

Tracing Fan Uptakes:

Tagging, Language, and Ideological Practices in *The Legend of Korra* FanfictionsBy Cara Marta Messina ([full text available here](#))[GitHub repository for article available here.](#)**1.0 AIM**

During the late hours before December 19, 2014, fans gathered on forums, discussion boards, and social media to eagerly wait for the series finale of *The Legend of Korra* (TLoK), a children's/young adult television show that aired on Nickelodeon from 2012-2014. One question reverberated across posts and discussions: would a romantic relationship between Korra and Asami—the main characters who are both women of color—be confirmed as canon¹? Although fans believed this was unlikely due to America's constant erasure of bisexuality and queer identities from media content, hope still bristled. As the final moments of the show aired on Nickelodeon's website, fans watched with bated breath as Korra and Asami's romantic relationship was confirmed canon when the two characters walk off into a metaphorical sunset, gazing into each other's eyes and holding hands. The immediate fan response on Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, and Reddit was powerful: fans who yearned for more queer representation—especially queer fans, themselves—were finally acknowledged. This research note, though, will look at another genre in which fans took up the series finale and the series in general: *The Legend of Korra* fanfiction published on *Archive of Our Own* (AO3)² during the show's airing and post-season finale.

Fanfiction as a larger genre—as there are sub-genres of fanfiction—is when fans use already-created cultural materials (i.e., television shows, movies, books) or in some cases people (i.e., bands, political figures, pop stars) to reimagine the characters, stories, and settings through writing. For example, a fanfiction writer may write a fanfic of *Harry Potter* from Hermione's perspective or bend Harry's gender to reimagine him as a young woman, rather than a young man. Fanfiction holds far more value than entertainment: scholars have celebrated and studied fanfiction for its view into cultural criticism (carrington, 2013; Booth, 2015), feminist, and queer practices (Russ, 1985/2014; Dym et al., 2018); representations of characters of color (carrington, 2013; Thomas and Stornaiuolo, 2016; Florini, 2018; Thomas, 2019); and role in literacy development (Jenkins, 2006; Roozen, 2009; Thomas and Stornaiuolo, 2016) and language learning (Black 2008;

¹ "Canon" refers to what is confirmed true in the original cultural material's universe.

² *Archive of Our Own* is a fanfiction publishing website that can be found at <https://archiveofourown.org/>

Black, 2009; Thorne et al., 2009). Fanfiction is a form of "restorying," or "reshaping narratives to better reflect a diversity of perspectives and experiences [as] an act of asserting the importance of one's existence in a world that tries to silence subaltern voices" (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016, p. 314). Fanfiction as a restorying literacy provides space for writers to critically examine the relationship between their identities and subject positions with the world around them. For many fans—particularly women, fans of color, and queer fans—participating in and reading fanfiction genres allows for them to re-examine how mainstream culture sees them and to reimagine what cultural materials might look like if their identities were celebrated, rather than tossed aside, underdeveloped, or ignored.

While fan studies research has boomed over the past thirty years, the social action of participating in fanfiction genres is under-explored and computational text analysis methods have rarely been used to examine fanfiction. This research note will trace fan uptake using writing analytic methods and rhetorical genre studies as a lens. The data collected for this study are 3,759 TLoK fanfictions published from 2011–2015 on *Archive of Our Own* (AO3)—a popular fanfiction publishing repository—in order to trace how fans take up the cultural materials and genres that they love. As mentioned earlier, TLoK show is already a special case study because of the groundbreaking confirmation that two women of color are bisexual. While the creators, Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino, actively made this choice, fans are always-already doing the revolutionary work of reimagining exclusive cultural narratives.

This research note advocates for two major expansions in writing analytics: the first is an expansion in *content to be studied*, while the second is about *methods*. The current content studied in writing analytics mainly derives learning analytics; the data often collected centers genres and texts found in traditional educational settings, such as writing done in classrooms (Aull, 2015; Aull, 2017; Klebanov, 2018), for tests, or in writing centers (Giaimo et al., 2018). As scholars in education and literacy studies who are also interested in fan studies have demonstrated, pedagogy extends beyond the traditional classroom space (Jenkins, 2006; Black, 2009; carrington, 2013; Booth, 2014; Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). While fanfiction may not hold the same institutional pressures as writing for a standardized test, fanfiction often helps both experienced and inexperienced writers develop their voices, rhetorical awareness, and understanding of the world. Paul Booth (2014) argues that for many, fandoms are where they can develop critical consciousnesses: "one's fandom may be one of the only places where one is encouraged to think

critically, to write, to discuss deeply, and to make thoughtful and critical judgments about hegemonic culture.”

The second goal of this research note is to continue expanding writing analytics methods. This research note provides an example for tracing genre uptakes—in this case, fan uptakes—using computational temporal analysis. As defined in rhetorical genre studies, uptake is the interdependent relationships between genres, specifically the anticipated responses to a genre in particular contexts that have been deemed appropriate based on place, time, frame, and function (Freadman, 2002). For this case study, I will use computational temporal analysis to examine the trends and patterns in the fanfiction corpus and compare these trends to when events in the show were broadcasted. I will examine the published fanfictions’ metadata and the actual text using NLP (Natural Language Processing) and word embedding models. As all methods, this method only work for particular data and contexts; computational temporal analysis for this case study demonstrates how fans resist or embrace ideologies embedded within a cultural material—*The Legend of Korra*. The data collected allows for both an analysis of patterns in the metadata and an analysis of the actual fanfiction texts.

The case study presented in this research note only uses two points of data from the corpus: the publishing dates and relationship tags. By triangulating this data with the dates TLoK episodes aired, I demonstrate four types of uptakes can be traced and defined: *canon complicit*, *implicit-explicit*, *canon resistant*, and *critical uptakes*. While the first three uptakes mainly relate to fan practices in that each deals with fans’ genre responses, the final uptake—*critical uptakes*—can be applied across the other three fan uptakes. Critical uptakes are the generic responses in which justice-centered ideologies are embedded; in this case study, the critical uptakes celebrate marginalized identities, specifically non-traditional gender and queer identities.

2.0 PROBLEM FORMATION

The main question driving this case study is how to trace and define fan uptakes in TLoK using writing analytics methods, specifically looking at critical uptakes through fans’ representations of marginalized identities. This section works to define fan studies, explain the role of rhetorical genre studies and uptake in discussing fanfiction, and finally demonstrate why integrating fan studies and fanfiction genres in writing analytics is mutually beneficial.

2.1 Fanfiction and Fan Studies

Fan studies appears across disciplines and invites scholars from education, new media, and other disciplines to come together (Jenkins, 1992, 2006; Black, 2008, 2009; Dym, Brubaker, and Fiesler, 2018; carrington, 2013; Hellekson and Busse, 2006, 2014; Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016; De Kosnik & carrington, 2019). Early fan scholars such as Henry Jenkins, Patricia Frazer Lamb, Diana Vieth, and Joanna Russ celebrated fanfiction writers' practices and genres. Jenkins (1992/2014) argues fans "much of the interest of fans and their texts for cultural studies lies precisely in the ways the ambiguities of popularly produced meanings mirror fault lines within the dominant ideology, as popular readers attempt to build their culture within the gaps and margins of commercially circulating texts" (p. 31). Jenkins' quote is one of the most well-cited fan studies because he captures the main interest in fan studies: fan studies both addresses the reflections of dominant ideologies in popular cultural texts as well as fans writers' practices in navigating, subverting, and pushing back against these dominant—and oftentimes harmful towards marginalized groups—ideologies.

Recently, fan scholars have turned away from celebrating fan practices to instead researching the nuances and complexities in fan practices, particularly in the ways that fan cultures may reinforce these particular harmful ideologies. In 2007, an anonymous *Transformative Works and Cultures* editor hosted and published a dialogue among several fans about racism and racist rhetoric across fan communities. Lothian (2018) and Booth (2014) have also pointed out the contradictions in fan communities in which fans simultaneously critique and embrace potentially exclusive and harmful ideologies. Several scholars have instead focused on *critical* fandoms, or the practices in fan communities that actively challenge systems of power and oppression (carrington, 2013; Booth, 2014; Lothian, 2018). Alexis Lothian's definition of "critical fandom" provides a good foundation to this work: "critical fandoms [are] the ways that members of fan communities use diverse creative techniques to challenge the structures and representations around which their communities are organized" (Lothian 2018, p. 372). Fanfiction community engagement often appears in the publication sites, tagging/hashtag practices, commenting features, and the actual publishing and content of the fanfiction. For example, on *Archive of Our Own*, authors choose tags to invite their ideal readers to check out their work. These tags signal content, genre, and ideologies, and are places in which critical fandom practices can be found. Critical fandoms extends far beyond what fans write and read; critical fandoms actively engage with who

is excluded and included, both in the original cultural materials as well as in the everyday interactions of the communities.

The application of critical fandoms has not explicitly found its way to writing and rhetoric, although the implication of fan spaces as critical spaces are there. Scholars in writing and rhetoric have studied fan communities for the purposes of understanding writing development (Roozen, 2009), fans' negotiations of their politics and the politics represented in the cultural texts they love (Summers, 2010), fanfiction as a remix literacy (Stedman, 2012), and the ways in which fans' produce and contribute to building out already-created stories (Potts, 2015; DeLuca, 2018). Roozen's (2009) case study of Kate, a graduate student and fanfiction writer, demonstrates the parallels between fanfiction literacy development and academic literacy development: "This portrait of Kate repurposing, remediating, and coordinating a rich network of texts and textual practices, of authoring herself continually across vernacular, disciplinary, and even professional worlds and the tensions and synergies that texture her efforts, suggests the need to make even more visible the rich and extensive networks at play in our students' literate lives" (p. 165).

Less represented in fan studies—especially in writing and rhetoric—are forms of computational analysis to explore patterns in linguistics, generic choices, tagging practices, and more. especially within writing studies. Dym, Brubaker, and Fiesler (2018) demonstrate the use of computational text analysis paired with measuring tagging practices in AO3, looking specifically at how fanfiction writers signal gender bending, particularly rewriting video game characters as trans. By using computational methods—particularly methods found in writing analytics—to explore fanfiction, scholars can better trace linguistic patterns and tagging practices in particular fan genres.

2.2 Merging Fan Studies and Writing Analytics

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2.3 Fan Genres and Uptakes

Compared to the vast amount of fanfiction—millions upon millions of published texts online—and fan genres, writing studies and fan scholars have barely scratched the surface, which is one reason why writing analytics and large corpus analysis can be useful for researching fanfiction. Fanfiction genres range from heartwarming "fluff" to sexually explicit "smut." The fanfiction texts reflect specific choices and actions made by fan writers and can provide a glimpse into understanding the reasons behind particular choices.

Fan scholars have rarely addressed the genre uptakes and conventions that appear across fandoms, especially through empirical research methods. Works like Thomas and Stornaiuolo's as well as Dym, Brubaker, and Fiesler's (2018) demonstrate empirical research methods for describing fan genres but they do not consider the genres themselves as a form of social action. What methods do fanfiction writers employ to reach their imagined audiences? How do fans take up the original cultural materials, the ideologies embedded in those materials, and other fan genres produced? To answer these questions, Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) offers another lens to study a fanfiction corpus.

RGS comes from a multidisciplinary merging of several approaches to texts and communication: speech act theory, rhetoric, linguistics, and phenomenology, and others. As Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) work on speech genres and utterances became centralized in genre studies because of its focus on interaction and the social, Carolyn Miller's formative article "Genre As Social Action" (1984) launched a new sociorhetorical and multidisciplinary approach to genre studies – Miller translated the notion of speech as action to *genre as action*. Miller's famous definition of genre—a definition that is still cited in most studies using an RGS framework—is genres are "typified rhetorical actions in recurrent situations." Instead of viewing genre as a stabilized category in which texts and ideas fit, Miller believes genre is separate from form because it is an action: the action of producing, reproducing, responding, and recurring all based on the social situations in which these actions take place. This view focuses on the *phenomenology* of genre, or the rhetorical and social situations in which genres are produced and reproduced.

Since Miller's formative article, RGS scholars have expanded the definition of genre to incorporate: the understanding that genre is "stabilized-for-now" (Schryer, 1994); the role of ideology and identity in genre participation (Paré, 2002; Poe, 2007; Applegarth, 2014; Randazzo, 2015); how individual people take up genres—or "uptake" (Freadman, 1994); and "disambiguating" uptake (Dryer, 2016). The importance of participating in genres is "knowing a genre [that is, being able to carry out a task effectively] is also knowing how to take it up" (Freadman, 1994 p. 63), as well as and understanding the appropriate time and place to that a genre up. Since Freadman's first mention of uptake (1994) and her continued exploration (2002), scholars have used the framework to explore the different ways individual writers take up genres as well as the genres produces as responses. As Dryer (2016) argues, the more uptake has been taken up, the more unclear its definition and usage. He creates a taxonomy of the different forms of uptake; two of the definitions

he creates are uptake as an *action* (uptake enactments) and uptake as a *thing* (uptake artifacts). While this research note is mainly looking at uptake artifacts—or the actual fanfictions written and published on *Archive of Our Own*—these artifacts provide a glimpse into and an understanding of the uptake enactments, or the actions fan writers take in response to the original cultural material as well as other fanfiction texts. This case study defines three types of fan uptakes: *canon complicit*, *implicit-explicit*, and *canon resistant*.

Another important element RGS brings to examining genre and uptakes—whether it be the action or the thing produced—is the focus on ideology. Bawarshi (2000, 2016a) extends Freadman’s notion of uptake to think more deeply about the role or power, privilege, and ideology in generic boundaries and uptakes. Analyzing uptake unravels the seams of genres—between the generic boundaries—in order to learn the rules for participating within particular genres, build and join communities that are constructed around genres, and/or problematize these rules by exposing the harmful ideologies woven within genre performance. Exploring fanfiction through the lens of uptake provides a method for exposing the ideologies embedded within the generic boundaries from the original cultural material as well as the fanfiction and communities; specifically, in the conclusion section of this research note, I will define and describe the justice-centered ideologies that are embedded in fans’ *critical uptakes*.

Fan uptakes—the action of reimagining an already-created cultural material through writing—demonstrate the ways in which fan writers read subtext, challenge normalized narratives in their work, expand identity and story representation, and develop audience awareness and their own voices. The uptake artifacts—the fanfictions—represent fans’ uptakes of the original cultural materials, provide a glimpse into the *what ifs* fans ask themselves when they watch shows and movies or read books, and reveal the ways in which fans resist or reinforce the ideologies perpetuated in the original cultural materials. The question, then, is how can these fan uptakes be traced and defined using computational means?

3.0 INFORMATION COLLECTION

This section will tackle how fan uptakes can be traced using writing analytics methods, particularly by incorporating computational temporal analysis. In this note, I define computational temporal analysis as a method of tracing changes across time in a database, looking specifically at changes in metadata patterns and language patterns as well as in the ideologies embedded in these

patterns. While this case study is particularly concerned with fan uptakes, this method may be applied across other research contexts.

3.1 Data Collection

In order to explore fan uptakes and the uptake artifacts, the different genres must be established. One genre is the young adult bildungsroman television show, while the other genres are the fanfictions, themselves. These fanfictions written are both a direct response to the original cultural material—TLoK—as well as other fanfictions that have been written before. This is evident through linguistic and tagging patterns that appear in the analysis of the data. The data collected for this case study are 3,759 fanfictions published on AO3 in 2011–2015.

Why The Legend of Korra Fanfictions?

TLoK, the original cultural material, already breaks generic conventions and demonstrates critical ideologies that subvert systems of power and oppression, especially around its representations of diverse races and sexualities. Since this case study explores fan uptakes, particularly fans' critical uptakes, I chose an original material that is already justice-centered in its ideologies because the fan community—those who choose to watch and engage with the original cultural material—may be more critically conscious than viewers of television shows that demonstrate more exclusive ideologies.

As Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019) and so many other cultural and fan studies scholars have argued, representation for people of color in mainstream cultural materials is limited. The “imagination gap” Thomas (2019) describes—or the ways in which science and speculative fiction often represent the same groups of people—demonstrates creators' and producers' lack of imagination in character representation because characters of color or other marginalized characters may be “unlikeable” to the larger public; the public, in this case, is coded as white, cisgender viewers, completely ignoring the viewers of color or viewers from other marginalized groups. *The Legend of Korra* already bridges this gap by having the main character in a cartoon fantasy series be a powerful and vulnerable woman of color—Korra—who in the end is confirmed bisexual when she begins a romantic relationship Asami, another woman character. As one of the creators, Bryan Konietzko states:

But this particular decision [to pair Korra and Asami together] wasn't only done for us. We did it for all our queer friends, family, and colleagues. It is long overdue that our media (including children's media) stops treating non-heterosexual people as nonexistent, or as

something merely to be mocked. I'm only sorry it took us so long to have this kind of representation in one of our stories.

The show invites fans to challenge particular exclusive ideologies around gender, race, and sexuality: the 'happy ending' in the show is not heteronormative, but rather suggestive of an adventure to come, a grand vacation, and a new love that breaks boundaries.

While the show itself demonstrates a critical consciousness by flipping the classic white, cisgender straight male hero, what is more important is how the fans took up the show, even before the confirmation of Korra's bisexuality in the series finale. Fans were already reading the queer subtext, as well as queering the explicit text, by pairing Asami and Korra together or other same-gender characters. The 3,759 fanfictions published on *Archive of Our Own* demonstrate the ways in which fans took up moments of the show to either challenge or reinforce particular ideologies embedded in the show.

Retrieving Data from Archive of Our Own

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AO3 does not currently have an application programming interface (API) to collect fanfictions, but when I reached out to the Organization for Transformative Works about my research, the respondent said third-party scraping was allowed at particular times to prevent overwhelming their servers. I used Jingyi Li and Sarah Sterman's AO3 scraper³ to collect all of TLoK fanfictions published from 2011–2018. The data collected was a CSV (comma separated value) file with both the metadata about the fanfiction as well as the actual body of text.

The next step is data transformation, or making choices about which data to analyze and pair. Including the actual fanfiction text itself, there are approximately 20 points of metadata about each fanfiction. Some important data for each fanfiction includes:

- **Published date:** or the date when the fanfiction was first published.
- **Relationship:** or the user-chosen tags that signal which characters are paired together in the fanfiction. Examples of relationship tags are "Korra/Asami," "Korra/Mako," or "Mako/Wu."⁴

³ The AO3 python scraper created by Jingyi Li and Sarah Sterman is available at <https://github.com/radiolarian/AO3Scraper>

⁴ Mako and Wu are other characters in *The Legend of Korra*; Korra/Mako is another popular relationship tag, although nearly as popular as Korra/Asami on AO3.

- **Rating:** or the user-chosen rating. These ratings include “General Audience,” “Teen and Up,” and “Mature.”
- **Additional tags:** or user-selected additional tags used to signal the genre, content, and other important information about the fanfiction. Examples of additional tags are “Fluff,” “Smut,” “Canon Complicit,” and “Alternate Universe.”
- **Body:** or the actual fanfiction text.

This case study mainly focuses on computational temporal analysis to trace fan critical uptakes specifically using “publishing date,” “relationship,” and “body” data. First, I pair data results from the corpus with events that air on the television show using the “publishing date” metadata; then, I use these results to trace “relationship” tagging practices to define different types of fan uptakes; finally, I create three corpora around specific dates as use NLP and word embedding models to further dive into shifts in ideological patterns.

3.2 Data Transformation

In order to analyze the corpus, I used Python to transform the data and Excel for visualizing some results.⁵ The “additional tags” and “relationship” tags are not standardized and chosen by each fan writer, which can make quantifying tags a bit challenging. As Rawson and Muñoz (2016) argue, the process of transforming data in an attempt to standardize is a form of argumentation, itself, because the researcher is choosing the final standard. When fans fill out the metadata about their fanfiction text, they can choose a relationship tag to pair two characters. While AO3 suggests to fan writers a specific string to represent the relationship, it is up to fans whether or not they will follow that specific string. The relationship tag “Korra/Mako” typically appears with Korra at the beginning of the string, but on rare occasion “Mako/Korra” will be used. I mainly counted “Korra/Mako” tags because these were the most common and incorporated “Mako/Korra” in my count when it came up. The relationship tag “Korra/Asami,” however, appears much more consistently, especially in the earlier publishing dates. The different strings used are “Korra/Asami (Avatar),” “Korra/Asami,” and finally “Korra/Asami Sato,” which made counting the number of times fans used Korra and Asami in a relationship tag a bit more challenging. In later date, as the korrasami ship became more popular in the fandom, the “Korra/Asami Sato” tag became much more standardized.

⁵ The Python code for this article is available on GitHub: https://github.com/caramessina/tracing_fan_uptakes

For computational temporal analysis, I grouped fanfictions up based on the month and year of their publication dates. Each fanfiction's publication date has the month, date, and year; using a regular expression, I created another metadata column using a regular expression titled "month" which contains only the month and year; for example, if a fanfiction text was published on May 12, 2015, the "month" column read 2012-05. This better allows me to trace patterns that occur by pairing the "month" data with the airing dates from the original cultural materials.

3.3 Pairing Publishing Dates with Television Air Dates

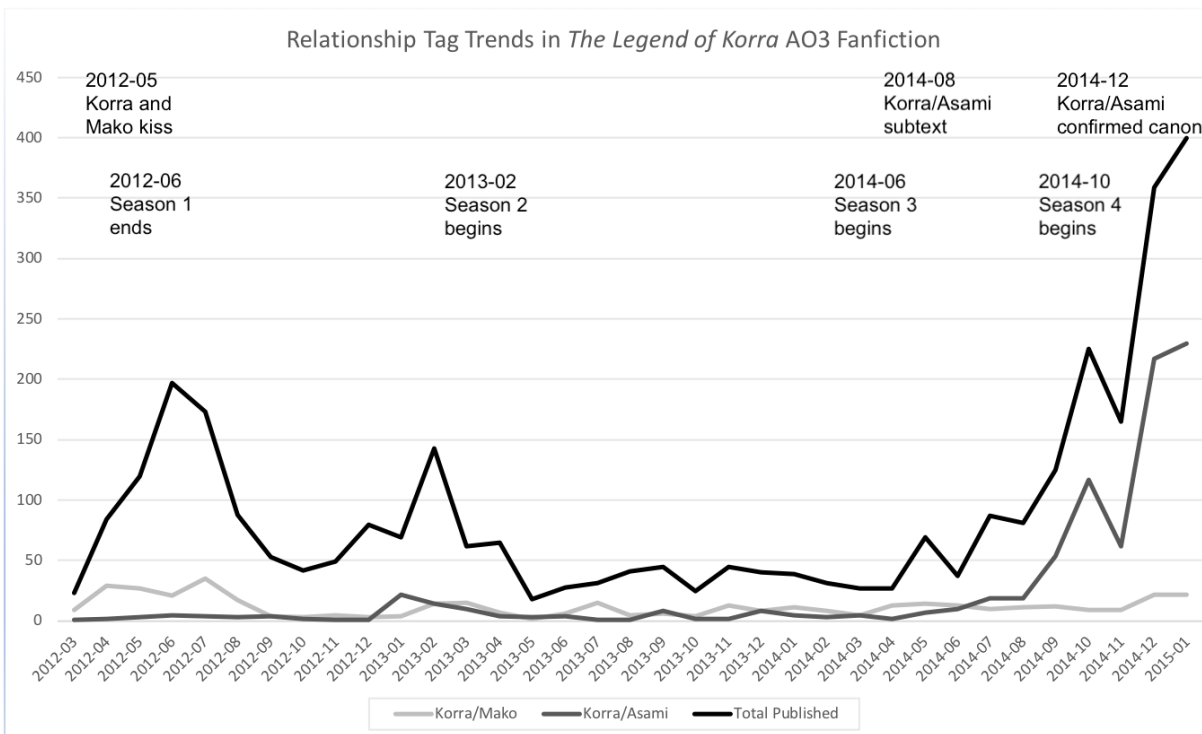
To begin exploring how fanfiction authors take up the original cultural material, the first place to begin is by pairing publishing dates in the corpus with dates in which important events on the TLoK were first aired. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the amount of fanfictions published across months and years as well as the amount of Korra/Asami Sato and Korra/Mako relationship tags used per month. The date represents the date of the trend or event; the middle column represents when important moments from the show aired; the third column represents data collected from the corpus of TLoK fanfictions published on AO3 that pair two points of metadata: "publishing date" and "relationship." I used the publishing date to count how many fanfictions were published in each month along with the most popular relationship.

By examining the uptake artifacts from the corpus, this timeline demonstrates several aspects of fan uptake enactments, or the actions fans take to participate in fanfiction genres and react to the original cultural material: *canon complicit*, *implicit-explicit*, and *canon resistant uptake enactments*. These type of fan uptakes relate directly to the ways in which the fans reimagine the original cultural materials: some choose to explore what is already canon (canon-complicit), some choose to make explicit the arguable subtext in the original cultural material (implicit-explicit), and some choose to resist the canon entirely (canon resistant).

In order to examine these fan uptakes, I will examine the "relationship" tags were used for each month, specifically looking at "Korra/Asami Sato" and "Korra/Mako" (see Figure 1). Relationship tags on AO3 are used by writers to signal to their potential audiences which characters will be involved romantically by using the forward slash between character names.

Figure 1

Trends in User-Chosen "Relationship" Tags



First, and most unsurprising, trends in the publishing dates and relationship tags reflect events in the show. When fans watch Korra and Mako kiss in an episode aired on May 2012, the excitement about the new relationship inspires fanfiction writers and begin publishing their own imagined romances between Korra and Mako, as shown in the Korra and Mako being one of the highest picked relationship tags in May and June 2012. In December 2014 Korra and Asami, a beloved ship—relationship—in TLoK fandom, is confirmed official on the show; fans’ enthusiasm can be traced in a large spike of fan fictions published from 165 in November to 359 in December). This uptake enactment, which I will call the *canon complicit uptake*, is fanfiction or fan genre created celebrating and following an event in the original source material. “Canon complicit” is a frequently used AO3 “additional tag”; the canon complicit works are fanfictions or fan art that follow the original source materials—also known as the “canon” in fandoms.

The next form of uptake that this timeline demonstrates is *implicit-explicit uptake* enactments, in which fans analyze the subtext of the show and make the subtext explicit in their fanfictions. This implicit-explicit uptake will come as no surprise to both fans and fanfiction scholars; fanfiction often builds off canonical moments in the show, exploring the potential stories hidden between the lines, such as the Kirk/Spock slashfic written and disseminated in the late

1970s and beyond (Russ, 1985/2014) or reimagining the story from a side characters' perspective. As Jones (2002/2014) points out, the cult television genre "implicity 'resists' the conventions of heterosexuality; the slash fiction stories written by some of its fans render explicit this implicit function" (p. 128). Jones' reading of cult television shows, or shows with a cult-like dedicated fandom following, are already subversive in their takes on culture and ideology; although I would argue this, of course, depends on the consumers' analysis of the text as there is no Truth that exists within a text. Jones' argument signals to the potential of an underlying narrative in the original cultural texts that resists heteronormative, white supremacist ideologies—the problem, is though, that these readings are usually buried in subtext and can be ignored by other fans. This is why fans' implicit-explicit uptakes are necessary.

Tracing fan uptakes using computational temporal analysis shows that fans typically react to moments of tension or potential romance by making this romance explicit, and TLoK is no different. As the second spike of TLoK fanfictions published on AO3 in August, September, and October 2014 demonstrates, fans' often take up the potential stories and make them explicit. In the episode "Venom of the Red Lotus" (aired online at the end of August 2014), Korra must fight Zaheer, an anarchist with a strong connection to the Spirit World; she defeats Zaheer, but is traumatized physically and mentally in the process. The final few minutes of the episode show wheelchair-bound Korra seemingly disconnected from the celebrations occurring around her as she suffers with the traumas she endured. Asami is right by Korra's side for every scene, helping her get ready, pushing her where she needs to go, and standing besides her during the final few minutes of the episode as a ceremony takes place. While Asami helps Korra get ready, she kneels besides Korra and takes her hand to tell her, "I want you to know that I'm here for you. If you ever want to talk or [pause] anything." Fans read into the Asami's pause and her lingering on the word "anything," as demonstrated in the sudden rise of published TLoK fanfictions and the Korra/Asami Sato relationship tag, jumping from 19 in August to 54 in October 2014. In fact, around October 2014, the count of the "Total published" texts match almost identically with the count of the "Korra/Asami" relationship tags; the amount of Korra/Asami fanfiction published from October 2014 and beyond heavily impacts the amount of total published fanfictions because the relationship is so popular in the fandom. This demonstrates fans' implicit-explicit uptakes enactments, exploring what is unsaid and hidden in the subtext to celebrate diverse stories, specifically diverse queer stories.

The third fan uptake enactment the data shows is *canon resistant* uptakes, or when fans actively resist both the implicit and explicit canonical choices made in the original cultural material. One of the more surprising moments for me during this research—and a result that I honestly should have seen coming—is Korra and Mako are *not* the most popular relationship tag chosen during the month Korra and Mako’s romantic relationship was built up and finally begins with a kiss. The most popular relationship tag chosen in May 2012 is Korra and Tahno (at 29, as opposed to Korra/Mako at 27), who is a competitor she faces during a sports event in the first season. Korra/Bolin ships—Bolin is Mako’s brother—also come up quite frequently and, even though Korra and Bolin tried dating at the beginning of the series, their relationship became platonic after Korra and Mako became a couple. Another insistence of canon resistance uptakes demonstrated through relationship tags is the common pairing of Korra and Kuviria, another woman character; Kuviria is the main villain in Season 4 and is often paired with Korra in fanfiction published later in the series and past the series. Canon resistant uptakes and implicit-explicit uptakes may overlap varying on the fans’ or the researchers’ reading of the original cultural material. For example, some fans may argue there was implicit sexual tension between Korra and Tahno, which is not my own reading of Korra and Tahno’s relationship.

Percentage of Fanfictions Published Using “Korra/Mako” Relationship Tag

<u>Date</u>	<u>Total Fanfictions Published</u>	<u>Texts that use “Korra/Mako” Tag</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
2012-04	84	29	34.52%
2012-05	120	27	22.5%
2012-06	197	21	10.66%
Total	401	77	19.2%

Examining different forms of uptake through relationship tags demonstrates the different types of fan uptakes, but also provides a glimpse into the exigency of fan uptakes. As Table 2 shows, while Korra and Mako was originally one of the more popular ships, the percentage of Korra/Asami relationship tags to the count of fanfiction texts published around the first season (April–June 2012) was only **19.51%**. As Table 3 shows, when TLoK subtext hints at Korra and

Asami’s potential romantic relationship (August–November 2019), the “Korra/Asami Sato” relationship tag is used in **44.08%** of the fanfictions published.

Percentage of Fanfictions Published Using “Korra/Asami Sato” Relationship Tag

<u>Date</u>	<u>Total Fanfictions Published</u>	<u>Texts that use “Korra/Asami” Tag</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
2014-08	81	19	23.46%
2014-09	125	54	43.2%
2014-10	225	117	52%
Total	431	190	44.08%

The difference between the “Korra/Mako” published texts when their relationship was canon as opposed to the percentage of “Korra/Asami” published texts when subtextual hints of their relationship appeared demonstrates a collective desire for a canonical queer relationship in the TLoK fandom. As Thomas and Stornaiuolo’s (2016) argue for young writers of color who restory texts, “we applaud young people’s resilient efforts to author themselves in order to be heard, seen, and noticed—to assert that *their lives matter*—by bending the world around them” (p. 333). For fanfiction writers who both enacted implicit-explicit uptakes as well as canonical complicit uptakes around Korra and Asami’s relationship, they assert queer lives matter and queer characters (people) deserve to be heroes.

3.4 Computational Text Analysis: Exploring Representations of Gender and Sexuality in the Corpus

In order to work with the actual fanfiction texts, I split the published fanfictions up into three separate corpora by published month (see Table 4): the first corpus is a collection of all the fanfictions published before August 2014, when season 3 was airing and the show hinted at Korra and Asami’s potential romance; the second corpus is a collection of all the fanfictions published from August 2014–November 2014, before the series finale confirmed Korra and Asami’s romantic relationship was canon; the third corpus is a collection of all the fanfictions published from December 2014–March 2015, when and after the series finale confirmed Korra and Asami’s romance. Similar to the results from the “published dates” and “relationship tags,” these three corpora reflect when important moments in the show aired, especially around Korra’s relationship

with Asami.⁶ This section will examine the different language patterns in the three corpora, how these language patterns reflect fan writers' uptakes of the original show, and the ideologies embedded within these uptakes, especially around representations of gender and sexuality.

Table 4

Fanfiction Corpora Separate by Published Date

<u>Corpus Name</u>	<u>Corpus Description</u>	<u>Corpus Word Count</u>
Pre-Korrasami	<i>TLoK</i> fanfictions published between February 2011 and July 2014	4,148,808
Subtext-Korrasami	<i>TLoK</i> fanfictions published between August 2014 and November 2014	1,506,803
Post-Korrasami	<i>TLoK</i> fanfictions published between December 2014 and March 2015	6,156,530

Once the three corpora were created, I ran different forms of corpus preparation to prepare each for computational text analysis. I lowered all the capital letters, removed basic stopwords, removed all punctuation (including punctuation specific to the corpora such as “`” and “-”), and stemmed all the words using NLTK's Porter Stemmer.⁷ Stemming transforms words like “masculine,” “bisexual,” and “breathlessly,” to “masculin,” “bisexu,” and “breathlessli” in order to combine the similar words with different suffixes; for example, “bisexual” and “bisexuality” are now both labeled “bisexu.”

In order to better trace the contexts in which particular words are used, I created three separate word embedding models of the corpora with Python's gensim library.⁸ Word embedding models, or Word2Vec, measure and compare the relationships of a word's context and finds the cosine similarity of other words in that corpus that appear in similar contexts. Schmidt (2015)

⁶ What I have not discussed in this research note is that Korra and Asami are not the only widely-used relationship between two female characters. There are several fanfictions that pair Korra and Kuvira, another woman character in the show.

⁷ To find the code for this text preparation stage, visit my published textual preparation notebook on GitHub at [LINK REMOVED FOR ANONYMITY]

⁸ For the code to create word embedding models as well as some more detailed results, visit my computational text analysis notebook published on my GitHub at https://github.com/caramessina/tracing_fan_uptakes/blob/master/02-computational_text_analysis.ipynb

advocates for analyzing texts with word embedding models because they “offer something slightly more abstract, but equally compelling: a spatial analogy to relationships between words. WEMs (to make up for this post a blanket abbreviation for the two major methods) take an entire corpus, and try to encode the various relations between word into a spatial analogue.” A classic example might be that “queen” is closely related to “king” in that each word is used in similar contexts. Depending on the corpus, however, the results will vary. The results will also vary based on the parameters provided during the creation of the model. In the word embedding models I created, I chose to include words that appear in at least 10 times across each corpus. This means if a word is not included in the word embedding model, it appears less than 10 times in that specific corpus. By creating a word embedding model for each corpus, I compare the ways in which particular terms are used across the three corpora based on the words that are most likely to appear in similar contexts.

[MENTION KUVIRA] The best example to begin with are the three separate results for the words that are most similar to “Asami” across all three corpora. In the pre-Korrasami corpus, some of the words most similar to “Asami” are “cheerlead” (cheerleader, cosine 0.6560); “quarterback” (0.6462); “heiress” (0.6236); and “girlfriend” (0.5158). In the subtext-Korrasami corpus, some of the words most similar to “Asami” are “engin” (engine or engineer, 0.7524); “korra” (0.7403); “softli” (softly, 0.6208); and “mumbl” (0.5618). In fanfiction, common nicknames are given to characters—especially when writing romantic scenes between characters of the same gender—because relying on pronouns to describe interactions can make for confusing prose. These nicknames often appear across many fanfiction texts, as fanfiction authors seem to be borrowing each others’ nicknames.⁹ For example, “the heiress,” “the engineer,” or “the inventor” may be used as a nickname for Asami, as shown in the results; other popular examples may include describing characters based on their physical features, such as “the taller one” or “the raven-haired woman”.

Between just the pre-Korrasami corpus and the subtext-Korrasami corpus, there are already significant differences in the words that are most commonly related to Asami. In the pre-Korrasami corpus, there is more of a focus on classic highschool romance tales—the cheerleader and the

⁹ Tracing the use of these nicknames across particular fandoms may be a fascinating intertextual study demonstrating how fan writers shape their own communities and writing practices through this form of intertextuality.

quarterback pop up as the most similar words to Asami. Canonically, there is no football, quarterbacks, or explicit cheerleaders in *TLoK* show, so the appearance of these words implies Asami often appears in alternate universe fanfictions¹⁰ where she is the cheerleader interacting with a quarterback. In the subtext-Korrasami corpus, the word “engine” is most similar to Asami, which aligns canonically with the show; Asami is an inventor, so fanfictions where she appears may be using the word engineer to describe her or engineer might appear in similar situations as the word “Asami.” The word “mumbl” and “softli” appears, demonstrating interactions between Asami and other characters or Asami’s own actions. These adverbs and verbs demonstrate in the subtext-Korrasami corpus, writers may write her as more active, rather than just describing her through the roles she takes on. Finally, in the post-Korrasami corpus, the words most similar to “Asami” are “Korra” (0.8552), “girlfriend” (0.6660); “heiress” (0.5773); “babe” (0.5372); and “mmm” (0.5117). At first glance, there are similar results between the pre- and post-Korrasami corpora, such as “Asami” being related to words like “girlfriend” and “heiress.” The post-Korrasami corpus results, however, suggest Asami’s role has shifted—words most related to her name revolve around activity, particularly romantic activity: “mmm,” “softli,” “shyli,” and “blush,” suggest romantic actions, and as the temporal analysis above suggests, these activities probably involve her interactions with Korra in these fanfictions. This basic analysis demonstrates the ways in which word embedding model results shift based on the corpus and how these results may insights for each corpus.¹¹

Table 5 shows the results across all three corpora for different words. I queried these words in each word embedding model and in the table, I highlight some of the top results along with their cosine similarity.¹² I chose to query words that mark either gender and sexuality and, as the results show, the representations of gender and sexuality differ widely across the corpora. I specifically decided to query identity-based words such as “masculine,” “feminine,” “bisexual,” and “gender”; different gendered actions and roles such as “marry,” “pregnant,” and “girlfriend;” and representations of Asami using the term “heiress” which is a nickname provided to her by fanfiction writers.

¹⁰ Alternate universe fanfictions are fanfictions that exist in universes outside the canonical universe. As the Asami/Cheerleader example demonstrates, some popular alternate universes are imagining characters in fantastical worlds in more ordinary and realistic high school situations.

¹¹ I also want to point out the importance of knowing your corpus. Because I am familiar with *TLoK* fandom, I am more likely able to discern potentially strange relationships between words.

Table 5

Results from Word Embedding Model Queries across the Three Corpora

<u>Word Query</u>	<u>Pre-Korrasami Results</u>	<u>Subtext-Korrasami Results</u>	<u>Post-Korrasami Results</u>
heiress	gorgeou*, 0.6265 asami, 0.6236 girl, 0.5857 quarterback, 0.5718	breathlessli*, 0.7744 flush, 0.7384 arch, 0.7338 a-asami, 0.717	omega, 0.6916 alpha, 0.6567 inventor, 0.6470 squirm, 0.6247
feminin*	eleg*, 0.7760 accentu*, 0.7595 complement, 0.7515 facial, 0.7390	brunett*, 0.9074 creami*, 0.8784 repeatedli*, 0.8639 vagina, 0.8495	allur*, 0.7315 contrast, 0.7279 eleg*, 0.7142 masculin*, 0.6968
masculin*	undeni*, 0.7111 mixtur*, 0.7093 throat*', 0.6919 enchant*', 0.6823	porn, 0.9184 inexperienc*, 0.9116 pervert, 0.9066 envi*, 0.9055	epitom*, 0.7003 feminin*, 0.6968 qualiti*, 0.6952 gender, 0.6914
gender	inspir*, 0.7662 interpret, 0.7536 writer, 0.7421 genr*, 0.7363	reput*, 0.9274 wage, 0.9266 specul*, 0.9165 inventor, 0.9161	biolog*, 0.7381 common, 0.7290 stereotyp*, 0.7286 renown, 0.7238
bisexual	N/A	N/A	lesbian, 0.73581 fangirl, 0.6794 gay, 0.6770 heterosexu*, 0.6747
marri*	wed*, 0.7040 wife, 0.7000 pregnant, 0.6946 sixteen, 0.6816	proud, 0.7784 marriag*, 0.7744 daughter, 0.7685 husband, 0.7571	marriag*, 0.7341 wed*, 0.6528 propos*, 0.6325 wife, 0.6007

pregnant	marri*, 0.6946	husband, 0.8924	birth, 0.6444
	babi', 0.6346	wife, 0.8595	husband, 0.6266
	fourteen-year-old, 0.6060	daughter, 0.7445	sire, 0.6051
	wife, 0.5976	warmli*, 0.7283	wife, 0.6000
girlfriend	boyfriend, 0.8421	cute, 0.8325	korra, 0.6986
	date, 0.7775	chuckl*, 0.8271	asami, 0.6660
	jealou*, 0.7470	date, 0.822	dork, 0.6309
	cute, 0.6560	wink, 0.8068	ador*, 0.6271

Table 5 results suggest there are shifts in ideological underpinnings through the relationships between words. Continuing the Asami example from above, the word “heiress” is in the pre-Korrasami model follows traditional gender roles for women: words like gorgeous, quarterback, and girl appear. In the subtext- and post-Korrasami models, however, “heiress” is used in words that relate explicitly to sexuality and sexual relationships: “arch” refers to someone’s back and body arching during a passionate act; “a-asami” refers to intimate speech; and “alpha” and “omega” are labels used across fandoms to refer to the sexual and romantic dynamic between two characters of the same gender. The transformation for how fans represent Asami across the three corpora also demonstrates a shift in ideologies. In earlier fan uptakes of the show, Asami is represented through more traditional gender roles and notions of femininity. She is represented as beautiful, wealthy, and distant from the main story. The subtext-Korrasami model *implicit-explicit* uptake demonstrates a dramatic shift in representations of Asami, recognizing Asami not just as a distant feminine figure, but an intimate part of the story, especially Korra’s story, where their romance is made explicit.

The next group of word queries are words that signify identity markers: “feminine,” “masculine,” “gender,” and “bisexual.” The word “feminine” across the three corpora reflects traditional descriptors of femininity: elegance, creamy, brunette, and alluring. However, femininity in the subtext-Korrasami corpus uses more explicit vocabulary, implying feminine is often used in intimate scenes; femininity in the post-Korrasami model seems to be used in “contrast” to “masculine,” potentially implying a feminine/masculine divide between Korra and Asami. The “masculine” query in the post-Korrasami model reinforces this idea: masculinity and femininity is often paired together. Meanwhile, “masculine” in the pre-Korrasami corpus seems to be more of a descriptor, although the word “mixture” implies less rigidity in gender performance.

Finally, the query results for “gender” and “bisexual” in the post-Korrasami yield the most interesting results: both results suggest writers’ critical awareness of identity markers. “Biolog*” (biology/biological) paired with “gender” suggests and awareness of gender theory, particularly around gender labels; although, the concordance tool results for “biolog*” show biological is mostly used to refer to parentage and biology is used to refer to the school subject. “Bisexual*” (bisexual, bisexuality) does not even appear in the first two models, which means the word was used less than 10 times in those corpora, meanwhile the appears in the post-Korrasami model with other markers of sexuality.

The final word queries relate to gendered actions and labels: “marri,” “pregnant,” and “girlfriend.” The words most similar to marri* and pregnant across the three models still suggest forms of heteronormative roles: wife, husband, propose; there are some surprises in these results, including “fourteen-year-old” in the pre-Korrasami model and “sire”—the male breeding position, but also sometimes used in fanfiction and fantastical genres to refer to a mystical forms of parentage—in the post-Korrasami model. “Girlfriend” across the three models provide a more explicit trajectory from traditional representations of girlfriends in the pre-Korrasami corpus to the queer, intimate representations in the post-Korrasami corpus. In the pre-Korrasami corpus, the word most related to “girlfriend” is “boyfriend,” and other terms like “jealous” and “cute” appear. In the post-Korrasami corpus, however, “girlfriend” has a less patronizing portrayal: obviously “korra” and “asami” are most related, but the word “adore” and “dork” are also closely related, two words which portray intimacy and playfulness.

While word embedding models provide overall patterns in contextual relationships between words, diving into the text is a necessary step to better understand how these models may reflect or not reflect specific moments in the text (Messina, 2018). Using a concordance Python function created by Geoffrey Rockwell,¹³ I queried several words from the word embedding model to examine how these words are used in specific contexts (see Table 6). Quinn (forthcoming 2020) refers to this method as “folding back,” in which researchers use computational models to then investigate specific moments in the original corpus. Table 6 shows some chosen excerpts from the concordance results. These results are not necessarily representative of each corpus, yet I want to

¹³ Find Geoffrey Rockwell’s concordance function published on GitHub here: <https://github.com/sgsinclair/alta/blob/a482d343142cba12030fea4be8f96fb77579b3ab/ipynb/utilities/Concordances.ipynb>

include them to demonstrate the necessity of going back to the text after performing computational text analysis.

Table 6			
<i>Concordance Excerpts from the Three Corpora</i>			
<u>Word</u>	<u>Quote</u>	<u>Corpus</u>	<u>Fan Author</u>
gender	<i>“were lingering stories of past gender inequality in the Water Tribes”</i>	Post-Korrasami	Katya_D_R_Rar ewyne
girlfriend	<i>“‘This is Asami; my girlfriend,’ Korra introduced Asami”</i>	Pre-Korrasami	Nightworldlove
feminine	<i>“just the right mix of masculine and feminine.”</i>	Post-Korrasami	avesnongrata
gay	<i>“I will not tolerate a son of mine being gay.”</i>	Pre-Korrasami	Aewin
	<i>“Because Korra could not be gay. She just simply could never marry a woman”</i>	Sub-Korrasami	autumnmycat
	<i>“police really liked to harass butch women at gay bars, especially those of us who used underwear as one of our items”</i>	Post-Korrasami	Emily Merrill
lesbian	<i>“How?! There isn't a lesbian version of Grindr. Is there?”</i>	Sub-Korrasami	Dandybear
bi/bisexual	<i>“‘I'm bi, er, bisexual' Korra announced, her voice just as shaky”</i>	Sub-Korrasami	gillywulf
<i>All fanfiction authors have provided consent for excerpts from their texts and credit given to usernames/real names to be used in this article .</i>			

As Table 6 demonstrates, the findings in the word embedding model do not fully capture the nuances of each corpus. For example, in the word embedding models, the word “bisexual” does not appear in the first and second model, but the words “bisexual” and “bi” are used in the

pre- and subtext-Korrasami corpora in ways that suggest writers are thinking deeply about representations of sexuality, particularly around the fluidity of sexuality as well as the “coming out” narrative.¹⁴ In the pre-Korrasami corpus, Nightworldlove’s text demonstrates *canon-resistant* uptakes as they writing about Korra and Asami’s romance in late 2012. Table 6 shows, especially in the “lesbian” and “gay” results, the anxieties around coming out and merely existing as a queer person. For example, autumnmycat’s fanfiction takes places in *TLoK* universe, yet autmnmecat maintains realistic anxieties around embracing one’s non-normative identity: “Because Korra could not be gay. She just simply could never marry a woman.” As Yoder, Breitfeller, and Rosé (2019) argue in their sentiment analysis of fanfiction published about the most popular fandoms in *AO3*, the negative sentiment analysis around queer identity markers like “trans,” “gay,” and “queer,” more reflects genre conventions in fanfiction, rather than actual negative sentiment towards queer identities. One of the most popular fanfiction tags on *AO3* is “Angst,” and angst paired with representations of queer identities may manifest through anxieties around a lack of acceptance, isolation, and violence. For example, in the “lesbian” search, one writer in their universe discusses the violent policing of butch lesbian women, which the author also points to as a historical reality. Even if these are fictional reimaginings of a fictional universe, the anxieties are very real: people who are queer are constantly threatened by damaging rhetoric and slurs, homophobic individuals and groups, and systems of oppression that encourage violence towards people who are queer.

Even though the word embedding models suggest fan writers’ uptakes become more critical as the show moved forward, some fan writers seem to always-already be concerned around representations of sexuality and non-traditional genders and gender roles. The goal, then, is for researchers to discern the type of rhetorical choices fans make in their uptake of original texts, and how these uptakes reflect ideologies that are critical of systems of oppression and want to represent diverse identities, particularly queer identities, in ways that reflect the real anxieties, joys, and all the nuances between.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned in the problem formation section, fan studies scholars are becoming more invested in critical fandom practices. The final form of uptake I will define are fans’ *critical uptake* enactments. These uptakes may include implicit-explicit, canon resistant, or canon complicit

uptake practices, but critical upakes specifically deal with resisting exclusive and oppressive ideologies by embracing justice-centered practices in writers' choices. The above analyses demonstrate several ways in which fans take up the justice-centered ideologies in the text, particularly around the representation of queer identities through Korra and Asami's relationship.

While there are multiple ways fans incorporate critical practices as they take up texts, this research note is particularly interested in fans' critical uptake enactments around the representation of *identities*. Critical uptakes reflect Thomas and Stornaiuolo's definition of "restorying," which are uptake enactments that "reshap[e] narratives to better reflect a diversity of perspectives and experiences" (p. 314). Fan scholars trace critical fandoms by examining fans practices that suggest fans are thinking critically about gender, sexuality, race, neurodiversity, and diverse abilities, even when the original cultural material does not reflect critical forms of representation (Summers, 2010; carrington, 2013; Lothian, 2018; Dym et al., 2018; De Kosnik & carrington, 2019).

Critical uptakes can be traced through the characters fans choose to write about, the relationships fans choose, and how fans choose to portray particular characters, such as through race-bending, gender-bending, or perspective-bending (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). For the metadata analysis as shown in Figure 1 and Table 1, critical uptakes are represented through fans' relationship tag choices. Because so much of fanfiction revolves around romance, particular ideologies may be parsed by examining relationship tag choices. Figure 1 shows there are several fan who imagined Korra/Asami's potential—even before there were any implicit or subtextual hints of their relationship—pushing against the original heteronormative romantic arc in the first season of the show. In May and June 2012, towards the end of season 1 when Korra and Mako's relationship is canon on the original cultural material, the Korra/Asami relationship tag is used 3 times in May and 5 times in June. In January 2013, before season 2 was released, there is a spike in Korra/Asami tags—the month count jumps from 1 to 22 times used, demonstrating a new interest in the fan community between Korra and Asami as a potential relationship.

As for the computational text analysis section, the word embedding models and the concordance results for the three corpora demonstrate the ways in which fans' ideologies shifted as the show continued to air. The *implicit-explicit* uptakes in the "subtext-Korrasami" corpus demonstrate how fans take up the subtext to explore queer identities, especially Korra and Asami's identities. The representations of gender and sexuality, particularly around labels like "lesbian," "gay," and "bisexual," demonstrate an awareness of navigating a society in which systems in place

attempt to do violence upon these identities; these representations also reflect, however, the joys of finding love, being accepted, and having the freedom to claim and establish one's identity.

Fanfiction can be a form of escapism, ownership, and subverting exclusive cultural and societal narratives. When fans critically take up the original cultural materials, they play in the "gaps and margins," (Jenkins, 1992/2014, p. 372), "restorying" texts to push against exclusionary or violent narratives against marginalized groups (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). Fanfiction is not just about who and what are missing, but how they can be found. Writing studies in its pursuit to empower students using critical pedagogy, digital literacies, and frameworks like "students right to their own language," should embrace fan critical uptakes as not just pedagogically valuable, but enactments that develop understanding, genre-awareness, compassion, and criticism.

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