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Producing locality: practices in a South African transnational participatory fandom

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ABSTRACT

Media fandom in South Africa is an under-researched area. This thesis is one of the first South African contributions to the study of media fans and their fan cultures. It uses a creative and participatory research design and, in collaboration with a small group of self-identifying South African fans, tests the relationships between media products and their contexts of consumption – particularly where those contexts are culturally or geographically distinct from the point of production. By means of interviews and researcher-absent data collection methods I have asked: What are the everyday media practices of South African fans of global popular culture? How do these fan practices make visible the material complexities and tensions of access, participation, belonging and place central to local fandom? How is South African participatory fandom curtailed and enabled by the global cultural industries in which they are embedded? How do South African fans imagine themselves in relation to their counterparts elsewhere in the world?

Three key themes emerged from the data as findings. The first is that the domestic space of home and the intimate familial relationships with children, parents and partners constitute a major site for fandom. In turn, being a fan has a significant impact on home and family life. The second theme is the diversity of labour that is undertaken as part of fan practices. From free and voluntary labour in the service of the local community to paid commissions and work as cultural intermediaries, South African fans are labouring to produce local fandom. Thirdly, South African fans see themselves as peripheral in relation to a non-local other – an imagined "centre" that lies elsewhere. If the previous two aspects of the "produced locality" are largely produced in space and through labour, then

the relationship between this imagined centre and the periphery is a question of access: not only to commodities and texts but to proximity and authenticity.

Positioned within a theoretical framework of transnational, transcultural or globalised media flows and relationships, this thesis claims that South African fans of global popular culture can be actors in the production of locality. This "produced locality" is neither neutral nor universal, but is inflected in particular ways given the South African context for this research. In so doing, this thesis argues that it is necessary to revisit the concept of locality in a time of mediation in order to understand locality as an accomplishment – something that is made and re-made constantly.