreeing to serve as a fake boyfriend at Paul’s family Christmas party. The light is mixed in with the dark, and there are also stories about death and illness. There are even stories about nothing, as is the case with one Chut published in January 2021: “No

plot—just boring, perfect everyday life on Thomas Lane, Liverpool,” the description of an eighty-six-thousand-word story about Lennon and McCartney as “an old married couple” reads.<sup>11</sup>

There are thousands of pieces of long-form slashfic about each possible pairing of One Direction members as well, but there are also novel forms of transformation enabled by newer internet platforms. On Tumblr, which is primarily an image-based platform, micro fanfics called “imagines” overlay tiny point-of-view scenarios on top of photos of the boys, inviting the reader to “imagine” themselves in some specific situation or another. They can be boring, asking the viewer to imagine such obvious things as kissing Harry Styles or marrying Zayn Malik. They can be fun, as when they goofily sketch out a situation the viewer might really be curious about experiencing. They can also be horrifying and surprising, for any number of reasons—the most surrealist of them seem to be written by people who are reaching to find something that has not already been proposed, or people who just have uncontrollable imaginations, or people who are making fun of the form. One that I think about often goes like this: “Imagine: You and Harry are on a date and you’re playing chubby bunny.” This text is positioned at the top of a photo of Harry Styles eating a bunch of large marshmallows. “On your first try you accidentally swallow the whole marshmallow and run to the bathroom and poop it out. You and Harry look at it in the toilet and laugh [*sic*] and he hugs you.”<sup>12</sup> You and Harry look into the toilet and laugh and he hugs you!

The most inexplicable entries are archived on a Tumblr called “bad1dimagines.” It can be difficult to tell which scenarios were dreamed up sincerely, which were jokes about the practice of fandom in general, and which were concocted as imitations of a person’s own morbid longings—satire that would be ineffective were it not for the commentary of the account’s anonymous twentysomething curator. She has been providing this service for years now, after starting it on a whim in 2015, and her captions often receive tens of thousands of likes and reblogs, indicating that a sizable chunk of the fandom is in on the joke. A probably sincere post asks the reader to imagine:

“Zayn just moved to your neighborhood and one day when you’re walking to school he tells you to come and get on his scooter so you agree and when you two get to the school everyone’s staring at you and the strange, exotic boy besides you and eventually rumors go around that you two are dating and then you two fall in love.” Underneath, the bad1dimagines curator added, “I wonder if they’re staring at you bc you’re with zayn or if, and just hear me out here, if it’s because you’re two people riding one scooter.”<sup>13</sup> Though the captions can sometimes be a little mean, their author accepts every premise as it’s presented to her. Never does she suggest that it’s unrealistic to dream of personal interactions with the extremely famous members of a boy band.

Bad1dimagines is structured around a much more coherent tagging system than your average Tumblr, which makes it easy to find the scary stuff. There’s a whole section of the blog dedicated to “Dark Harry” imagines—stories about Harry Styles being violent or controlling or murderous.<sup>14</sup> These strike some of the same notes as the wealth of fanfiction about Justin Bieber dying in hideous ways, seeming to reach for the only higher-pitched and more confusing emotional reaction imaginable for someone who already feels as strongly as they think is possible.<sup>15</sup> Liam stabs you in the abdomen. Niall pushes you off a bridge. Harry runs you over with his car, laughing, or cuts your collarbones out of your chest “because he loved them so much.”<sup>16</sup> These violent images are culled from other forms of popular culture, remixed to star a group of boys whose commercial proposition is that they would never hurt you. How scary—and why do it? If there’s a joke, what is it? (One post, seared into my brain, is a collection of images plotting “the outfit you wear to jump in front of niall’s car.” It includes a blue gown covered in Swarovski crystals and a microwavable Kid Cuisine meal with *Shrek*-branded packaging.)<sup>17</sup> I didn’t think I knew, until I’d scrolled through so many “bad” imagines that I no longer understood what any common nouns directly signified and could not remember how to put together a sentence. That’s when I really started laughing.

The joke is that we have talked so much about these people that we no longer have anything left to say that isn't totally absurd. "Imagine: niall horan crawling inside your ear" goes one of my favorite Tumblr posts. "you tell him to stop, but he is in there."<sup>18</sup> I don't have any idea who made this, or why, or how it became so well known among girls who were on the internet in 2013 that references to it persist to this day. What I like about it is its senselessness and the creator's evident delight in her own unusual mind; it invokes the nightmarish nonsense of love for a stranger and the hilarity of losing control, and when I see it, I remember what I wanted more than anything when I was nineteen years old. I wanted something to happen to me that couldn't be described.

## Shrines

I'm looking for the shrine to Harry Styles's vomit. I know it was on Tumblr—I remember seeing it there. In the fall of 2014, at the beginning of my last year of college, I also remember a GIF set of Harry Styles, answering an interview question about the shrine to his own vomit, nodding diplomatically and saying, first in one frame, "It's interesting. For sure," and in a second, "A little niche, maybe."<sup>1</sup>

Those are my memories. These are the facts. That October, Harry Styles went to a party at the British pop singer Lily Allen's house in Los Angeles.<sup>2</sup> The next morning, riding in a chauffeured Audi, in his gym clothes, on the way back from "a very long hike," he requested that the driver pull over. On the side of the 101 freeway just outside Calabasas, he threw up near a metal barrier, looked up, and locked eyes with a camera. He is sweaty, peaked; his hair is dirty, pulled up in a messy bun. Yet dehydrated in gym shorts and athletic socks, hands-on-knees by the side of the road, he still exudes the elegance of Harry Styles. His cheekbones find the direction of the light, thanks to reflex or a gift from God.

The day they were taken, the photos circulated in tabloids and on Tumblr and Twitter, and a few hours later, a Los Angeles-based eighteen-year-old named Gabrielle Kopera set out to find the spot and label it for posterity. She drove there alone, then taped a piece of poster board to the barrier: HARRY STYLES THREW-UP HERE 10-12-14, she wrote in big block letters. The grainy photo she posted first to her own Instagram circulated later on Tumblr, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, and all those junky-looking celebrity blogs that are actually just search engine scams. Even more than the photos of Harry Styles, I

remember that I loved the photo of this sign. Harry Styles threw up here! That's all he did—but given that we've seen him throw up only once before (gross story), and we've never seen him do it on *this* strip of gravel, the sign suggested that the event was worth recording for posterity. Harry Styles threw up here! Six months prior, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the then twenty-year-old Styles had dropped \$4 million on a five-bedroom house in Beverly Hills (a photo gallery of the home's interior was removed from the story shortly after publishing).<sup>3</sup> Yet he descended from the Hills, jumped out of the car in fancy suburbia, and threw up in the street. Why stop at a piece of poster board? Why not a plaque?

The idea of Harry Styles throwing up on the side of a highway and the idea of a girl I don't know erecting a shrine to it is the most precise possible representation of what I find interesting. Imagining what could make me feel most myself, I thought it would be standing on that ground. No, I would not touch it—I would just look at it, photograph it, and delight in executing the dramatic act of Photoshopping myself into a meme in the physical world. So, in December 2019, I flew to Los Angeles for two days and drove around in a rented minivan, stopping only at places where I knew Harry Styles had been.

I had no other curiosities about the city in which I had spent fewer than forty-eight hours in my entire life. My first move upon arriving was to hop confidently onto the wrong shuttle bus, then walk two miles in the sun to pick up my rental car. I wanted to take photos of the Christmas decorations in the Budget office—piles of tinsel and glimmering metallic mini trees made every surface look like an imminent fire hazard and the set of a music video. But I was too embarrassed to take out my phone, so I just absorbed what I could, accepted my keys, and headed for a donut shop. Harry Styles wore a crewneck sweatshirt with the donut shop's logo on it while out for a jog in the summer of 2016, according to a Styles-specific fashion blog that blocked me on Twitter sometime after. I spent my time waiting in line in the parking lot of Randy's Donuts deliberating over what sort of donut Harry would be most likely to eat. I didn't think it would be

anything too elaborate—something classic, not *too* rich to sit well with black coffee. (For a while, Harry Styles had a habit of drinking black coffee with a spoonful of butter and a spoonful of coconut oil in it, part of one of those terrifying new diets for men.) I settled on a classic glazed donut and a jelly-filled one, because this was vacation. Then I drove around Los Angeles with gobs of strawberry dripping down my arm, memorizing the words to the new Harry Styles album, singing with my mouth full and the windows down. I spent the whole trip chasing him around the city in a dogged pursuit that I certainly felt was nearly cinematic. There were costume changes! Mishaps! A long montage of scribbling in a notebook in public! I put on my nicest New Year's Eve dress to go to the Nice Guy on La Cienega Boulevard, a restaurant to which both Harry Styles and Zayn Malik have taken dates, and where cameras are forbidden, and I also paid \$15 to park my car above a gentlemen's club. My reservation was so early that there was nobody else in the entire restaurant. I stayed for ten minutes, drinking one \$18 glass of wine, then swiped a handful of souvenir matchbooks and went back to the hotel.

The next morning, wearing a baseball cap low over my face as if I were myself a celebrity, I went to the Beachwood Cafe on the edge of Griffith Park. I was afraid that the workers might see something in my eyes or the tilt of my phone camera that would indicate I was there only because Harry Styles had referenced the place in a new song—a ballad about his ex-girlfriend Camille Rowe, with whom he apparently used to eat brunch there. The lyric goes, “The coffee's out / At the Beachwood Cafe / And it kills me 'cause I know we've / Run out of things we can say.” Sad! The coffee was not out, for the record, just a little watery. I tucked the receipt into my wallet, in the spot where some people might carry their business cards or photos of their children. I sat and drank the coffee and snuck photos of my surroundings, thinking not about the possibility of breathing in a speck of dust made from Harry Styles's dead skin, but of how many girls just like me would do this very thing. I was early; the album had come out only the night before. But now, if I click through the tagged photos for the Beachwood Cafe on Instagram, I see them. One after the other—hundreds. “The coffee actually WAS out” on one

afternoon, around 1:00 p.m. Pacific time, though it “WAS NOT out” just two hours before, when a different Styles fan got there. Many of the pictures tagged with Beachwood Cafe are not actually of the Beachwood Cafe, but just of girls in their rooms, wherever they may be, listening to the same song. On Tumblr, there are mood boards for an afternoon at the Beachwood Cafe with Harry Styles, and blogs with URLs like [out-of-coffee-beachwood-cafe.tumblr.com](http://out-of-coffee-beachwood-cafe.tumblr.com), and, of course, speculation about whether Styles has ever been to the Beachwood Cafe with Louis Tomlinson, to whom many still believe he is secretly married. I came back an hour later and ate pancakes—why not! This time I snuck photos of the royal-blue-and-yellow-triangle-checked flooring, as well as my dirty plate.

And of course, I drove thirty miles from my hotel, taking the interstate to the 101 freeway and following it through Calabasas, toggling between watching where I was going, sipping hot coffee—black!—and scanning the shoulder for a familiar patch of gravel. I’d billed this trip as a pilgrimage, and I felt a feverish dedication to securing a moment of spiritual bliss. Without Harry Styles, Los Angeles to me was just an American city like any other I had seen mostly on TV. A freeway was just a freeway. A shoulder of the road was something I would never risk life and limb to stare at while steering a borrowed vehicle with one hand. I drove ten miles one way and then ten miles back down the other side. In the original photo, you can’t see anything except the edge of a guardrail, some pebbles, and the direction of traffic, which was toward the camera. I’m not sure why I thought the exact spot it was taken would be so obvious—I guess I grossly overestimated my ability to differentiate one piece of roadside from any other—but I convinced myself I’d gotten close enough. The sound of crunching gravel was familiar and significant; the air was heavy, not with humidity but with history. Here we were! This contact, while glancing and totally imaginary, was more intimate than the time I’d spent in stadiums and arenas with Harry Styles, and funnier to me than life itself.

*It’s one of these patches of dirt here, I imagined telling a double-decker tour bus. It’s very important to remember. Then I imagined a Los Angeles ghost tour one hundred years in the future: This is where*



*that journalist was decapitated by a tractor trailer as she knelt at the side of the road looking for the spot where a pop star threw up. She hovers over the 101 to this day, searching, but not unhappily. See, there she is now, she's eating a donut.* I got everything I wanted, really, because what I wanted was an opportunity to make my own digital shrine—just some photos of the highway, just some tweets about how good it felt to go in search of it. Just a little joke about how I'm getting older, and how I'm allowed to rent a car. Just something to report back to the girls on the internet.

★ ★ ★

The earliest experiments in online community had an odd gravitational pull, for whatever reason, for Grateful Dead fans. Community Memory, the first digital bulletin board, was installed in a Berkeley record store in 1973 and was tightly intertwined with the California counterculture—it was dedicated to the sharing of art and literature, and full of Deadheads.<sup>4</sup> The same year, the Stanford University artificial intelligence researcher Paul Martin created the distribute command “dead.dis@sail” to collate his lab’s email conversation about the Grateful Dead into a proto listserv. In early 1975, he made the mailing list semipublic by putting it on ARPANET—the U.S. Department of Defense’s experiment in communication protocols that would eventually lead to the invention of the internet as we know it—and researchers from other universities started joining.<sup>5</sup> Martin programmed automatic news updates that crawled for information about the Grateful Dead and sent them out immediately to all subscribers, and they, in turn, crowdsourced information from other fans in a manner and with a purpose strikingly similar to those of pop stans today. In 1975, for example, based on group intel, several members of the dead.dis@sail mailing list crashed a wedding at a country club outside Palo Alto after learning that the Dead guitarist Bob Weir had been hired to play with his side band Kingfish.<sup>6</sup> (They were allowed to stay.)

According to the internet researcher and historian Nancy K. Baym, “hundreds, perhaps thousands” of dial-up computer bulletin board

systems were launched throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and many were specifically set aside as forums for Grateful Dead fans.<sup>7</sup> Here, early adopters innovated the idea that the internet might be organized by affinity. Though early internet fandom was invite-only and near exclusive to well-paid white men, it was also the first evidence of a pattern. Fans became, almost as a rule, the first to adopt new platforms and to invent new features of the internet—a habit molded by the fact that they were the people with the most obvious incentive to do so.

The WELL, the most influential early virtual community—the story of which is chronicled in Howard Rheingold’s 1993 history *The Virtual Community*—was founded by Stewart Brand and Larry Brilliant in 1985 as a general interest dial-up bulletin board system for the Bay Area in California. (Later, in the early 1990s, it morphed into a broad-use internet service provider.) Though many of the other early users of the WELL were technologists, scientists, journalists, and academics to whom computers were already familiar, Deadheads invested hours of free time to learn about the technology that would make it possible to practice their fandom together in cyberspace.<sup>8</sup> Their “conference” on the WELL was known only as “GD,” and it was always busy with chatty fans—dissecting lyrics, discussing concerts, sometimes swapping memorabilia or tapes. It could be joined only by emailing an administrator or “host” personally, and was founded by the Deadhead historian David Gans, with the help of the tech journalist Mary Eisenhart and the programmer Bennett Falk, who came up with the idea at a Grateful Dead concert. In *The Virtual Community*, Matthew McClure, the WELL’s first director, identifies two major growth spurts for the board: the first was word of mouth among Bay Area computer professionals and journalists; the second was the Deadheads. “Suddenly, we had an onslaught of new users,” he tells Rheingold. “The Deadheads came online and seemed to know instinctively how to use the system to create a community around themselves.”<sup>9</sup> At the time, individual internet users had to pay à la carte for the hours they spent online, and being a member of the WELL—if you used it fanatically—could run up a bill of hundreds of

dollars a month. These funds were necessary to keep the service operational, and the Deadheads were therefore crucial to its survival. According to Rheingold, the Grateful Dead conference on the WELL was “so phenomenally successful that for the first several years, Deadheads were by far the single largest source of income for the enterprise.”<sup>10</sup>

By the 1990s, people building alternate lives through online fandom were also imagining the future of the internet. Fan sites with rudimentary features like guestbooks and photo collections were some of the most heavily trafficked pages on the internet once the World Wide Web opened up to a broad recreational-users base, and in 1995, Yahoo’s free web hosting service, GeoCities, took off, filling up with thousands of fan sites that had something for everyone. The full range of these pages is difficult to see today, but amateur archivists have put substantial effort into preserving it: you can still browse partially salvaged pages for *The X-Files* (with names like “24 Hour News X” and “The Hall of X”), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (“Buffyology—The Academic Study of Buffy”), *Sailor Moon* (“The Moon Palace Archive”), the boy band Hanson (“Grown Up Hanson Fans Unite”), Harry Potter (“Perfect?,” a Percy Weasley fanfiction archive), Sherlock Holmes (“The Sexiest Lines in Sherlockian Canon”), *CSI* (“Naked Truth,” a site dedicated to an imagined relationship between investigators Catherine Willows and Sara Sidle), Britney Spears (“Jen’s Britney Spears Page,” “Jerry’s Britney Spears Page,” “Matt’s Britney Spears Page,” “Britney People,” “Britney Space”), and almost any other media property or personality you can think of.<sup>11</sup> Backstreet.net, “the MOST famous/best BSB page on the Net,” was created in 1997, and though its guestbook is now littered with phone-sex spam, it is still browsable. A faux-LED “I <3 BSB!” GIF still spins around on the front page, above links to 25,000 photos, 12 discussion boards, and an RSS news bulletin that sent out 1,691 updates about the Backstreet Boys before it ceased publication in 2012.

These pages were social networks in their own right, bound by limitations that meant conversation could happen only clunkily in guestbooks or by linking and cross-posting, but richly interconnected

nonetheless. Some of the more elaborate sites had discussion boards; Murmurs, an R.E.M. fan site built using Microsoft's FrontPage HTML editor by then sixteen-year-old Ethan Kaplan, debuted in 1996 and had ten thousand users and five thousand new posts per day during its peak. When Kaplan shut the site down after eighteen years, he reflected on it as "a great example of an emergent community around fanaticism."<sup>12</sup> In August 1998, David Bowie announced that he would be launching the "first artist-created Internet Service Provider." BowieNet, as it was called, was a fully functioning ISP for eight years. Fans paid \$19.95 a month for a "davidbowie.com" email address, Bowie chat rooms, exclusive Bowie content (including concert "cybercasts"), 5 MB of storage space on their Bowie fan pages, and "full uncensored" internet access. "I wanted to create an environment where not just my fans, but all music lovers could be a part of the same community," Bowie said in a press release, "a single place where the vast archives of music information could be accessed, views stated and ideas exchanged."<sup>13</sup>

★ ★ ★

The idea of mailing a monthly wireless bill to Taylor Swift or sending your professional correspondence from an "@justinbieber.com" email address would be ridiculous now, but that kind of participation was, for a time, a logical way for music fans to experiment with the possibilities of the internet. Before most people were using the internet for anything, fans were using it for everything. Still, for much of the 1990s, these fans were mostly men—well-educated, affluent, and white. The World Wide Web was born in 1994, and though millions of people came online throughout the mid-1990s, the gender gap in the United States didn't close until 2000. (In a study of women's internet adoption from 1997 to 2001, the economists Hiroshi Ono and Madeline Zavodny argued that the delay could be attributed to men and women's differences "on average, in socioeconomic status, which influences computer and internet access and use.")<sup>14</sup>

To see the women of the early internet, and of early online fandom, you have to look for them. Women were expressly unwelcome on the web in its early days. “There are no girls on the internet,” a catchphrase that originated in Usenet gaming communities in the early 1990s, was in wide use on 4chan and Reddit and other forums well into the aughts. It was codified in “The Rules of the Internet,” a digital document that has fluctuated in length and form as it’s been passed around message boards for the past fifteen years but still contains several phrases that are instantly recognizable to anybody who has spent time online.<sup>15</sup> (Rule 34—“if it exists, there is porn of it”—is so well known that it’s regularly quoted by people who probably can’t name the source or a single other “rule.” Same for Rule 32, “pics or it didn’t happen.”) Rule 30 is “there are no girls on the internet,” and it’s followed by a correlated rule, number 31, “tits or GTFO,” a common refrain from the days in which any internet user claiming to be a woman was demanded to prove it with a photo of her body.

Before TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, Friendster, and all the other Web 2.0 platforms that incentivized the hoarding of attention and the cultivation of a personal brand, pseudonymity was the online norm. Though the lack of real names or bodies made it a difficult task, men in these spaces were still fixated on identifying the sex of the users they interacted with—and driving women off the web by insisting they weren’t there to begin with. “The discourse of male-by-default is pervasive across pseudonymous spaces,” the internet researcher Siân Brooke observed in a retrospective.<sup>16</sup> But there were, of course, girls on the internet; they were just hidden. Nancy Kaplan and Eva Farrell’s 1994 ethnography of “young women on the net” staged a direct challenge to earlier studies that had dwelled on the negative experiences of adult women who’d tried to participate in internet culture, and instead emphasized the importance of speaking to teenage girls. Teen girls, Kaplan and Farrell pointed out, had no professional reason to be online, and so it was only their “desires” that brought them there. This made them an ideal subject for study of what anyone might be seeking on the

internet, and whether they were finding it. “We have been so busy noticing what hinders and repels us that we have failed to ask what draws some of us,” Kaplan and Farrell wrote, introducing a deep dive into the public messages on a handful of popular online bulletin boards—all owned and operated and populated predominantly by men, and all used, also, by teenage girls. These girls were going to boards for thoughtful, long-form correspondence that differed from the conversations men were having in both style and intent. Girls were writing “to maintain connection rather than to convey information,” Kaplan and Farrell observed. Their sketch was self-admittedly simplistic, using anecdotal accounts to point at behavioral stereotypes, but it was pivotal in demonstrating the reality that girls, in fact, had not been uniformly dissuaded from computers or from life online. Farrell watched the conversations of others and kept her own diaries. “I noticed that even as I was inducted into this world, I invoked changes in it,” she wrote. “You create the net in the act of accessing it.”<sup>17</sup>

In the late 1990s, women contributed disproportionately to the boom of fan websites—a boom that was energized by the creation of thousands of GeoCities pages in honor of boy bands like NSYNC, Boyz II Men, and the Backstreet Boys in the United States, as well as Take That, Westlife, and Boyzone in Europe, all of which grew in parallel to the wealth of pages created by the enormous, women-led fandoms for TV shows like *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. “Girls and women are a substantial presence on the World Wide Web,” the researcher Pamela Takayoshi wrote in 1999, bucking the general assumption—it was just that the sites they were building occupied “a nonmainstream, nondefault position” and were going unnoticed.<sup>18</sup> Even as men continued to argue that women did not exist online, women were outpacing them: most new users of the internet in 2000 were young women, according to a Pew Research Center study conducted at the time, and most of them were young women who were “more enthusiastic” about the internet than their male counterparts. The report referred to these energetic new users

as “Instant Acolytes” and credited them with a projected societal shift of enormous consequence:

*With Instant Acolytes’ inclination to go online from home and for fun, the Internet may be evolving much like the telephone into a domestic tool for sociability used more heavily by women. Rather than a mysterious technology that is the province of men, the Internet is on the cusp of becoming a household appliance whose applications are as much social as transactions-oriented.*<sup>19</sup>

By the time of Pew’s follow-up study in 2005, 86 percent of American women between eighteen and twenty-nine were online, compared with 80 percent of men that age.<sup>20</sup> Men were still using the internet for a wider variety of activities, but women were far more prolific online communicators, sending and receiving emails for personal reasons that had nothing to do with work and approaching the new tools at their disposal as ones well suited for connection. Though men had been the early adopters of the internet, women were the early adopters of social media—in late 2010, just after the launch of Instagram, 68 percent of American women were using some combination of social networking sites, compared with 53 percent of men. By August 2012, the numbers had risen to 75 percent for women and 63 percent for men, and the gap didn’t close until 2015.<sup>21</sup> Incidentally, One Direction had been the biggest band in the world for four years by then, and I was twenty-two years old, having the time of my life, friendless in my first apartment in New York City, scrolling through Tumblr.

★ ★ ★

The reason I was so disturbed when I was inclined to look for the shrine to Harry Styles’s vomit on Tumblr and couldn’t find it is because I rely on Tumblr to provide me with my memory.

Tumblr had no system in place to archive or analyze activity on its platform before it hired its first “meme librarian,” Amanda Brennan,

in 2013, six years after the site launched.<sup>22</sup> But luckily Tumblr's basic premise—as a somewhat secretive space for identity exploration through multimedia—enabled a culture with a unique visual style and a predilection for “discourse” and historicizing. Stockpiling images and compiling them into “master posts,” the basic work of archiving a cultural phenomenon, became one of the common recreational uses of the site—today, even for those wading past broken links and stabbing blindly for useful search terms, there are remarkable libraries of One Direction ephemera to be found. They're made up of GIF sets, an invention of Tumblr users, and organized with elaborate tagging systems that are possible only on Tumblr, where users can put spaces between words and write entire paragraphs legibly in a post's tags. Though they can be difficult to find, posts that are deleted are not necessarily gone, because reblogging a post and adding to it makes a persistent copy of it—totally unlike a Twitter retweet, which disappears if the source material is erased. At various points, users couldn't reply to posts at all without reblogging them onto their own page, turning every conversation into a public exquisite corpse.

The way Tumblr is built also explains why so many describe the site as formative in their political, aesthetic, and cultural taste, as well as their personal identity. Alexander Cho, an assistant professor of Asian American studies at UC Santa Barbara who researches how young people use social media, has credited the physical structure of Tumblr with the creation of its culture. In his 2015 doctoral thesis, he explored the reasons that queer young people of color gravitated toward Tumblr in its first several years of popularity, and how the site was used “to cultivate an explicitly anti-heteronormative, anti-white supremacist politics.”<sup>23</sup> Tumblr was a creative new space that had little in common with other social media sites on which users were expected to maintain public profiles, and on which the ties between people or “accounts” were also public and could be explored in order to understand a web of connections. While Tumblr content *can* be seen and distributed widely, and there are certain Tumblr posts from many years ago that persist, reblogged by hundreds of thousands of



people, it's rare for a Tumblr post to become well known outside of the insular world of the platform. When a blog disappears or its URL changes, there is no easy way to find it again. Tumblr's search feature is so bad it might as well not even exist. These design choices meant that Tumblr was impossible to simply drop in on and understand: "Tumblr, especially in the early days, seemed impenetrable, ruled by a code and norms that were never outlined anywhere officially, only intuited," Cho writes. "[It] feels almost as if it purposely gave the middle finger to established conventions of indexing, search, and persistence on the internet."<sup>24</sup>

The same design elements and features that foster Tumblr's singular culture make it difficult to find cultural artifacts on the site. But this, too, is part of Tumblr's culture: for me, the shrine to Harry Styles's vomit is preserved by my resolve to wade through shards of information and broken links to find it. I should have prepared better—I should have reblogged the shrine years ago so that it would forever be part of my own page and I would never have to worry. Because Tumblr's primary interactive feature is the reblog, its primary mode of engagement is frantic stockpiling. Scrolling through the feed, users gather things to their pages—things that may be deleted later by their original creator but which anyone, after reposting, can single-handedly preserve.

The small thrill of understanding a meme comes from a feeling of belonging, but when years have gone by and the meme resurfaces, the feeling is also one of relief. For Christmas one year, my sister made me a sweatshirt with a Tumblr in-joke on it: a photo of Niall Horan trying out for *The X Factor* with a paper sign taped to his shirt, on which some production assistant had typed out his name, erroneously, as "Naill." Dredging up his tiny humiliation is funny because it's a callback to a time before the world knew his name, when only day-one fans could be expected to notice the error. Bringing it up again years later is a way of teasing him, even though he's not there to participate, and it's a way of teasing each other for caring so much about his life. It's also an offer of reassurance—we all feel this way, still, a decade later.

These are the best and most satisfying memes: the ones that require years of recall. I can scroll through my Tumblr feed today and sometimes be startled anew by the absurdity of “Wax Liam,” the nickname the One Direction fandom gave to Liam Payne’s horrifying wax figure at Madame Tussauds, which looks, frankly, like some kind of sex doll. The mouth is open, corners turned up, with a tongue visibly close to emerging—kind of like he’s panting? But the eyes are dull and dead, with no smile creases. The effect is that the face looks pained and horny. It’s been Photoshopped into any number of unnatural scenarios, including a tattoo on Zayn Malik’s arm; an *Insidious* movie poster, overtop the faces; the “hide your kids” meme; a still from the music video for Christina Perri’s “Jar of Hearts” (?); and a whole bunch of smutty tousled-sheet fanfiction scenarios. (In the fall of 2020, going about my workday scrolling, I felt a tinge of sadness upon seeing the news: One Direction’s wax figures were being removed from the museum after seven years.) Yet Wax Liam is not easy to find if you are not already embedded in Wax Liam culture. It was never added to a formal archive or written about in a publication that would maintain such a thing. Know Your Meme, the de facto encyclopedia of internet culture for more than a decade now, does not reference it. There are only eight entries on the site that refer to One Direction at all. The meme repository of record is run by well-intentioned and detail-obsessed people, but everyone has blind spots. “Having a female voice on staff is very rare,” Brennan told me when I was reporting on the site’s ten-year anniversary.<sup>25</sup> (Before she was Tumblr’s meme librarian, she interned at Know Your Meme for a summer.) Your best bet for links to Wax Liam, and details about his storied time on earth, come from messaging the operator of that invaluable blog bad1dimagines. “I like this blog a lot because sometimes when people ask about a specific thing (a picture or wax liam), you link it,” an anonymous follower wrote to her once. “Every time I click a link I get this mini rush, because I never know where it will send me or what I’ll be looking at. It’s always more disturbing than what I could have imagined.” (bad1dimagines replied with a smiley face shedding a tear.)<sup>26</sup>

When I wrote to the proprietor of bad1dimagines, she told me that she hadn't imagined her blog as an archive when she started, but considers that word "an accurate description of what it's become."<sup>27</sup> The blog started as a joke—of course!—but then people started to rely on it, so she started to take it seriously. And by creating archives outside of the purview of institutions or corporations, and in massive collaborative efforts with no barrier to entry or rules for participation, an amateur archive like bad1dimagines is, as Abigail De Kosnik argues in her 2016 book *Rogue Archives*, doing the work of democratizing cultural memory. "Traditional memory institutions were not designed to safeguard cultural texts that proliferate indefinitely" she writes.<sup>28</sup> Something like bad1dimagines is still reliant on Tumblr in a lot of ways, but it is not reliant on any formal archival system, and it is designed to "safeguard" a still-evolving cultural text, for as long as anyone is still on the site and reblogging its posts to make more and more copies. It can respond immediately to inquiry, replace links when they break, and fill in missing pieces of information before it becomes too eroded to be read by future audiences. It connects those who remember and those who are learning, allowing them to bond over the mutual project of digging up the good stuff.

Fans are engaged in archival work all the time because they're always engaged in a conversation of "remember when," presenting and building on their own oral history. (Where collective memory "used to mean the record of cultural production, memory is now the *basis* of a great deal of cultural production," De Kosnik writes.)<sup>29</sup> In the early days of One Direction, when several members of the band had girlfriends and Niall didn't, a random photo of him holding a leaf became another in-joke: it was passed around with a caption about "shipping" the pair known as "Neaf." In 2019, Horan posted a photo of himself standing next to a plant in his house, and "Neaf lives, never give up the ship" popped up on my dashboard. The first "Neaf" is the sort of event that would be compiled in a master post of stupid things Niall has done, or "best memories from early One Direction." (Today, you can easily find it, of course, on bad1dimagines.)<sup>30</sup> These

archivists acknowledge their own limitations and unreliable memory, often admitting, “I can’t find this,” and then asking others, “But didn’t this happen?” Sometimes, the best anyone can do outside of locating the original post is connecting with someone else who remembers the original post, and who may be willing to describe it for the record.

In my deluded attempt to locate the precise former roadside site of a large piece of paper, I failed. But in talking about it online, I succeeded in archiving the story once more. When you search for the shrine to Harry Styles’s vomit, you will see a handful of stupid tweets by me. These tweets may fall, like so much else, into what the WELL cofounder Stewart Brand was the first to refer to as a looming “digital dark age,” when cultural history that is maintained only at will by for-profit corporations erodes and falls away, leaving huge gaps in future generations’ understandings of who we were.<sup>31</sup> But I like to think that someone else will make a copy of the shrine to Harry Styles’s vomit. We’ll never know an internet without it—thank god! On my phone, sometimes, I replay the clip of Harry Styles laughing at the puke poster. I ripped it from YouTube and saved it to my camera roll so I wouldn’t ever lose it. “A little niche, maybe,” he says over and over, while the studio audience laughs.

★ ★ ★

Gabrielle Kopera’s original photo of the shrine is easy enough to find, indexed dozens of times on Google Images. It’s referenced in articles about “the moment Harry Styles knew he’d made it,” which was supposedly the moment someone told him his vomit had been scooped off the ground and was up for sale on eBay.<sup>32</sup> In grainy, bootleg YouTube clips, it’s pulled up on the big screen in the background of *The Graham Norton Show*, while Styles says, “Is this the puke thing?” The puke thing! In Tumblr’s degrading and incoherent archives, it can be much harder to walk back in time to find the original conversations about this vomit, but they are there so long as you *know* that they are there. “My stupidity was immortalized,” Kopera said when I asked her how she felt about her shrine’s brush with online fame.<sup>33</sup> She’d known where to place the

sign because she'd grown up five minutes away from the spot and recognized it instantly in the background of the photos—she'd been driving past it her whole life. The sign was only up for half an hour before other fans started tweeting at her, saying they were going to drive out to Los Angeles to burn or destroy it. (They felt she was encouraging the ruthless stalking of Styles by tabloid photographers.)

So she went back for it, grabbed it, and stowed it in the garage. (It's still there.) She was eighteen then, and the type of One Direction fan who would sometimes wait at the arrivals gate at LAX to catch a glimpse of the band. At the time, Kopera was bored: she didn't have the money for a four-year school and so she'd stayed home to work and to study at a local community college while most of her friends moved away. Being a fan of One Direction made her feel like she had something to do that wasn't a chore. At the very least, she would have something to say and people to say it to—something to care about and a way to spend her time. When she saw the photos of Styles throwing up, she saw them as a prank the universe had played on her alone. Here she was, one of his biggest fans in the world, a girl who had traveled for him and tweeted for him and thought about him for years, and he had barfed right in the middle of the drudgery of her life.

She was surprised that people misinterpreted the shrine so dramatically by assuming that she was crazy or malicious. She was also confused by the way it was covered in the media, as if it was something more bizarre than a comedy routine she was performing, primarily with herself as the audience. "The worst part for me about the sign was that news outlets kept saying his throw-up was being sold on eBay," Kopera said. Some of them strongly implied that she was the one who had scooped it up. "I never saw puke, nor did I want to. I definitely never, ever tried to sell his throw-up. I never actually saw a listing on eBay, so I feel like that was made up." Oh well. You can't control the rumors and myths that swirl around the legitimate events of history. All you can do is preserve what you have. She keeps the photo on her Instagram account, and promised she would forever.

"It was more a joke about my life than his," she told me. Now it's a joke about mine, too.

## Trending

It was the best of wild blandness: A music video that opens with a boy in nautical horizontal stripes—tapping on the steering wheel of a vintage VW Bug—and proceeds primarily with five boys jumping around and falling on each other, protected from serious injury by clouds of swooping hair. A song with the same chord progression as recent mall food-court hits like Owl City’s “Fireflies” and Katy Perry’s “E.T.,” as well as several Beatles songs. All Abercrombie & Fitch and high-top Nikes. At the end of 2011, One Direction’s dreamily offensive debut single, “What Makes You Beautiful”—“You don’t know you’re beautiful / That’s what makes you beautiful”—was coursing through YouTube and American radio stations, charting higher than any song by a British act in fourteen years.

Within a few months, the phenomenon was compared explicitly to Beatlemania, and the boys were charged with causing waves of teenage hysteria—predominantly online—before a single show had been played on American soil. In March 2012, they performed on American television for the first time, appearing on *The Today Show*, swarmed by fifteen thousand fans at Rockefeller Center.<sup>1</sup> That same month, *Up All Night* became the first debut album from a British group to reach number one in the United States. In November, *Take Me Home* made One Direction the first boy band in U.S. history to release two number one albums in the same year. “It’s a real moment,” Sonny Takhar, then president of Sony subsidiary Syco Music, told *The Guardian*. “Social media has become the new radio. It’s never broken an act globally like this before.”<sup>2</sup> Harry Styles’s suggestion that “fame-wise,” One Direction was “probably even

bigger” than the Beatles was not quite as scandalous as John Lennon’s infamous insistence that the Beatles were “more popular than Jesus,” but the claim was still interrogated by music critics and journalists. London’s 5 News assembled an expert panel of radio DJs and “showbiz” reporters to assess it: “Well, they’re the biggest pop band in the world right now, that’s fair enough,” BBC Radio 6 DJ Matt Everitt conceded. But the Beatles changed American cultural history, he argued. “I don’t think One Direction are going to change American cultural history.”<sup>3</sup>

By this time, One Direction fans were already boasting that they had stolen security camera footage from at least one hotel (to see Zayn Malik without a shirt on) and an Australian airport (so they could watch Harry Styles just sitting around).<sup>4</sup> They referred to themselves as hackers, and they acted as if they were above the laws not just of their respective countries but of reality itself. They bragged not only about leaking albums and breaking Twitter, but about things they could not possibly have actually done, like acquiring the ultrasounds of each band member in utero, as well as scans of their passports. They made One Direction into the biggest band in the world not simply by loving them, but by sowing chaos on every online platform they touched. Almost everything they did was worthy of media attention because almost everything they did had never been seen before and literally could not be explained. In 2013, one fan account “leaked” the penis sizes of every member of the band, insisting that Liam Payne’s was more than ten inches long. For a year, another fan tweeted in character as “Liam’s 10 inch,” providing the Twitter bio “I AM THE OFFICIAL 10 INCH OF LIAM PAYNE.”<sup>5</sup>

On Twitter, anyone who doesn’t remember all of that is a “local.” This is one of the more casually devastating labels one can acquire in the digital age. A local is a person who belongs to no subculture, understands no intricacies of online humor, follows only the accounts of people they know in real life—and maybe *The New York Times*?—and retweets only the most generic content. Most simply, and most often, a local is a non-stan. If you haven’t been around since the early days of One Direction but buy a ticket to a Harry Styles concert just

because you like his pants, you're a local, taking up space that doesn't belong to you. If you're confused by fan-made supercuts of Korean pop stars, proliferating in the replies to any viral tweet on any subject, you are a local. Locals have no identity, no allegiances, no personality, no charisma, no passions, no curiosity, and no reason to be on the internet at all. A local joins Twitter to share professional news, which they refer to as "personal news," and to retweet "inspiring" human interest stories. They love "relatable" content and memes that are long past relevant, and they're also, it's implied, kind of lazy. A local is a person who has not been bothered. They haven't felt moved to do the work of stanning. Maybe it's more useful to say what a local is not: A local is the opposite of the One Direction fan who started a new Twitter account in 2010—while the band was still just a contender on *The X Factor*—in order to share "facts" like "the boys blood types" (Liam: AB. Louis: O. Niall: A. Harry and Zayn: B.) and each of their heights, in inches and in centimeters (all are under six feet, and Niall is the shortest, at five foot seven, or 171 centimeters).<sup>6</sup> A local would never hang around, waiting for Niall to say that he can't calculate his rising sign because he doesn't remember what time he was born, ready to supply the answer (8:04 a.m.).

The corrective force acting in opposition to locals is "Stan Twitter," a broad term encompassing all of the superfans of anything under the sun. (The word "stan" is taken from an Eminem song about an obsessive fan, but is sometimes also referred to as a portmanteau of "stalker" and "fan.") Looking at Twitter through the eyes of a local, you can certainly see that stans are there. You can sense their gravitational pull and the way they drag every conversation into their realm of relevance, making every day online about them and their wishes and their feelings on the many injustices of the *Billboard* charts. Locals roll their eyes at the antics of Stan Twitter, which seems always to be in hysterics and on the edge of a meltdown, as well as bent on dragging everyone else down with them. But they can't do anything about it.



When Twitter launched in 2006, it was not obvious what it was for. Tweets were initially sort of like Facebook status updates, but what was the point of limiting your thoughts to—at the time—140 characters, and no pictures, when there was already a website that all your friends were on that did not impose those limitations? Why would anyone join a website that served them nothing but contextless, mundane messages from brands and a bunch of people—when they even *were* people, and not bots—they didn't even know? What was the point of moving into vacant space?

After the dot-com boom, technologists rallied around the promise of “Web 2.0,” a term coined by Darcy DiNucci in 1999. The new web, she wrote, in departing from the static web pages and passive browsing of Web 1.0, would be “understood not as screenfuls of text and graphics but as a transport mechanism, the ether through which interactivity happens.”<sup>7</sup> In 2004, the tech commentator Tim O'Reilly organized a Web 2.0 conference to help developers and investors nail down the specifics and talk out the business model. To him, the new web would be about “harnessing collective intelligence” through activities like hyperlinking, tagging, and user-generated content. Where software companies used to talk about silent customers, they should now talk about users as “co-developers” of their projects. Logically, they should also engage in “real-time monitoring of user behavior,” to see how their features were being used and when to add new ones.<sup>8</sup> Twitter was founded shortly before Facebook was made available to any person over the age of thirteen. Tumblr followed the year after. These applications debuted as blank slates, and the people who came to them filled them with culture. They innovated the language and rhythm and aesthetics and norms of websites that they didn't fully understand but saw instead as raw material.

As Nancy K. Baym and Jean Burgess document in *Twitter: A Biography*, the words we associate with Twitter today and use—for better or worse—in regular conversation, like “hashtag” and “don't @ me,” were not the developers' own ideas but instead those of early enthusiasts.<sup>9</sup> In 2007, users started adding “@” as a shorthand when a post was intended to be read by someone specific, or to directly

reference another account. This didn't really make sense until Twitter made @-replying a real feature a few months later. The hashtag made a similar journey to Twitter from Internet Relay Chat channels and early Web 2.0 sites like Flickr, Last.fm, and Delicious—where they were already in use to catalog conversation topics and make files more searchable. Twitter was initially reluctant to add hashtags to the site—cofounder Biz Stone said hashtags were “for nerds”—but they acquiesced when users pushed for it. The tags were made searchable in 2008, and the company started experimenting with using them to determine “trending topics” in 2009.

At that point, hashtags started drawing the attention of the types of people who later became known for caring deeply about directing attention on the internet. For those people, the crucial difference between Twitter and Facebook was that you could post to Twitter from a cell phone. A pre-smartphone cell phone. *Any* cell phone. You could text your tweets to Twitter. By 2009, Twitter's user base was young (mostly eighteen to twenty-nine) and female (21 percent of American women online had accounts, compared with 17 percent of men) and Black (26 percent of Black Americans online had accounts, compared with 19 percent of white Americans and 18 percent of Hispanic Americans).<sup>10</sup>

The young and the online moved to Twitter from other platforms and started to build it out. The staunchly anti-corporate and surrealist energy of “Weird Twitter” steered the site toward a default of absurdism, sustained by the constant retweeting of early accounts like @fart, known for hijacking brand campaigns with inexhaustible trolling; @leyawn, the sweet cartoon-bird man whose first tweet was “SOMEONE PUMP MY STOMACH ITS FULL OF EVIL”; and @dril, the source of such timeless-feeling phrases as “it is with a heavy heart that I must announce that the celebs are at it again.”<sup>11</sup> As confused politicians, musicians, and movie stars joined the site to share total nonsense or graphic detail about the mundanities of living in even a very famous body, the idea of celebrity started to mutate. The unreachable were suddenly right here, at times even closer than we would like. “just got home, let out the dogs, within minutes they

cornered, attacked and killed an opossum,” Martha Stewart tweeted in 2009. “had to wash little bloody mouths .life on farm.”<sup>12</sup> An untold number of brains were wrecked by one of Britney Spears’s early tweets: “Does anyone think global warming is a good thing? I love Lady Gaga. I think she’s a really interesting artist.”<sup>13</sup> These disoriented extremely famous people were just like the rest of us: unnerved or moved by the events of our daily existence, deluded into thinking that projecting it outward would somehow be rewarding.

Black Twitter was recognized early as a major cultural force on the platform. “What Were Black People Talking About on Twitter Last Night?” Choire Sicha asked on *The Awl* in 2009.<sup>14</sup> Black Twitter users were, for whatever reason, taking over the site during late-night East Coast hours, driving the course of conversation and the trajectory of memes for hours at a time, impossible to interrupt. The *Slate* columnist Farhad Manjoo asked several media and network researchers to explain the phenomenon to him and was told that young Black people were using Twitter “differently from everyone else” on the platform. They were creating dense clusters of interaction by following back most of the people who were following them, retweeting each other reciprocally, and replying to each other’s posts quickly and often. “It’s this behavior, intentional or not, that gives Black people—and in particular, Black teenagers—the means to dominate the conversation on Twitter,” he concluded.<sup>15</sup>

Stan Twitter was molded by these three influences: the emotional valence of Weird Twitter, simultaneously detached and totally out of control; the public-private flattening of Celebrity Twitter, which promised that from now on we would always have access to a behind-the-scenes candor from anyone and everyone; and the tight networking and enthusiastic riffing of Black Twitter, which took the shapelessness of the site and gave it a conversational form. The type of densely connected networks that Manjoo noted—in which people with shared cultural reference points follow each other’s accounts, becoming what’s known now as “mutuals”—is crucial to fandom, which sustains itself by rapidly escalating the visibility of its passions and funneling attention to the celebrities and causes it cares about.

The idea that hashtags could be used to elaborate on jokes or to sustain conversation on niche or insider-y topics preceded the rise of fan practices such as streaming parties and stan wars. The first major “update”—or news—accounts dedicated to individual celebrities appeared in 2009 as well. They were there mainly to share chart positions and curate paparazzi photos, but Stan Twitter also began taking shape around the idea that young users did not have to use their real name or real images of themselves in order to participate. In fact, it would make *more* sense and confer greater authority if they found a sufficiently rare or interesting photo of their “fave” to use instead. Stan Twitter was where Tumblr culture came to make itself known to a broader and busier internet. The most visible demographics were the young women who appeared to make up the majority of the fan bases for artists like Taylor Swift and One Direction, the young women of color who controlled the fan operations for Rihanna and Beyoncé, and the gay men who tweeted on behalf of Nicki Minaj, Lady Gaga, Ariana Grande, and others. Crossover and cultural exchange between “stan armies” happened predominantly through their warring—the Swifties taught everyone how to craft a narrative around their fave’s persecution, while Nicki Minaj’s Barbz demonstrated how to make memes that were funny enough to get their hero’s personal attention, and Rihanna’s Navy came to exemplify what a prestige operation could look like for Stan Twitter, having figured out its tactics and protocols long before anyone else.

For some fans, all of this was serious work from the beginning, even though their labor often put them at odds with the platform that was hosting them. The people who are the best at driving engagement and attracting attention are also the people who can lose their accounts in an instant for uploading a few too many seconds of a video they don’t own; to stay in business, they have to act like they’re in business. (They also tend to lose their accounts over repeated infractions of other rules—such as those against tweeting death threats at people.) The French Rihanna fan who started @TeamofRihanna in July 2011 referred to the account as

“professional” when asked about it by *Paper* magazine.<sup>16</sup> The first major Beyoncé fan account, @BeyonceWeb, was created in August 2010 and developed a reputation for reliable, accurate news—a decade later, it has more than three hundred forty thousand followers, as well as the honor of being one of only ten accounts that Beyoncé herself follows on Twitter. The second, @BeyLegion, had been sitting on a Twitter handle since 2009 but grew its audience first on Tumblr. The mysterious Bey Legion leader moved to Twitter full time in May 2012 and was later interviewed about this successful cross-platform migration by the marketing blog *Brandwatch*. “What started out as a Tumblr page is now a global team operating multi-channel marketing across Twitter, Youtube, Facebook, and Instagram channels,” the interviewer wrote.<sup>17</sup>

Twitter itself was abundantly aware of the business opportunity of stans. In 2010, tech journalists circulated a claim sourced to one unknown Twitter employee that 3 percent of the company’s servers were employed solely to host activity related to Justin Bieber. “Imagine racks of servers dedicated to delivering [Bieber’s] every word to 5.1 million users,” the *Daily Beast* reporter Brian Ries wrote. “They exist.”<sup>18</sup> As a claim, this does not even make sense, but Twitter wisely declined to publicly refute it. In 2011, the year Twitter introduced the ability to attach photos to tweets, Beyoncé announced her first pregnancy at the MTV Video Music Awards. Twitter’s public relations team was quick to highlight how the reaction played out on the site—she’d generated 8,868 tweets per second in the moments after she threw open her blazer, rubbed her belly, and winked at the camera.<sup>19</sup> In 2012, Lady Gaga became the first person to hit 20 million followers—a milestone her online marketing company, ThinkTank Digital, had been anticipating for two years.<sup>20</sup> Her fans, who identify as “Little Monsters” under her care, often referred to her in those days as the “queen of Twitter,” a title that she was also awarded by *Forbes* after she surpassed Britney Spears to become the most popular woman on the platform.<sup>21</sup> (In celebration, she recorded an inaugural address, in which she thanked her followers for making

her Twitter royalty, waved a glowing blue wand, and vowed to “tweet and tweet again.”)<sup>22</sup>

By the time I joined Twitter, as a college sophomore in 2012, the battle lines had been drawn: A person could be a Justin Bieber fan or a person could be a One Direction fan, or a person could be both—but if that were the case, they’d better cleave their personality in two and pick one half to keep off the internet. Hardly a day went by without the two fandoms jostling to get a spot among the trending hashtags, a goal even more tangibly possible and immediately achievable than the also important goals of winning chart domination and the highest ticket sales and the most appropriate recognition from award shows and the coolest photo shoots from the best magazines. The number one spot on *Billboard’s* Social 50 chart, which incorporated “buzz” from every major social media platform, toggled between Bieber and One Direction nearly every week. The rivalry was vicious and exhilarating, like college football except interesting. During a particularly noteworthy 2014 showdown between the two fandoms over a social media-based “Biggest Fans” honor at the MTV Europe Music Awards, each side went so far as to create fake versions of the hashtags used to vote—tweaking a letter in their opponent’s tag or adding an emoji, in hopes of pushing this version into the Trending Topics bar and confusing fans on the other side, hopefully sabotaging millions of votes.<sup>23</sup> “Gonna tell my kids this was world war 3,” one Bieber fan tweeted five years later, with a screenshot of the leaderboard.<sup>24</sup>

This was also the year that *Billboard* introduced an annual competition called Fan Army Face-Off—a summertime online-only event in which stan factions were celebrated primarily for their ability to execute the pulling of levers, over and over and over. There were enough armies to fill up an entire March Madness-style bracket: Lovatics (Demi Lovato) and Selenators (Selena Gomez) and the Little Monsters and the Rihanna Navy and the Directioners in an arbitrarily drawn Eastern Conference, versus Arianators (Ariana Grande) and the Gould Diggers (Ellie Goulding) and the Beyhive and the Beliebers and the Barbz in the Western. The results were ridiculous and

transparently warped by powerful fan armies voting for whomever their most obvious rival was paired up with in each round—unless there’s another explanation for the Directioners losing to the Panheads (Skillet stans) in round one, or the Beliebers losing to the Victims (the Killers fans). The final champions were the VIPs, fans of the K-pop group BIGBANG, followed in second place by the Echelon, apparently the name for the fandom of Jared Leto’s rock band Thirty Seconds to Mars.<sup>25</sup>

Whatever else you might say about it, 20 million votes were cast in the objectively meaningless contest that year. This, it was clear, was what Twitter was for.

★ ★ ★

One Direction’s Take Me Home tour started in February 2013 and grossed \$114 million, with six sold-out shows at London’s O2 Arena as its centerpiece. Though it came out just before the end of the year, the band’s third album, *Midnight Memories*, sold 4 million copies and became the bestselling album of 2013 worldwide. In a year-end post on the company blog, Twitter announced that three out of five of the most retweeted posts of the year were from members of One Direction. The posts they referred to were uniformly boring: Niall Horan celebrating his own birthday, with his signature punctuation artistry, writing “Yesss! I’m 20! Wohooo! No more teens!” Zayn Malik sharing a photo of Harry Styles sleeping, captioned “Harry wake up!!:D.” The third was Malik’s announcement that he was engaged to Perrie Edwards, a member of the British girl group Little Mix.<sup>26</sup> But the point of Twitter was for fans and faves to be in near constant contact—these little intimacies were what made it all feel real.

For One Direction fans, Twitter was easy to turn into a constantly refreshing scrapbook, and it was easy to start viewing the band’s commercial success as a result of this labor. In 2014, Twitter allowed users to add GIFs to their tweets for the first time—One Direction’s Where We Are tour was documented that way, almost second by second, by fans who uploaded from cities all over the world. Bringing in more than \$290 million, it was the highest-grossing tour of the

year, as well as the highest-grossing tour by a vocal group ever. When the band's next album, *Four*, came out that November, they broke their own record to become the first band in American chart history to have its first four albums debut at number one.

Social media researchers were obviously interested in the network of co-conspirators that made One Direction the most visible ongoing conversation on Twitter. These people lived everywhere, but they congregated in group chats to coordinate and strategize, and they never failed in their efforts. In 2016, Nicole Kelsey Santero, a graduate student at the University of Nevada, conducted a forensic analysis of a collection of One Direction–related hashtags that had been number one worldwide trends on Twitter the year before, including #HarryBeCareful, which referred to a rumor about an assassination plot against Harry Styles. (“Guys please rt this and make the boys security aware because we need to keep our sunshine safe,” one tweet read.) The paper identified Twitter accounts that served as “hubs,” defining them as “a small number of influential users” who were highly connected and motivated to spread these hashtags. The hubs were mostly personal fan accounts and moderately sized “update” accounts—based not just in the United Kingdom and the United States but in Portugal, Brazil, Greece, the Netherlands, Indonesia, Armenia, Lebanon, Mexico, Italy, the Philippines, and elsewhere. One particularly influential Zayn Malik fan account with over one hundred forty thousand followers and one Harry Styles fan account with about forty-five thousand were even traced to China, where Twitter is blocked.<sup>27</sup>

Critics of social media often point out that Twitter's functionality and engagement-juicing business model rewards dramatics and over-the-top rhetoric—suggesting that the platform is its cause. But it's also the emotional stakes of Stan Twitter that set the tone. Scrolling through my timeline at any given moment, theatrics are being pushed to ever more elaborate heights. “If taylor swift murders me DO NOT PROSECUTE HER!!!” one fan writes.<sup>28</sup> Another shares a photo of Harry Styles, captioning it “he's so sexy break my back like a glow stick daddy.”<sup>29</sup>



The structure of stan networks is what makes them feel so unavoidable on Twitter—their slang is everywhere, their trends are filling up the sidebar, their wrath is coming down on anyone who makes so much as an offhanded comment about a pop singer whose latest single was not their best. This is how the mannerisms of Stan Twitter became the mannerisms of the whole site—through mutuals creating, as they did, thousands of denser, smaller networks knit together. Stan Twitter, of course, pushed the internet at large to use the word “stan,” and sometimes to swap it with the self-deprecating equivalent “trash,” and to parrot phrases like “we stan a legend” and “HER MIND,” and to refer to people as “oomf,” meaning “one of my followers,” or an “IRL,” meaning someone who also exists in one’s offline life. A song has become a “bop” or a “banger.” A good guy is now a “king,” and a bad guy is now “over.”

Gay stans popularized the light diss “your fave could never,” as well as the unfortunate compliment “skinny legend” and the tongue-in-cheek practice of making ultra-violent demands of the things we love—“step on my neck,” “run me over with your car,” “break my back,” “punch me in the face.” Black Twitter introduced shorthand like “she snapped,” to signify praise, then “she doesn’t have the range,” a casual put-down that blew up in 2016 and warranted explainers in *GQ* and *New York* magazine, to indicate cool dismissal. Black fans with a drag culture background introduced “wig” as an expression of enthusiastic surprise, and Black women popularized “tea” as a synonym for gossip. This language was appropriated by young stans, then more crudely by brands and white professional adults, before its adoption as the speech of Twitter at large. By 2020, the official Target account was retweeting BTS album sales numbers and adding, “We have no choice but to stan.”<sup>30</sup>

★ ★ ★

In 2018, a Lady Gaga stan convinced a bunch of other fans to make sock-puppet Twitter accounts and pretend to be middle-age women. “Radio hosts hate homosexuals and stan twitters, it’s a fact,” they wrote. “Make an account with a soccer mom selfie avatar.”<sup>31</sup> This is

charming because the only intention was to complete successful radio requests for Gaga's new single, but it's also a little bit chilling, because it demonstrates online fandom's allegiance to manipulation.

Stans have little regard for rules or terms of service. They manipulate the timeline in good fun, generally, and they sometimes do it with dubious methods that are traditions of darker online spaces. Their prodigious talent for amplification is not always paired with an interest in the truth, which can often backfire, and they've learned this the hard way. The notorious cesspool 4chan used fans' talents for escalation against them quite often in the early years of Stan Twitter, seemingly just to make a point about who *really* held the power to bend reality online. In January 2013, for example, posters on 4chan's "random" board conspired to prank Justin Bieber fans by circulating images on Twitter that would appear to show other fans slitting their wrists, paired with the hashtag #CuttingForBieber.<sup>32</sup> "You stop using drugs and we'll stop cutting," one fake fan account tweeted alongside a graphic image. "You make this world meaningless and we've lost hope." The hoax was debunked by media outlets, but not before it succeeded in setting off thousands of confused responses and trending on Twitter. The following year, 4chan came for the One Direction fandom by promoting the hashtag #SkinFor1D.<sup>33</sup> The idea was that One Direction fans could be duped into tweeting pictures of themselves naked if it were even suggested that this would in some way benefit the band. Trolls made more fake fan accounts, stole photos of naked teenage girls, and tweeted them until they started a trend. The hashtag was used one hundred ten thousand times in forty-eight hours, and though it didn't result in a whole lot of nude sharing, it did derail the fandom for two full days.

Years later, Stan Twitter has a seedy reputation due to its own history of aggressive trolling, inspired in part by tactics that were once used against it. If there's one thing that Stan Twitter is known for above all else, it's that when it turns against you, it turns bitterly. Once, alone in New Mexico after a breakup, drunk in an Airbnb on a Wednesday night, I tweeted a bland joke about an old Taylor Swift music video. "There's a reason you're drunk and alone," a stan spat

back within seconds, though they didn't follow me and I hadn't tagged Swift in the tweet. *I love Taylor Swift!* I wanted to plead, but I knew it would do no good, so I simply went to bed. That kind of exchange is the most delicate of brushes with the bad side of Stan Twitter—like being blown a kiss, even. It was nothing.

I don't want to run through a full litany of the coordinated harassment campaigns that One Direction fans have executed throughout the years. But one memorable and well-documented incident happened in 2013, when they tweeted a baffling number of death threats at *GQ* magazine—the magazine itself!—after it published a condescending profile of the band and its fandom.<sup>34</sup> (The profile really was egregious, and described a typical fan as “a rabid, knicker-wetting banshee.”) One fan's response read, “I want to fucking mutilate your insides, feed them to my dog and burn your body in my own personal raging hell.”<sup>35</sup> (Everyone at the magazine's insides! And to one dog!) When Beyoncé fans decided that the designer Rachel Roy was Jay-Z's mistress based on a handful of vague clues, some of them wrote to her sixteen-year-old daughter, informing her that her mother should drink bleach.<sup>36</sup> Nicki Minaj fans pointed Minaj in the direction of the Canadian music blogger Wanna Thompson after she tweeted some light criticism of the rapper's recent work—Minaj wrote to her personally, calling her “ugly.” After she shared screenshots of Minaj's message, Thompson lost her job and received death threats from fans, some accompanied by images of her young daughter.<sup>37</sup>

Over the years, stan harassment tactics have only evolved to be weirder and deliberately more unsettling for those on the receiving end. In 2020, when Taylor Swift's surprise quarantine album *Folklore* was given an overwhelmingly positive review by *Pitchfork*'s Jillian Mapes, which contained perhaps two full sentences and one parenthetical of constructive criticism, fans immediately started suggesting that Mapes “sleep with one eye open.”<sup>38</sup> They also doxed her by publishing her home address. Then they started tweeting images of Swift—edited to look like a demon, with an upside-down cross on her forehead or black maggots falling out of her mouth—

accompanied by what they seemed to think was a hex, translated for indecipherable reasons into Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia. (The text, fed back through Google Translate, read something like, “Anyone who comes after the Queen of Darkness Taylor Swift will die alone and burn forever ... You will never be happy and you will never sleep again.”) They also spent days tormenting the Australian experimental musician Katie Dey, who had joked about the misfortune of sharing an album release date with Swift, tweeting “my ass is fatter than taylor’s at least.”<sup>39</sup> On Twitter and Instagram, they told her she was a “dumb bitch” and a body shamer and reminded her that she wouldn’t sell as many records as Swift if she lived for two hundred years. They also reminded her of the Queen of Darkness stuff, obviously. “i knew my fat ass would ruin my life someday didnt think itd go down like this tho,” Dey wrote in the midst of the storm.<sup>40</sup>

★ ★ ★

When I tweeted that I was working on this book, the response came in two phases. At first it was “congratulations!” from my friends and coworkers and former coworkers. Then, a few weeks later, it was something else: “Maybe One Direction fans should write a book about you instead, titled ‘Why are you this obsessed with us?’” A segment of the fandom that was still irritated by an essay I’d written on the well-known conspiracy theory about Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson years prior had heard about the project and signal-boosted it to each other. The replies came in one after another, until I turned off my notifications and started ordering glasses of wine. “Leave us alone,” and “get a job,” and “you’re creepy,” and “we’re not here to feed this bitch,” and “do better things with your time.” “This needs to be stopped,” and “she’s not up to anything good,” and “you’re pathetic,” and “girl go away,” and so on. One person commented that I was probably just going to screenshot these replies and use them to make the fandom look bad, about which I had to admit they were right, even if they were misunderstanding how much I would rather not be in that position at all.

Fans are unavoidably part of Twitter’s knotty history with abuse and coordinated harm. Stan Twitter has never been motivated to push entire groups of people off the internet, nor has it engaged in the same level of graphic violent threats or dangerous real-world attacks as those driven by explicitly hateful ideologies—which, during the “Gamergate” online harassment epidemic in the mid-2010s, usually took the form of calling SWAT teams to a victim’s home address. But it would be irresponsible to ignore some similarities. In 2018, a team of MIT media researchers performing a postmortem on Gamergate explained how the site had once been turned into an “inescapable GamerGate experience” and described some of the “dark patterns” of Twitter, writing, “When one member sent a message, that message became a signal to [a] highly connected community that had been instructed to echo one another.”<sup>41</sup> Stan Twitter harassment campaigns do not approach the level of Gamergate. Yet any kind of harassment at scale relies on some of the same mechanisms—a tightly connected group identifying an enemy and agreeing on an amplification strategy, providing social rewards to members of the group who display the most dedication or creativity, backchanneling to maintain the cohesion of the in-group, which is always outsmarting and out-cooling its hapless victims, all while maintaining a conviction of moral superiority. Twitter provides a platform for some of the worst habits of fandom.

Still, no matter how afraid I sometimes am of the whims of stans, I would never want to be a local. Many or most stans don’t participate in harassment campaigns, and being part of Stan Twitter is much more fun than logging on just to frown at politicians or congratulate acquaintances on their new jobs. When I’m doom-scrolling through a timeline full of terrible news and inane bickering, it’s a treat to come across all-caps excitement or an ultra-niche joke. Or to wake up and find that there is a conversation going on and that I understand it, and that people are excited about something and I am too. This is the type of thing that can buoy a person for an hour or so at a time. In the same way that holidays give shape to formless years, album promotion and single releases give color to the days that line up one

after another. There is a reason to stay up late. There is a reason to wake up early. There is something to do at lunch when you feel like you'd like to cry and take a nap. There are people who swear they *hacked into an airport security camera*, and aren't you interested to see what they saw, even if you find that totally weird and ultimately quite scary? I like Stan Twitter because it is so peculiar, even as millions of people participate in it and it *should* have become generic. "This is the 6th Christmas without One Direction," the anonymous account @1DPsychic tweeted on December 23, 2020.<sup>42</sup> Fair enough. "Niall Horan will be the first to go bald," it shared in January, no explanation.<sup>43</sup> "Louis Tomlinson will show us his wisdom teeth removal video," it promised in March.<sup>44</sup> I guess we'll find out!

In the summer of 2020, when coronavirus infections in the United States had not yet peaked, One Direction fans celebrated the band's tenth anniversary. I was in Brooklyn, living alone. Like many people, I hadn't seen my family in months. I had watched eleven seasons of *The Real Housewives of New York* in just under six weeks. I was in a new relationship, which had been robbed of the fun of meeting in bars or casually suggesting attendance at a friend of a friend's birthday party. We'd watched *Contagion* on our fourth date, sitting on my bed, speculating about what a respiratory virus could do to each of us. Like everyone I knew, I felt like I was living in the worst sensory deprivation tank of all time—completely deprived of human interaction, yet still constantly bombarded by news alerts. But the day of the One Direction anniversary, I started scrolling through Twitter and the world came back to me. There were memes I'd forgotten about and concert clips I'd never seen. It was all fresh—the first new thing in months, or the only special occasion of the year. I riled myself up easily, went out to the store—double-masked—in the pouring rain and bought ingredients for a birthday cake, as well as big cheap candles. I slid around my apartment making Martha Stewart's chocolate buttercream, and watched music videos on a laptop balanced on the edge of the sink. I felt like life indoors was enough again. I poured cake mix into a pie dish. I yelped when I scrolled past a screenshot of an old tweet: "help so my cousin got

upset after reading a fan fiction where Harry Styles dies and now she's been peeling potatoes for 3 hours."<sup>45</sup> The text was accompanied by two photos of a teenage girl sitting on a couch, glaring at a potato, which she is peeling into a metal bowl. I clicked into another tab, clicked back, looked at it again, and laughed again. It was so perfect. The best short story I had ever read. Other people on the timeline were celebrating it too; they were in awe of its concision and hilarity, the way it felt like something that had happened to them personally. It *had* all happened to us, personally, and it was still happening.

This is the best of what Stan Twitter can do. It provides interludes in which it's possible to feel that there is such a thing as "community" on a website used by nearly 200 million people, or online anywhere. I love when girls tweet to see if anyone else is in the Los Angeles airport, flying home from the Harry Styles concert, feeling depressed that it's all over. (I am!) I love when it's Thanksgiving weekend and someone logs on to say that they put the new One Direction CD on in Mom's car, and as they did so they realized that there must be thousands of new One Direction CDs playing in thousands of moms' cars all over the world. (*My mom's car!*) I feel grateful every time.

The morning after the tenth anniversary, I pulled up Twitter to start work, as usual, and felt the site diminished. Here we were, still grown-ups, still under orders to stay home and scroll. Here we were, nothing to do but our jobs. Nothing to look forward to except the 6:30 glass of wine that marks the end of the workday; nothing to search for except more advice on how to avoid contracting a disease. I read a tweet from a Harry Styles fan: "Yesterday was like a breath of fresh air after literally one of the worst years of everyone's life."<sup>46</sup> She didn't really need to explain what *this* day was like. It was terrible. With a stale cake in my refrigerator, I was bored again, and so tired—exhausted by 10:00 a.m. But for a moment, I was glad to know that even in my hyperspecific misery, I would never be alone.

## NOTES

### Introduction

1. The Twitter account @isasdfghjkl was deleted at some point after I saw this tweet and could not be accessed using the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine.
2. Anonymous, "your fav is problematic," Tumblr post, September 13, 2015.
3. Editors, "Let Them Eat Print!," *n+1* 15 (Winter 2013), <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-15/the-intellectual-situation/let-them-eat-print/>.
4. Moira Weigel, "The Internet of Women," *Logic*, April 1, 2018, <https://logicmag.io/scale/the-internet-of-women/>.
5. Kaitlyn Tiffany, "The Founder of Pinboard on Why Understanding Fandom Is Good for Business," *The Verge*, June 12, 2017, <https://theverge.com/2017/6/12/15746916/pinboard-founder-maciej-ceglowski-interview-yahoo-delicious-fandom>.
6. Maciej Cegłowski, "Fan Is a Tool-Using Animal," *Idle Words*, 2013, [https://idlewords.com/talks/fan\\_is\\_a\\_tool\\_using\\_animal.htm](https://idlewords.com/talks/fan_is_a_tool_using_animal.htm).
7. Jamie Crossan, "One Direction's Harry Styles: 'We're Bigger Than the Beatles, Fame-wise,'" *New Musical Express*, February 9, 2014 (aggregation of quotations originally published in *Top of the Pops*), <https://nme.com/news/music/one-direction-149-1239904>.
8. Timothy Bella, "Lou Pearlman Was a Disgraced Mogul Who Defrauded Boy Bands. Then Came the \$300 Million Ponzi Scheme," *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2019, <https://washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/03/13/lou-pearlman-was-disgraced-mogul-who-defrauded-s-boy-bands-then-came-million-ponzi-scheme/>.
9. Brooke Marine, "The Jonas Brothers Finally Explained Their Purity-Ring Origin Story," *W*, March 8, 2019, <https://wmagazine.com/story/jonas-brother-purity-rings>.
10. *One Direction: This Is Us*, directed by Morgan Spurlock (2013; Culver City, CA: TriStar Pictures).
11. OneDirectionVewo, "Niall Horan Calling Fans a 'Shower of Cunts,'" YouTube video, July 6, 2012, <https://youtu.be/CCRLUGTiLqY>.



12. Caroline Moss, "A Four Year-Old Tweet from One Direction Just Leapt Past Obama's Four More Years Tweet to Be the Second Most Popular Ever," *Business Insider Australia*, January 14, 2015, [www.businessinsider.com.au/one-direction-tweet-2015-1](http://www.businessinsider.com.au/one-direction-tweet-2015-1).
13. Rebecca Davison, "Oh Baby! One Direction's Niall Horan Is Mobbed as He Attends Nephew's Christening in Ireland Where He Served as Godfather," *Daily Mail*, November 9, 2013, <https://dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2496371/One-Directions-Niall-Horan-mobbed-attends-nephews-christening-Ireland.html>.
14. Maëlys Wandelst (yourssincerelylarry), "Larry Hug," 2015, accessed via Sacha Judd's personal website, <https://sachajudd.com/one-direction>.
15. Maëlys Wandelst, email to the author, January 21, 2020.
16. Kaitlyn Tiffany, "Harry Styles Fans Are Trying to Beat the Billboard Charts with VPNS and Mass Coordination," *The Verge*, May 5, 2017, <https://theverge.com/2017/5/5/15533760/harry-styles-streaming-data-billboard-tumblr-fan-effort>.
17. "What Tumblr's Ban on 'Adult Content' Actually Did," Tossed Out, Electronic Frontier Foundation, last modified May 20, 2019, <https://eff.org/tossedout/tumblr-ban-adult-content>.
18. "Copyright policy," Twitter Rules and Policies, Twitter, <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/copyright-policy>; Katherine Trendacosta, "Unfiltered: How YouTube's Content ID Discourages Fair Use and Dictates What We See Online," Electronic Frontier Foundation, December 10, 2020, <https://eff.org/wp/unfiltered-how-youtubes-content-id-discourages-fair-use-and-dictates-what-we-see-online>.
19. Samantha Hunt, "There Is Only One Direction," *The Cut*, May 12, 2015, <https://thecut.com/2015/05/there-is-only-one-direction.html>.

## 1. Screaming

1. J. Mack Slaughter, Jr., and Lynn Roppolo, “Screaming Your Lungs Out! A Case of Boy Band-Induced Pneumothorax, Pneumomediastinum, and Pneumoretropharyngeum,” *The Journal of Emergency Medicine* 53, no. 5 (October 2017): 762–64, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jemermed.2017.08.006>.
2. Abby Armada (@mygiantrobot), “That’s worse than when I,” Twitter, November 1, 2020, <https://twitter.com/mygiantrobot/status/1322919976265748480>.
3. J. Mack Slaughter, Jr., MD, email to the author, January 12, 2020.
4. Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, “Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun,” in *The Adoring Audience*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 84–106.
5. Frederick Lewis, “Britons Succumb to ‘Beatlemania,’” *The New York Times*, December 1, 1963, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1963/12/01/105229577.html>.
6. Jim Farber, “Beatles’ Historic Arrival in New York City 50 Years Ago Gave Big Apple Unforgettable Lift,” *New York Daily News*, January 24, 2014, <https://nydailynews.com/new-york/beatles-electrified-nyc-50-years-article-1.1590579>; Robert Alden, “Wild-Eyed Mobs Pursue Beatles; Dozen Girls Injured Here in Fervent Demonstrations,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 1964, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1964/02/13/97379540.pdf>.
7. Paul Russell, memo from Capitol Records, December 23, 1963, images accessed via <http://rarebeatles.com/photopg2/comstk.htm>.
8. James Barron, “Historic Hysterics: Witnesses to a Really Big Show,” *The New York Times*, February 7, 2014, <https://nytimes.com/2014/02/08/nyregion/the-beatles-debut-on-ed-sullivan.html>.
9. “What You Don’t Know About the Beatles’ U.S. Debut,” NBC News, February 7, 2014, <https://nbcnews.com/nightly-news/what-you-dont-know-about-beatles-u-s-debut-n24171>.
10. David Dempsey, “Why the Girls Scream, Weep, Flip; The Path to Understanding Is Psychological, Anthropological, and a Whole Lot Besides,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 1964,

<https://nytimes.com/1964/02/23/archives/why-the-girls-scream-weep-flip-the-path-to-understanding-is.html>.

11. Theodor Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," 1938, in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001), quoted by Dempsey, "Why the Girls Scream."
12. Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music," 53.
13. Dempsey, "Why the Girls Scream."
14. Al Aronowitz, "Beatlemania in 1964: 'This Has Gotten Entirely Out of Control,'" *Saturday Evening Post*, March 1964, in *The Guardian*, January 29, 2014, <https://theguardian.com/music/2014/jan/29/the-beatles>.
15. Casey McNerthney, "Beatles' Stay at Edgewater Helped Mark Its Place in History," *Seattle P-I*, August 19, 2009, <https://seattlepi.com/local/article/Beatles-stay-at-Edgewater-helped-mark-its-place-1305857.php>; Bob Greene, "Hotel Stripped Its Bed and Now Must Lie in It," *Chicago Tribune*, August 18, 1993, <https://chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1993-08-18-9308180075-story.html>.
16. Jim Cushman, "A Beatle Slept with This: Pieces of the Mania," *Collectors Weekly*, March 11, 2011, <https://collectorsweekly.com/articles/a-beatle-slept-with-this-pieces-of-the-mania/>.
17. Anthony Burton, "Beatlemania Hits N.Y.: The Beatles Appear on 'The Ed Sullivan Show' in 1964," *New York Daily News*, February 10, 1964, <https://nydailynews.com/entertainment/music/beatlemania-hits-new-york-beatles-ed-sullivan-article-1.2525425>.
18. Alan Rinzler, "No Soul in Beatlesville," *The Nation*, 1964, published online April 6, 2009, <https://thenation.com/article/archive/no-soul-beatlesville/>.
19. Bernard Hollowood, "Beatlemania," *Punch*, reprinted in *The New York Times*, December 1, 1963, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1963/12/01/105229577.pdf>.
20. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), quoted in Ehrenreich et al., "Beatlemania."
21. Ehrenreich et al., "Beatlemania," 103.
22. Maureen Cleave, "Paul All Alone: Running Hard to Catch Up with the Music," *London Evening Standard*, September 1, 1966.
23. Allison McCracken, interview with the author, November 8, 2019.
24. Allison McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 201.
25. Allison McCracken, email to the author, June 1, 2021.
26. McCracken notes that this collection has shifted ownership and is now part of the University of California at Santa Barbara's Performing Arts

Collection.

27. McCracken, interview with the author, November 8, 2019.
28. McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing*, 201.
29. Ehrenreich et al., "Beatlemania," 98.
30. George E. Pitts, "TV's 'American Bandstand' a Noisy Menagerie!," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 12, 1958, accessed via Newspapers.com.
31. Jon Caramanica, "Send in the Heartthrobs, Cue the Shrieks," *The New York Times*, September 1, 2010, <https://nytimes.com/2010/09/02/arts/music/02bieber.html>.
32. James C. McKinley, Jr., "Bieber Fever Comes to Macy's," *The New York Times*, June 18, 2012, <https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/18/bieber-fever-comes-to-macys>.
33. Jon Carmanica, "Riding the Boy Band Wave While It Lasts," *The New York Times*, November 14, 2012, <https://nytimes.com/2012/11/15/arts/music/one-direction-rides-boy-band-wave-with-take-me-home.html>.
34. Jon Carmanica, "Heading Wherever, Together," *The New York Times*, November 27, 2013, <https://nytimes.com/2013/11/28/arts/music/one-direction-releases-a-new-album-midnight-memories.html>.
35. Daniela Marino, interview with the author, October 29, 2019.
36. Freya Whitfield, interview with the author, September 22, 2019.
37. Jacob Gaspar, interview with the author, October 1, 2019.
38. "How to Kick the Beatle Habit," *Life*, August 28, 1964.
39. Cheryl Tusso, letter to the editor, *Life*, October 9, 1964.
40. Ehrenreich et al., "Beatlemania."

## 2. Deep-Frying

1. Zan Romanoff, "One Direction's Female Fans Love to Dress Like Harry Styles," *Racked*, May 16, 2017, <https://racked.com/2017/5/16/15609830/one-direction-cosplay>.
2. Obsession\_inc, "Affirmational fandom vs. Transformational fandom," Dreamwidth post, June 1, 2009, <https://obsession-inc.dreamwidth.org/82589.html>.
3. "DeepFriedMemes Goodbye Message," Google Doc linked in Reddit post, October 10, 2020, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1yEQg3TRB7w8cHcl3ss5fn8m-VsuVVSGq640DN6Dzdoo/view>.
4. "Friend: i don't like 1D Because there not bad boy," archived by bad1dimagines, Tumblr post, July 7, 2016, <https://bad1dimagines.tumblr.com/post/147064657448>.
5. Theodor Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," 1938, in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001), 29–60.
6. ChutJeDors, email to the author, May 31, 2021.
7. "Beatles RPF," RPF Fandom, Fanlore, last modified October 28, 2019, [https://fanlore.org/wiki/Beatles\\_RPF](https://fanlore.org/wiki/Beatles_RPF).
8. Llamaonfire, "Just my kind of sickness," Archive of Our Own, January 10, 2014, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/1128159>.
9. Llamaonfire, "Beatle baby," Archive of Our Own, March 27, 2014, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/1158721>.
10. *Your Quality John/Paul-Library*, Tumblr, <https://thejplibrary.tumblr.com/>.
11. ChutJeDors, "5 Thomas Lane," Archive of Our Own, January 1, 2021, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/13818678>.
12. "Imagine: you and Harry are on a date and you're playing chubby bunny," archived by bad1dimagines, Tumblr, March 18, 2017, <https://bad1dimagines.tumblr.com/post/158552923878>.
13. "Imagine: Zayn just moved to your neighborhood," archived by bad1dimagines, Tumblr, October 17, 2019, <https://bad1dimagines.tumblr.com/post/188405787103/i-wonder-if-theyre-staring-at-you-bc-youre-with>.
14. bad1dimagines, "Dark Harry" tag, Tumblr, last updated October 30, 2019, <https://bad1dimagines.tumblr.com/tagged/dark-harry>.

15. Jessica Misener, "Why Justin Bieber Keeps Dying in Fan Fiction," *BuzzFeed*, October 10, 2012, <https://buzzfeed.com/jessicamisener/the-many-deaths-of-justin-bieber>.
16. "Imagine: Harry nibbling at your ear," archived by bad1dimagines, Tumblr, September 17, 2018, <https://bad1dimagines.tumblr.com/post/178196944263>.
17. "Imagine: the outfit you wear to jump in front of niall's car," archived by bad1dimagines, Tumblr, March 14, 2016, <https://bad1dimagines.tumblr.com/post/141070376788/please>.
18. "Imagine: niall horan crawling inside your ear," archived by bad1dimagines, Tumblr, July 13, 2015, <https://bad1dimagines.tumblr.com/post/123997770038>.

### 3. Shrines

1. harryx, "Harry on the puke sign," Tumblr, April 21, 2017, <https://harryx.tumblr.com/post/159843358974/harry-on-the-puke-sign>.
2. Rebecca Davison, "One Di-RETCH-tion: Fans Erect a Shrine in Honour of Harry Styles' Vomit on Los Angeles Freeway," *Daily Mail*, October 15, 2014, <https://dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2793668/a-shrine-erected-honour-harry-styles-vomit.html>.
3. Christie D'Zurilla, "Harry Styles Drops \$4 Million on House near Beverly Hills," *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 2014, <https://latimes.com/entertainment/la-xpm-2014-mar-18-la-et-mg-harry-styles-buys-house-beverly-hills-post-office-photos-20140318-story.html>.
4. Nancy K. Baym, *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 95.
5. *Ibid.*, 96.
6. Jesse Jarnow, *Heads: A Biography of Psychedelic America* (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo, 2015), 97.
7. Baym, *Playing to the Crowd*, 96.
8. Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 30–39.
9. *Ibid.*, 30.
10. *Ibid.*, 37.
11. OoCities, GeoCities archive, <http://oocities.org/#gsc.tab=0>.
12. Ethan Kaplan, "Shutting Down My Life's Work," *Medium*, May 21, 2014, <https://ethankaplan.com/shutting-down-my-lifes-work-c358320e7689>.
13. Tresa Redburn and Mitch Schneider, "Countdown Begins for David Bowie's 'Bowienet' Internet Service," Mitch Schneider Organization, August 28, 1998, <http://msopr.com/press-releases/countdown-begins-for-david-bowies-bowienet-internet-service-as-hes-set-to-launch-historic-internet-service-provider/>.
14. Hiroshi Ono and Madeline Zavodny, "Gender and the Internet," *Social Science Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (March 2003): 111–21, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6237.t01-1-8401007>.
15. "Rules of the Internet," Encyclopedia Dramatica, January 10, 2007, archived by Wayback Machine, [http://web.archive.org/web/20070110035128/http://encycopediadramatica.com/index.php/Rules\\_Of\\_The\\_Internet](http://web.archive.org/web/20070110035128/http://encycopediadramatica.com/index.php/Rules_Of_The_Internet).

16. Siân Brooke, “‘There Are No Girls on the Internet’: Gender Performances in Animal Advice Memes,” *First Monday* 24, no. 10 (October 2019), <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i10.9593>.
17. Nancy Kaplan and Eva Farrell, “Weavers of Webs: A Portrait of Young Women on the Net,” *The Arachnet Electronic Journal on Visual Culture* 2, no. 3 (1994).
18. Pamela Takayoshi, “No Boys Allowed: The World Wide Web as a Clubhouse for Girls,” *Computers and Composition* 16, no. 1 (1999): 89–106, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S8755-4615\(99\)80007-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S8755-4615(99)80007-3).
19. John B. Horrigan, “New Users: What They Do Online, What They Don’t, and Implications for the ’Net’s Future,” Pew Internet and American Life Project, September 2000, [https://pewinternet.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/media/Files/Reports/2000/New\\_User\\_Report.pdf](https://pewinternet.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/media/Files/Reports/2000/New_User_Report.pdf).
20. Deborah Fallows, “How Women and Men Use the Internet,” Pew Research Center, December 28, 2005, <https://pewresearch.org/internet/2005/12/28/how-women-and-men-use-the-internet>.
21. “Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet,” Pew Research Center, last modified April 7, 2021, <https://pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>.
22. Julia Carpenter, “Meme Librarian Is a Real Job—and It’s the Best One on the Internet,” *The Washington Post*, December 21, 2015, <https://washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/12/21/tumblr-meme-librarian-has-the-best-job-on-the-internet/>.
23. Alexander Cho, “Sensuous Participation: Queer Youth of Color, Affect, and Social Media” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2015), 201.
24. *Ibid.*, 20.
25. Kaitlyn Tiffany, “The Story of the Internet, as Told by Know Your Meme,” *The Verge*, March 6, 2018, <https://theverge.com/2018/3/6/17044344/know-your-meme-10-year-anniversary-brad-kim-interview>.
26. Anonymous, “I like this blog a lot because sometimes when people ask about a specific thing,” Tumblr post responded to by bad1dimagines, November 9, 2019, <https://bad1dimagines.tumblr.com/post/188935607618/i-like-this-blog-a-lot-because-sometimes-when>.
27. bad1dimagines, Tumblr message to the author, June 1, 2021.
28. Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 4.
29. *Ibid.*, 3.
30. bad1dimagines, “i’m not even posting this as a joke,” Tumblr, March 12, 2016, <https://bad1dimagines.tumblr.com/post/140919782608/im-not->



even-posting-this-as-a-joke-like-i.

31. Stewart Brand, "Escaping the Digital Dark Age," *Library Journal* 124, no. 2 (February 1, 1999), quoted in De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 46.
32. Francesca Bacardi, "Harry Styles Knew He'd Made It When His Vomit Ended Up on eBay," *Page Six*, June 2, 2017, <https://pagesix.com/2017/06/02/harry-styles-knew-he-made-it-when-his-vomit-ended-up-on-ebay/>.
33. Gabrielle Kopera, email to the author, February 10, 2020.

#### 4. Trending

1. Steven J. Horowitz, "One Direction & the Wanted: The Billboard Cover Story," *Billboard*, March 27, 2012, <https://billboard.com/articles/news/499360/one-direction-the-wanted-the-billboard-cover-story>.
2. Caspar Llewellyn Smith, "One Direction: The Fab Five Take America," *The Guardian*, March 15, 2012, <https://theguardian.com/music/2012/mar/15/one-direction-fab-five-america>.
3. 5 News, "Are One Direction Bigger Than the Beatles?," YouTube video, February 11, 2014, <https://youtu.be/JvyxaOWQaiE>.
4. Matt Stopera and Dave Stopera, "23 of the Craziest and Scariest Things One Direction Fans Have Ever Done," *BuzzFeed*, November 7, 2019, <https://buzzfeed.com/mjs538/what-a-time-it-was>.
5. @Dat10inchYo, Twitter account, last updated April 12, 2014, <https://twitter.com/dat10inchyo>.
6. Anonymous, "The boys blood types- Liam: AB. Louis: O. Niall: A. Harry & Zayn: B," Twitter, April 4, 2015.
7. Darcy DiNucci, "Fragmented Future," *Print*, January 1999, 32, 221–22, [http://darcyd.com/fragmented\\_future.pdf](http://darcyd.com/fragmented_future.pdf).
8. Tim O'Reilly, "What Is Web 2.0," *O'Reilly* (blog), September 30, 2005, <https://oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>.
9. Jean Burgess and Nancy K. Baym, *Twitter: A Biography* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 36–69.
10. Susannah Fox, Kathryn Zickuhr, and Aaron Smith, "Twitter and Status Updating, Fall 2009," Pew Research Center, October 21, 2009, <https://pewresearch.org/internet/2009/10/21/twitter-and-status-updating-fall-2009/>.
11. John Herrman and Katie Notopoulos, "Weird Twitter: The Oral History," *BuzzFeed*, April 5, 2013, <https://buzzfeednews.com/article/jwherrman/weird-twitter-the-oral-history>; Leon Chang (@leyawn), "SOMEONE PUMP MY STOMACH ITS FULL OF EVIL," Twitter, June 26, 2009, <https://twitter.com/leyawn/status/2349522508>; @dril, "it is with a heavy heart that i must announce that the celebs are at it again," Twitter, September 24, 2014, <https://twitter.com/dril/status/514845232509501440>.

12. Martha Stewart (@MarthaStewart), “just got home, let out the dogs, within minutes they cornered, attacked and killed an opossum,” Twitter, November 11, 2009, <https://twitter.com/MarthaStewart/status/5638126088>.
13. Britney Spears (@britneyspears), “Does anyone think global warming is a good thing? I love Lady Gaga,” Twitter, February 10, 2011, <https://twitter.com/britneyspears/status/35767743634481152>.
14. Choire Sicha, “What Were Black People Talking About on Twitter Last Night?,” *The Awl*, November 11, 2009, <https://medium.com/the-awl/what-were-black-people-talking-about-on-twitter-last-night-4408ca0ba3d6>.
15. Farhad Manjoo, “How Black People Use Twitter,” *Slate*, August 10, 2010, <https://slate.com/technology/2010/08/how-black-people-use-twitter.html>.
16. Zach Hull, “Stan Stories: Meet the Commander of Rihanna’s Navy,” *Paper*, June 6, 2019, <https://papermag.com/stan-stories-rihanna-2638715945.html>.
17. “Interview: Young Experts on How to Create a Legion of Followers from Tumblr to Twitter,” *Brandwatch*, September 5, 2016, <https://brandwatch.com/blog/react-interview-young-experts-on-how-to-create-a-legion-of-followers-from-tumblr-to-twitter/>.
18. Brian Ries, “Justin Bieber and His Crazy Twitter Fans,” *The Daily Beast*, September 9, 2010, <https://thedailybeast.com/justin-bieber-and-his-crazy-twitter-fans>.
19. Leena Rao, “Beyonce Pregnancy News at MTV VMAs Births New Twitter Record of 8,868 Tweets Per Second,” *TechCrunch*, August 29, 2011, <https://techcrunch.com/2011/08/29/beyonce-pregnancy-news-at-the-mtv-vm-as-births-new-twitter-record-with-8868-tweets-per-second/>.
20. Simon Owens, “The Secrets of Lady Gaga’s Social Media Success,” *The Next Web*, March 15, 2011, <https://thenextweb.com/news/the-secrets-of-lady-gagas-social-media-success>.
21. Lacey Rose, “Lady Gaga, Twitter Queen,” *Forbes*, August 23, 2010, <https://forbes.com/sites/laceyrose/2010/08/23/lady-gaga-twitter-queen/>.
22. Lady Gaga, “An Inaugural Message from Tween Gaga,” YouTube video, August 22, 2010, <https://youtu.be/nyf4LGQdbB8>.
23. Emily Yahr, “One Direction, Justin Bieber Fans in Epic Twitter Battles over MTV EMAs Voting,” *The Washington Post*, October 28, 2014, <https://washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2014/10/28/justin-bieber-one-direction-fans-in-epic-twitter-battle-over-mtv-emas-voting/>.
24. This tweet seems to have been deleted. The quote and description are from a transcribed version in the author’s notes.

25. *Billboard* staff, “Fan Army Face-Off: And the Winner Is...,” *Billboard*, August 18, 2014, <https://billboard.com/articles/news/6221800/fan-army-face-off-winner>.
26. Lewis Wiltshire, “2013: The Year on Twitter,” Twitter blog, Twitter, December 11, 2013, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_gb/a/en-gb/2013/2013-the-year-on-twitter.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_gb/a/en-gb/2013/2013-the-year-on-twitter.html).
27. Nicole Kelsey Santero, “‘Nobody Can #DragMeDown’: An Analysis of the One Direction Fandom’s Ability to Influence and Dominate Worldwide Twitter Trends” (master’s thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2016).
28. Anonymous, “if taylor swift murders me DO NOT PROSECUTE HER,” Twitter, November 24, 2019.
29. Anonymous, “he’s so sexy break my back like a glow stick daddy,” Twitter, November 25, 2019.
30. Target (@Target), “We have no choice but to stan,” Twitter, January 16, 2020, <https://twitter.com/target/status/1217856741897129985>.
31. Brad Esposito, “Lady Gaga Fans Are Pretending to Be Soccer Moms on Twitter to Con Radio Stations,” *BuzzFeed*, September 5, 2016, <https://buzzfeed.com/bradesposito/soccer-moms-unite-for-gaga>.
32. Andrew Martin, “#CuttingForBieber: Most Disturbing Hashtag of All Time?,” *Complex Magazine*, January 7, 2013, <https://complex.com/music/2013/01/cuttingforbieber-most-disturbing-hashtag-of-all-time>.
33. Fernando Alfonso III, “#SkinFor1D: 4chan Hoax Asks Teens to Strip for One Direction,” *The Daily Dot*, May 28, 2014, <https://dailymag.com/unclick/one-direction-4chan-prank/>.
34. Jonathan Heaf, “This One Direction Interview Got Us Death Threats,” *GQ*, August 23, 2015, <https://gq-magazine.co.uk/article/one-direction-gq-covers-interview>.
35. “The Most Terrifying Responses to Our One Direction Covers,” *GQ*, February 25, 2014, <https://gq-magazine.co.uk/article/one-direction-gq-covers-most-terrifying-responses>.
36. Angelina Chapin, “The Wrath of Beyoncé’s Beyhive: How Fans Have Lost the Plot,” *The Guardian*, April 30, 2016, <https://theguardian.com/music/2016/apr/30/beyonce-beyhive-fans-rachel-roy-lemonade>. Roy denied the rumors and addressed the online harassment, tweeting: “I respect love, marriages, families and strength. What shouldn’t be tolerated by anyone, no matter what, is bullying, of any kind.”
37. Joe Coscarelli, “How One Tweet About Nicki Minaj Spiraled into Internet Chaos,” *The New York Times*, July 10, 2018,

<https://nytimes.com/2018/07/10/arts/music/nicki-minaj-wanna-thompson-twitter-stans.html>.

38. Laura Bradley, "Taylor Swift Remains Silent as Fans Doxx and Harass Music Critic over 'Folklore' Review," *The Daily Beast*, July 30, 2020, <https://thedailybeast.com/taylor-swift-remains-silent-as-fans-doxx-and-harass-music-critic-over-folklore-review>.
39. Katie Dey (@katie\_dey), "my ass is fatter than taylor's at least," Twitter, July 24, 2020. This post was deleted after I saw it, but it is preserved in news coverage.
40. Katie Dey (@katie\_dey), "i knew my fat ass would ruin my life someday didnt think itd go down like this tho," Twitter, July 24, 2020, [https://twitter.com/katie\\_dey/status/1286867100737236992](https://twitter.com/katie_dey/status/1286867100737236992).
41. Michael Trice and Liza Potts, "Building Dark Patterns into Platforms: How GamerGate Perturbed Twitter's User Experience," *Present Tense: A Journal of Rhetoric in Society* 6, no. 3 (January 2018), <https://presenttensejournal.org/volume-6/building-dark-patterns-into-platforms-how-gamergate-perturbed-twitters-user-experience/>.
42. 1D Predictions (@1DPsychic), "This is the 6th Christmas without One Direction," Twitter, December 23, 2020, <https://twitter.com/1DPsychic/status/1341813495785017345>.
43. 1D Predictions (@1DPsychic), "Niall Horan will be the first to go bald," Twitter, January 13, 2021, <https://twitter.com/1DPsychic/status/1349438620646699008>.
44. 1D Predictions (@1DPsychic), "Louis Tomlinson will show us his wisdom teeth removal video," Twitter, March 1, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210302003222/https://twitter.com/1DPsychic/status/1366539633027391488>.
45. @fuckwesanderson, "help so my cousin got upset after reading a fan fiction where harry styles dies and now she's been peeling potatoes for 3 hours," Twitter, February 3, 2017, <https://twitter.com/fuckwesanderson/status/827487005885952000>.
46. Lily Redman (@finelinelily), "Yesterday was like a breath of fresh air after literally one of the worst years of everyone's life," Twitter, July 24, 2020, <https://twitter.com/finelinelily/status/1286665153258414081>.

## A Note About the Author



Amelia Holowaty-Krales

[Kaitlyn Tiffany](#) is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*, where she covers technology and internet culture. She was previously on the same beat at *Vox*'s consumer vertical, *The Goods*, after starting her career writing about pop culture, fandom, and online community at *The Verge*. She lives in Brooklyn. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

