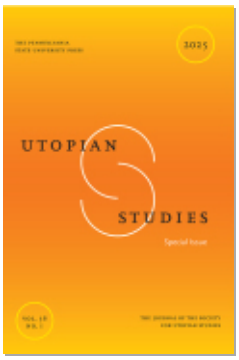
Captain America, Genderqueer Socialist: The Utopian Politics of Queer Fan Fiction



Alexis Lothian

Utopian Studies, Volume 36, Number 1, 2025, pp. 35-59 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

Captain America, Genderqueer Socialist: The Utopian Politics of Queer Fan Fiction

Alexis Lothian
University of Maryland at College Park

ABSTRACT

As a practice of literalizing narrative desire, fan fiction can be a rich source of utopian imagination. Participants in fandom and academic spaces alike discuss the capacity for fan fiction's content to live up to the utopian potential of its form and distribution: how might a cultural formation based on the fantasy fulfillment of desire hold space for the complex and contradictory relationships between pleasure and power? To unpack some contradictions and possibilities inherent in fan fiction's queer utopian work, this article develops a case study of Known Associates *(thingswithwings, 2016), a long, complex, and influential work of fan fiction. The story reimagines the Marvel Comics Universe character Steve Rogers, also known as Captain America—who is transported from World War II to the present—as a queer femme socialist sympathetic to Black social movements of the early twentieth century.* Known Associates *develops an eroticized articulation of American feminist, queer, trans, and left social movement history. To the queerly utopian fantasy that Captain America might have always been a radical, queer, gender-nonconforming figure,* Known Associates *grafts a longing for the possibility that the national institutions of the U.S., founded on slavery and settler colonialism though they are, might be imagined and lived otherwise.*

Utopian Studies, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2025

https://doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.36.1.0035

KEYWORDS: *fandom, queer, fantasy, utopia, abolition*

> An embrace is the other response to fear.
>
> —thingswithwings, *Known Associates*[1]

Reading Fan Fiction, Feeling Utopian

In the spring of 2016, while finishing the manuscript for my first academic book, I spent every spare moment immersed in fan fiction. There is always something utopian about this experience: an affective transportation, just for a moment, to a then-and-there filled with queer pleasures. In *Cruising Utopia* (2009), José Esteban Muñoz writes of "a way of being in the world that is glimpsed through reveries in a quotidian life that challenges the dominance of an affective world, a present, full of anxiousness and fear."[2] As a practice of literalizing narrative desire, fan fiction is a rich source of such reveries. Across rapidly transforming media platforms over the last several decades, fan fiction writers and readers zero in on the dimensions of media that they find most pleasurable, stretch those moments into extended storylines, and gather community around this process. They turn individual desire into collective imagination, offering reprieve from the constraints of everyday life amid global capitalism. The desires fulfilled and pleasures shared are often problematic. Yet the power of fan fiction as a sphere in which any imaginable configuration of figures and bodies can participate in any imaginable erotic act, cheered on by a joyful collective of onlookers, has made such texts integral to queer community and subject formation for many.[3] In fandom and academic spaces alike, the capacity for fan fiction's content to live up to the utopian potential of its form and distribution has been a focus of ongoing discussion. How and in what ways might a cultural formation based on the fantasy fulfillment of desire hold space for complex and contradictory relationships between pleasure and power? To explore these questions, I turn to the fic[4] that captured my attention in 2016 (and has done so ever since): *Known Associates* (2016) by the well-established pseudonymous fan fiction author thingswithwings.[5] This 300,000-word epic tells the story of the Marvel Comics Universe (MCU) character Steve Rogers, also known as Captain America, who is transported from World War II to the present. In thingswithwings' version of the story, Steve Rogers is queer, femme, active in

socialist politics, and a fellow traveler with Black social movements of the early twentieth century.

It is unusual in fan fiction studies to dedicate an article to the close reading of a single text. Because fandom is a collective endeavor sometimes likened to modern myth, with individual authorship less emphasized than tropes, genres, and pairings, a multivocal or comparative approach even among scholars who close-read fan fiction's narratives is typically preferred.[6] Nevertheless, many works of fan fiction hold a depth and complexity that reward analysis on their own terms as well as within their cultural and generic contexts. To analyze an individual work is necessarily to miss some of the collective context essential to fan fiction, which operates through shared ideas and repeated, familiar tropes. Yet works of fan fiction are far from interchangeable, and analyzing one in depth allows me to show how a virtuoso author uses the form. It is also unusual to publish scholarly close readings of works that circulate outside prestige economies of professional publishing. In so doing here, I hope to call my colleagues' attention to the creativity, cultural critique, and utopian thinking that flourishes in contexts with which they may not be familiar. *Known Associates* has reached recognition outside of fandom circles and was long-listed for the Otherwise Award for speculative fiction that expands and explores views of gender.[7] Nevertheless, I do not claim that the text transcends or overcomes its fandom context. My conversations with readers (some of them my students) who encountered the work without prior literacy in fan fiction's discursive networks have shown me the extent to which its power relies on its situatedness within fan community. *Known Associates* operates in the genre and tradition of slash fan fiction, queering ostensibly straight characters and narratives from dominant culture. Its pleasures unambiguously and unabashedly presume a readership both invested in fandom interpretations of the central characters and educated in the erotics and interpretative practices that slash writers and readers have honed over the years.[8] An extended reading, rich in quotation and contextualization, is necessary to transmit the affect of the fic and its contribution to utopian studies.

Within fan fiction studies, slash has long been a nexus for questions of utopianism.[9] In the 1980s and 1990s, the idea that communities of women were turning the male protagonists of popular television into their own erotic canvas was a powerful one for feminist scholars: Constance Penley described fan fiction as a site in which women imagine "sexual and social utopias."[10] The idea of slash fan fiction as feminist utopia reflected the notion that writing sexual and romantic relationships onto male bodies would enable women to

bypass the cultural weight with which patriarchy has loaded female bodies. The sexual worlds of early slash are spaces where the bodies of male characters become playgrounds, often but not always within the framework of science fiction settings, for explorations of desire in which both sexual anatomy and social gender hierarchies depart from the realistic. Such works aim to produce worlds of intimate sex and romantic connection in which homophobia and patriarchy are nowhere to be found.[11] Slash fandoms expanded wildly with the advent of the internet, while at the same time gay and lesbian representation in Anglo-American media increased, and queer and trans movements exploded dominant frameworks of gender and sexuality. Together these movements led to more complex, less cisnormative understandings of gender.[12] Fan fiction's myriad iterations of the erotic reconfiguration of media texts created what I, writing with Busse and Reid, named a "queer female space" in which shared fantasies and fictional narratives develop as a networked counterpublic for queer world making and gendered self-fashioning outside of cisheternormative capitalist patriarchy.[13] While "slash" as a term is no longer in wide circulation, fan fiction fandom continues to be a vibrant site of queer cultural production.

The utopian possibilities of queer fandom's worldmaking have always been incomplete, and its failures are most vividly evident on the axis of race. Rukmini Pande describes the unmarked whiteness that characterizes slash fandom's fantasy structure, forcing racial concerns and racialized individuals into tokenized positions or worse.[14] Many scholars of fandom and fan fiction have moved away from the utopian claims of the field's earlier days, finding them to be naive and dated at best, and dangerously exclusionary at worst.[15] Yet the affective experience of reading and engaging with sexually explicit queer fan fiction continues to resonate profoundly with queer utopian theory, particularly with the work of Muñoz.[16] Maghan Malloy Jackson argues that "the wholesale dismissal of fandom's utopian potentials to 'charges of naiveté, impracticality, or lack of rigor' risks ignoring or eliding the very real ways in which queer utopian feeling frames and informs the reading practices of queer media fans."[17] Importantly, Jackson notes that utopian feeling is not the same thing as progressive, subversive, or radical content. In fan fiction, she argues, "queer utopian potential . . . coalesces most easily around the bodies and identities that are always already most imaginable as avatars of futurity within a white supremacist and patriarchal paradigm."[18] There is a danger that fan fiction's queer utopias might overlap with the white utopias of the right, even as their authors' personal politics might be liberal or

progressive. In contrast, thingswithwings positions the erotic imaginary of *Known Associates* within explicitly politicized, counterhegemonic contexts that link queer utopia to racial justice and left politics. My reading of the fic centers these moments and their implications and limitations, paying less attention than most studies of queer fan fiction to the fic's relationship with the media property on which it is based, or the romantic narratives around which the story is structured. Queer utopianism here is about a broader and more complex politics than can be attributed to the playful realization of same-sex desire.

Known Associates participates in what Abigail de Kosnik identifies as a "social justice fandom," in which fans collectively critique "prejudice in mass media" or develop their fics into pedagogical tools that can initiate readers into social movements by connecting those movements with beloved fandoms.[19] The fic's pedagogical work is to reimagine the nationalist politics of superhero movies through the history of queer, trans, and left social movements and sexual practices. thingswithwings combines an eroticized queer pedagogy with a critique of normative American history, offering a hefty bibliography in the fic's final chapter. *Known Associates* follows queer Steve through the events of the MCU films that were released before the fic's publication in early 2016, slipping queer history and U.S. left social movements into the gaps the films leave behind. The text also develops an original plotline in which the queered heroes rescue superpowered children who have been subject to abusive medical experimentation, eventually starting a school in which they can learn and grow in safety. Numerous queer utopic elements arise from thingswithwings' version of Steve Rogers, while the larger plot provides some of the fic's most powerful political fantasy.

The first part of this article unpacks thingswithwings' engagement with radical queer history and futurity. The second part explores the possibilities and limitations of fannish utopianism in relation to the U.S.-centered, militaristic, nationalist canon of the MCU, as thingswithwings' queer coalition of superpowered malcontents begins to take an abolitionist approach to their status as weapons of American empire. Ramzi Fawaz writes that "superhero comics articulated the tropes of literary and cultural fantasy to a variety of left-wing projects for political freedom," opening "a world of possibilities" to readers who sought the pleasures of fantasy . . . to imagine the nation and its future otherwise."[20] To the queerly utopian fantasy that Captain America might have always been a radical, queer, gender-nonconforming figure, *Known Associates* grafts a longing for the possibility that the national institutions of

the U.S., founded on slavery and settler colonialism though they are, might be imagined and lived otherwise. The history of queer gender becomes a pathway to simultaneous fantasies of erotic community and radical transformation. Finally, I reflect on fan fiction's particular capacities and limitations as a medium for political utopia.

Embracing Queer History, Refusing Progress

Within the hundreds of thousands of fan fiction works spawned by the media industry juggernaut of the Marvel Comics Universe, Steve Rogers is among the most popular characters, and the most consistently central to queer fan fiction. Steve's story has several resonances with LGBTQ+ narratives: in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011), he experiences rejection and loneliness due to the physical inadequacies that debar him from military service in the 1940s, before undergoing a physical transformation into a hypermasculine iconic super-soldier body. At the end of the first film, he is frozen for seventy years, emerging in *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012) and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Joe Johnston, 2014) as a person out of time. Jackson writes that "it is perhaps unsurprising that . . . a man who exists outside of normative understandings of progressive time, genetically enhanced with strength, healing, and speed in significant excess of normal human abilities" would become the protagonist of queer fan fiction.[21] The idea that MCU characters and settings can be used as building blocks in the creation of a queer world is not something that thingswithwings needs to prove; instead, familiar structures can be invoked creatively to intervene into fannish and cultural discourses. *Known Associates* pushes back against some of queer fan fiction's common tropes, including the idea common in fan fiction and dominant culture alike that LGBTQ+ history has followed a progressive path from repression to freedom. Resonating with the work of scholars like Heather Love and Elizabeth Freeman to reckon with the incommensurability of queer history with contemporary political desires, the fic refutes the inevitability of gay and lesbian politics' march toward respectability, which Muñoz critiques as "straight time's gravitational pull."[22]

In naming Steve Rogers as a "tough little Brooklyn fairy," thingswithwings acknowledges that if Steve had indeed been queer before his transformation and cryogenic preservation, the queerness he occupied then and there would not have been legible in the future to which he awoke. To depict

how queer sex and gender might have felt in 1940s Brooklyn, thingwithwings relies on research, bringing to life George Chauncey's assertion that "the fairy, regarded as a 'third-sexer,' more womanly than manly, was a pivotal cultural figure" whose in-between position "seemed reasonable in terms of the social practices that constituted and reconstituted gender on an everyday basis."[23] thingswithwings narrates Steve's pre-transformation interiority in relationship to the white, working-class gender norms that mark his small, physically limited body as insufficiently masculine, showing him losing jobs due to lack of strength and endurance as well as being rejected by the U.S. army. In contrast, finding spaces at the intersection of what would later be separated out into gay and trans life, where he can experiment with femininity, sets him free.

Original characters Betty and her roommate Marlene, both of whom describe themselves as fairies, use female names and pronouns except when their male working-class jobs and military service necessitate otherwise. They nurture Steve into a queer community that becomes his family. In one early scene, Betty and Marlene teach Steve to wear makeup for the first time and he sees himself anew, recalling "sweet, beautiful fairies he's seen at the bars and nightclubs" in the way that "his cheekbones stand out with the rouge, making him look soft and girlish" and enabling him to see his body as "delicate" rather than "weak."[24] While the fic does mention the existence of large, muscular fairies within Steve's community, Steve's third-sex identity is tied closely to the ways his body has been read prior to his superhero transition. I use the word "transition" for the transformation purposefully: thingswithwings' emphasis on Steve's experience of gender as complex and coercive asserts the continual presence of trans experience at the heart of queer history, nodding to the genre of trans fan fiction.[25]

When a musclebound superhero body is bestowed upon Steve by military scientists, he experiences dysphoria even before he shifts unexpectedly forward in time. In the 1940s, he finds comfort with his friend and lover, Bucky Barnes (frequently paired with Steve in MCU fan fiction), who sees his girlish side even as they fight together, as well as in the queer milieux of cross-dressed army performances and secret sex between comrades in arms. On awakening in 2011 New York, however, Steve is marooned from his context, assumed by all to be the epitome of straight masculinity. Keen to educate him on the progress narratives of the twentieth century, his new superhero colleagues announce proudly that gay people can now serve in the military. Steve responds "What, even—even the fairies?" and is greeted by universal

horror at such a derogatory term. Guided by Bruce Banner (aka the Hulk) to read about anti-LGBTQ slurs online, Steve is confronted by "the apparent fact that his entire vocabulary on this subject has turned into derogatory, unusable words . . . because they imply effeminacy in gay men."[26] For thingswithwings' version of Steve, the progress narrative of the modern gay movement is not a happy story. Gender and sexuality have been split from one another, rendering some aspects of his selfhood unmoored. Mournfully, he muses: "you can't be a fairy all by yourself."[27] As the fic unfolds, though, Steve finds ways to be a fairy in the twenty-first century; drama and romance unfold through his reassertion of queer gender, sexuality, politics, and community within modern contexts. He and Bruce Banner come out to one another in a favorite pleasure of queer fan fiction, replacing movie star masculinity with queer coming of age tropes. Refusing fan fiction's dominant logic of the singular pairing, Steve gradually finds his equivalent to Betty, Marlene, and his World War II unit in the superhero team of the Avengers and their collaborators, engaging in polyamorous relationships with three men (Bucky, Colonel Jim Rhodes—who is also in a triad with Tony Stark and Pepper Potts—and Sam Wilson) over the course of the narrative.

Steve's queer world also becomes a framework with which thingswithwings can place their own community and readership, the participants of queer fan fiction fandom, in relationship to the possibilities of a queer future beyond hegemonic progress narratives. Online, unburdened by his iconic face and body, Steve discovers that queer connection can be found not only in gay bars but also remotely. In a space where identities and sexualities can be complicated and ambiguous, he trades makeup and clothing tips with trans and genderqueer young adults whose economic precarity and creative energy reminds him of his pre-serum past. "As it turns out," thingswithwings concludes, "Steve isn't alone in the twenty-first century, and—what's more—all the young people of the twenty-first century aren't alone in history."[28] This experience of connection and affirmation is what fan fiction's networked counterpublics offer to many readers of *Known Associates* (not all of whom, I can attest, are young), who also find that they are not alone. The utopia of online pseudonymity periodizes *Known Associates* and its author to an internet generation where digital connectivity could be felt as utopian because it provided a way of moving beyond the horizons of one's available world.[29] Yet fandom, through continually shifting and evolving platforms, continues to offer such networks to many.[30] Simultaneously framing Steve Rogers as a

living avatar of queer/trans history and as a very online twenty-something, thingwithwings connects queer modalities across time.

Across the temporal range of the fic, thingswithwings creates moments of utopian affirmation for a queer collectivity in opposition to the politics of state recognition and respectability. In the 1940s, Steve's queer milieu spans extralegal territory from cross-dressing to sex work. Police raids are commonplace, with one memorable one recounted in depth:

> "Betty threw her shoe at the cops," Marlene manages eventually, breaking out into laughter.
>
> "She—what?" Steve asks, as Marlene chuckles helplessly. "She threw her *shoe*?"
>
> Marlene nods, still laughing, and Steve starts to laugh too. . . . "She was in drag," Steve realizes, in awe.
>
> "She threw a size eleven red high heel," Marlene says, eyes wide. "It hit a cop right in the face. Cut him pretty good, too."
>
> "Jesus Christ," Steve says. He's amazed, but also, that's not gonna bode well. "Did they—is she okay?"
>
> "Hyam says they didn't see who threw it," Marlene says, and a slow smile comes over her face. "And a bunch of the kids in drag all kicked off their shoes so they wouldn't be able to tell. Whole floor was scattered with heels and loafers and so forth."
>
> "That's amazing," Steve breathes. "Oh wow."[31]

This scene projects a Stonewall or Compton's Cafeteria moment into prewar queer life, conjuring a fantasy of joyful resistance in the face of police repression. Linking this imagined past to a queer future of protests against police and military rather than the inclusion of cops and soldiers in pride parades, thingswithwings sets a foundation for Steve's personal politics that is thoroughly at odds with the expectation that will be placed upon him as Captain America.

In aligning Steve with riots rather than respectability, thingswithwings connects to the history of American queer and trans people of color whose perspectives have been erased from dominant gay and lesbian politics. In this and other ways, they also align their worldbuilding with both queer of color and fan of color critique.[32] The utopian tradition of queer fan fiction has historically foundered on questions of race, most visibly through the

marginalization of characters of color in popular slash pairings. Steve Rogers, for example, is paired far more often with Bucky or with a white Avengers teammate than with Sam Wilson or Jim Rhodes, the Black characters romantically centered in *Known Associates*.[33] As Suzanne Black notes, thingswithwings attends carefully to race, using the figure of Steve in relationship to his two Black boyfriends to provide an intersectional pedagogy for navigating racial dynamics in erotic fan fiction.[34] For example, engaging in pillow talk with Jim, Steve learns about his partner's past history with an untrustworthy "white boy," and instigates a discussion about racial epithets in sex talk. This exchange offers an implicit response to some of the apologia offered to fan of color critique by white fan writers, who claimed that their decisions to restrict their representations to white characters were because of the loaded nature of sexual language when applied to men of color.[35] While the primary perspective in *Known Associates* remains a white one, thingswithwings collaborated with several beta readers of color to craft a model for listening to the voices of BIPOC fans as mediated through the Black characters.[36] Steve and Jim's discussion of racial justice is, at least for me, an awkward moment in the fic; I find it difficult to imagine this conversation playing out. However, I suspect that this awkwardness is crucial to the utopian work *Known Associates* does in connecting queer erotic imagination with structural critique. When Jim and Steve name racism as an operative force in their relationship, thingswithwings renders visible the white supremacist structures of the state and of capital, which are deeply coded into mainstream media properties like the MCU.[37] Before the representational explosion that occurred with *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018), Marvel depicted Black people in positions of power, but did not reckon with the meaning of racialized experiences in the world, resulting in surface-level depictions that Kristen Warner calls "plastic representation."[38] Writing in community with fan of color critics and creators, thingswithwings seeks to de-plasticize the representation of the Black characters while providing Steve with a capacity to overcome internalized racism that affirms the utopian aspirations of social justice fandom.

Over the course of the fic, Steve's queer gender and social justice politics begin to change his world through the convergence of personal and institutional memory. As Suzanne Black explores, transformative possibilities arise through the recognition and resurgence of what disappears in the movement from personal recollection into institutional memory.[39] The title *Known Associates* comes from a box Steve finds in his own institutional archival record: he researches his own hidden history and fills it with additional

documentation over the course of the fic. In the story's final act, Steve uses the box to found an official queer archive, rescuing his own history from the erasures that cast him as the embodiment of national masculinity. Shortly after a coming-out announcement inspired by a straightwashed exhibit of his wartime sketches at the National Gallery of Art, Steve gifts his collected files to a prominent trans woman academic. She promises: "We'll make this information free. Every scholar, every historian, every queer kid with internet access will be able to read these letters and look at these photos."[40] The histories that *Known Associates* teaches become newly imagined as public fact, transmitting fantasy into knowledge. We ourselves have, after all, just read the letters and looked at the photos through our action of reading the fic.

Opening Steve's memories to future queer kids on the internet suggests an upward progress narrative for queer and trans representation, but this is tempered by specific histories of loss and mourning. When he searches for records of queer friends to add to his updated archive, Steve finds dates of death in quick succession in the 1980s. It takes an encounter with a queer survivor from his youth, and a question about the status of their former shared gender expression, to find out why:

> "I remember when we called ourselves fairies. . . . A lot of that—you know, the girly-man stuff, effeminate manners and all, a lot of that went away with the AIDS crisis. We had to get respectable in a damn hurry, and men wanting to be like women wasn't respectable."
>
> Steve blinks. The only crises SHIELD has briefed him on are Cuban Missile, subprime mortgage, and energy. "AIDS crisis?" he asks. . . .
>
> "Well, it's—" Arnie sighs. "I don't know how to put it. God. We lost a generation." At Steve's frown, he adds, "Of gay men. Queer men. They died."
>
> Steve's body goes cold, and he thinks of the police raids in Brooklyn, the queers in the German concentration camps, the pink stockades the American Army built during the war.[41]

As Steve listens to the story of the lost queer generation, thingswithwings draws explicit connections between state violence in the U.S. and in Nazi Germany, gesturing to the use of the the Nazis' pink triangle by ACT UP in their activism against the U.S. government's murderous neglect of people with HIV / AIDS.[42] They also note that submission to coercive cisheteronormative

gender expectations enabled gay men to access a protective respectability, albeit primarily for white, privileged men like Arnie, for whom sexuality was the only axis of difference that rendered them vulnerable to violence, marginalization, and abandonment.[43] For Steve, learning about AIDS gives a political weight to the ghosts he carries, as he recognizes that the losses of his transportation seventy years into the future are not only attributable to the passage of time. Later, he will learn that even the suppression of his own history is marked by this politics, because it could have been of use to queer activists working against state homophobia.

Having set the scene for who Steve Rogers could have been and how his truths would be hidden from history, Known Associates moves to transformatively reimagine a world in which queer, radical Steve refuses to captain the America that would have preferred to hide his allegiances and identities. In a scene that hinges the narrative, Steve finds his way to a real-life memorial for those who cared for people dying from HIV/AIDS. The inscription, by Black queer poet E. Ethelbert Miller, reads, "We looked to one another for comfort / We held hands of friends and lovers / We did not turn our backs / We embraced."[44] In Steve's fictional encounter, an anonymous hand has woven the slats of the metal bench with roses; the poem and the roses inspire a moment of transcendent realization:

> The mourner left roses here as a public statement, to invite the public to mourn with them.
>
> That person isn't here anymore, but they're not alone in the world, either; Steve is here now, and mourning with them, and loving what they love. The way they love.
>
> We embraced, solid underneath Steve's feet, a place he could step to push himself up off the bench and into a run.
>
> To love so passionately, and without stopping, even though the loved one is dead; to love so much that it has to be public, and loud, and bright red on a hazy D.C. morning. To love so intensely that it doesn't matter that death comes after.
>
> To choose love and death over life and terror.
>
> Steve can't take his eyes off of the inscription. . . .
>
> We embraced, the inscription says, because that's more important than another, equally true fact: we died. Because an embrace is the other response to fear.[45]

We embraced, the inscription says, because that's more important than another, equally true fact: we died. Because an embrace is the other response to fear. From here on, Steve begins to reject the weaponization of his superhero body and instead turns toward the queerness of his body and all that it can embrace: not only his signifying power as a living queer archive and his complicated queer transtemporal gender but also the socialist, anti-police, union-supporting politics that place him in direct conflict with his military employer. From this embrace, a fragile utopian framework emerges.

Superheroes, Otherwise

Just as Steve Rogers has become a canvas for queer identification and imagination in transformative fan responses, so is the MCU a site of critical engagement for fans who use creative works to analyze and transform its politics. In the bibliographic final chapter to *Known Associates*, thingswithwings lists numerous fan works that critique the MCU's investment in the military industrial complex, alongside the numerous Marvel comics that have offered more complex depictions of superhero power fantasy than Hollywood studios could easily provide.[46] Shana Rangwala describes superhero imaginaries and the MCU in particular as a dissemination avenue for the "American fantasies of liberal democracy and freedom" that are used to legitimize corporate exploitation, colonial domination, and climate apocalypse, with the films' narrative structure of iconic heroes standing against fascistic villains fulfilling a fantasy that "someone will come along to save us from existential threats and return us to the idealized liberal status quo."[47] Rangwala argues that "to confront this structural condition would require a critique of structures of power together . . . that does not retrench into conservatism like the Avengers films, but rather recognizes the root of oppression in racial capitalism and puts forth an abolitionist imperative." She finds the capacity for "fans to connect and exercise agency in recombining and remixing various parts of these narratives and representations" to be a hopeful site for the development of this imperative through the iconic imagery Marvel provides.[48] Transformative social justice fan fiction often does this by lingering deep inside source texts' driving fantasies in order to examine how they might be experienced otherwise.[49] This is the process by which thingswithwings's queer Steve Rogers begins to develop an abolitionist critique of his own superhero imperative.

Captain America, famously first featured punching Hitler in 1941, is the prototype for superheroic liberal nationalism as anti-fascist fantasy.[50] That image was created by Jewish cartoonists angry at U.S. hesitance to oppose Nazism, within a historical context where the opposition between fascism and American liberal nationalism did not seem like a foregone conclusion.[51] thingswithwings incorporates it into the queer history that places Steve in opposition to liberal narratives of state-sponsored progress, adding additional connections to Black social movements. In 1940, Steve listens to a speech from a socialist friend, a queer Black woman named Valentine, whose campaign speech for anti-war, anti-segregation socialist Presidential candidate Norman Thomas is based on a 1941 speech to the African American Writers' Congress by Richard Wright:

> Against the background of Hitler's treatment of the Jews, . . . the Negro's fight in this country is an embarrassment to the war-mongers in Congress. . . . The common people across the world do not seek war. The common people seek instead an extension of democracy at home. And because we know that once again the Negro will be called upon to fight and die for a country that will not let him vote or live in peace, we oppose the war. We oppose the self-righteous rhetoric that calls on us to defend the freedoms of others, defend them with our lives, when we are given none ourselves. We oppose the self-righteous rhetoric that tells us we are fighting for freedom, when in reality we are fighting for the rights of rich nations to keep what they have plundered through conquest. We oppose the war, and we work for peace at home.[52]

The speech resonates with calls made by Black intellectuals across the twentieth century that people systematically dehumanized by a nation should not fight and die for it.[53] A radical queer figure who listens sympathetically to Valentine might seem at odds with the films' narrative of a wide-eyed patriot eager to serve his country. However, the imperative of fighting Hitler led many on the American left, including eventually Wright himself, to advocate for American involvement, and news of Nazi atrocities "circulated through the gay underground" in the 1930s and 1940s.[54] Steve hears these rumors and connects them to the fic's earlier portrayal of queer collective opposition, declaring: "We got a duty to help our own kind, and it doesn't matter if all we got to throw at 'em is our shoes."[55]

Over the course of the fic, Valentine's antiwar speech joins the shoe-throwing police raid to provide touchstones for Steve's political development. These touchstones guide thingswithwings' efforts to depict a white individual from the segregated 1940s as an avatar for a queer utopianism that demands racial accountability beyond plastic representation. In *Captain America: The First Avenger*, the MCU provides a plastic representation of multicultural diversity in the depiction of the Howling Commandoes, the World War II unit Steve leads.[56] While the film suspends disbelief by placing the unit outside the formal command structures of the segregated U.S. Army, thingswithwings shows Steve recognizing that "the uniform he wanted so badly, for so long, the symbol that lets him protect others, is also a symbol of so much that he hates," and telling one of the Black soldiers in his unit that he would "disobey a direct order" to deny segregation if he had to.[57] Though he gets frozen in time before that intention can be tested, it suggests precedent for his fluency with racial justice in the twenty-first century.[58]

There are many moments in *Known Associates* when Steve becomes an avatar for readers' political hopes and ideals. After a few months living as Captain America in the 2010s, Steve becomes frustrated with the public image of him as a "grandpa" who has "never heard of women's rights, or racism, or poverty," and seeks to rectify it with the help of his publicist, a queer Asian American twentysomething named Allison who serves as a stand-in for the social justice fangirls likely to be enjoying this text.[59] He shows up at protests for a list of causes that span popular left-liberal politics of the early 2010s: Planned Parenthood, voter ID laws, and unionization for numerous constituencies including fast food workers, sex workers, and adjunct professors. Claiming the label of "socialist" proudly, Steve argues that his politics are fully allied with his national hero status. As Allison plans his media strategy, he rejects "anarchist" and "communist" along with "traitor," but embraces "patriot," insisting that "corporate oppression is the enemy of America."[60] His politics at this point map onto a hopeful vision for the United States of America that would allow his anti-fascist aspirations at enlistment to be realized in a queerer, fairer version of then-President Barack Obama's vision of a more perfect Union. The positioning of Captain America as an icon for liberal or left American nationalist politics is not original to *Known Associates* but is well established both in comics and in fan fiction.[61] Comments to *Known Associates* made in the wake of Donald J. Trump's election as the forty-fifth President of the United States show readers brandishing Pride-themed Captain America shields at Women's Marches, holding out hope for the

fantasy of a left American nationalism against the reality of racial capitalism's long-running investment in fascistic oppression.[62] As we enter Trump's second term, such visions may be equally likely to provoke feelings of exhaustion and despair, even as movement organizers and scholars have long known that the nationalist frameworks of liberal democracy paper over the violent foundations of the United States in chattel slavery and settler colonialism alongside its ongoing racist violence.

Known Associates may welcome the pleasures of imagined Nazi-punching, but thingswithwings' familiarity with such critiques becomes evident in Steve's deep discomfort with Captain America's status as a living weapon. In the 1940s, he reflects that Valentine told him "'*Don't vote for the war machine*' . . . and then he went and became one."[63] In the 2010s, he considers the ideological structures that shaped his transformation, acknowledging that he could not "understand" what the U.S. government and military had in store as he names the violence done in the transformation of an idealistic soldier into an embodiment of war.[64] Crucially, at a turning-point moment when *Known Associates* offers an alternative interior monologue to a key scene from the 2014 film *Captain America: Winter Soldier*, Steve describes himself as "a pacifist in patriotic drag."[65] Claiming pacifism despite his having long operated as a weapon, when his ostensible righteousness confronts an enemy weapon in the body of his friend, Bucky Barnes, Steve's refusal to fight allows Bucky to resist his own programming. Drag, central to Steve's experience of gender and of state oppression, opens a complicated relationship to his Captain America identity. Drag, after all, is a performance that reveals the contingency of structures often taken for granted, without denying the realness of their power in the world. Drag is a doing of gender otherwise; if Steve's patriotism is drag, it also signals the possibility of an otherwise America.

In the last chapters of *Known Associates*, thingswithwings develops an original plotline that unfolds in parallel to the unfolding of Steve's queer and trans historiography to suggest the possibility of an abolitionist horizon for the superhero-powered universe of the MCU. In the years since *Known Associates* was published, both Marvel and dominant culture have become attuned to longstanding abolitionist frameworks that undo oppressive structures of prison, policing, and punishment.[66] For fan fiction writers, one dimension of that attunement has been an acknowledgment of the carceral structures that underlie many of the popular media genres on which transformative works are based: many of the most beloved characters in

the history of slash are police and military officers, whose canonical stories revolve around the capture and punishment of bad guys. The superheroes of the MCU, guided into the "Avengers Initiative" by the shady government organization SHIELD, are no exception. In *Captain America: Winter Soldier*, SHIELD is exposed as a front for Nazi analogues HYDRA, complicating the relationship between superhero and state. As Rangwala points out, though, despite this shift and the MCU's move toward more diversified, social-justice-minded films, the basic plot structure continues to be that superheroes use their powers to defeat nefarious villains.[67] After all, high-concept, high-budget fight scenes drive the movies' global success, and the good guys have to win. *Known Associates* replaces the logic of big-screen conflict with fan fiction's centering of relationship and connection, encapsulated by Steve's reflection on the HIV/AIDS caregiver memorial: "An embrace is the other response to fear." What could the world look like if superheroes, superpowers, embraced rather than fought?

thingswithwings' utopian gesture of embrace begins when Steve and his comrades encounter a group of scientists who are experimenting on children to create new superheroes. Once they have caught the scientists they believe to be the villains, they learn SHIELD plans to reward and perpetuate their abusive labor, valuing the possibility of new advances in superhero technology over the collateral damage to objects of experimentation. With this analogy to the role of coercive experimentation on marginalized people in the history of medical science, the heroes see the fig leaf of liberalism begin to fall off the naked power they are accustomed to exerting. Steve, Sam Wilson (The Falcon and later also Captain America), Jim Rhodes (War Machine), Bruce Banner (Hulk), Natasha Romanov (Black Widow), and Pepper Potts (Rescue) reflect on the harm they have done and the trauma they have experienced as living weapons. Alluding to the relentless forces of state and capital for whom MCU superheroes inevitably do their violent work, Steve concludes "the world doesn't need any more of us."[68] Having agreed that they should not exist, the group tries to decide what to do with the power they cannot not have. Running through the options of what it would mean to use their power responsibly, they think first of nonprofit work. Sam proposes registering the Avengers as a charity that would not "just barge in like the Red Cross" but "go where you're invited and work with people on the ground, like Doctors Without Borders"; Jim wonders who would have the authority to invite a superhero intervention, and Bruce points out that "Superheroes Without Borders is kind of the problem in the first place."[69]

Queerly utopian post-superheroes will not be participating in the non-profit industrial complex.[70]

In the end, *Known Associates* moves away from the question of global justice and creates a more modest container for its abolitionist horizon: a school. The surviving rescued superpowered individuals, mainly children of color severed from their communities of origin, are handed on to SHIELD, but discover that the school they are sent to is more like a prison. They escape and find ways to survive but are unable to control their powers. Reflecting that the children are "alone and on the run because there's no one in the world they can trust not to exploit them," Steve "wants them to have what he never did: people to look up to, to help them learn who they are and how they want to use their powers."[71] Creating that possibility for the children requires the adult superheroes to work together while respecting the autonomy of the children who are rightfully suspicious of individuals and institutions who may have rescued them but have also done them harm. The building of the "place they can live" proceeds slowly and carefully, nothing like a MCU film. While *Known Associates* plays out Steve's romance, identity, and archive plots in the fic's closing chapters, the narrative returns regularly to the utopian project of building a just, or at least a benign, institution. Teachers, "recruited from the kids' hometowns, local schools and non-profits," are selected by the children, who read resumes and carry out interviews. Adult superheroes test the capacities of a playground calibrated for superpowered exercise. A young girl with super strength learns it is "okay to be an artist, instead of a superhero . . . even though she can lift cars off the ground." In the fic's penultimate scene, Steve sits with his lovers and protégés "surrounded by the summer sun and the green grass and the safe, quiet space that they've made together."[72] Queer futurity converges with reproductive care labor in this gentle image, replacing military force with a warm embrace. The lingering affect with which *Known Associates* leaves its readers, or at least leaves me, can also be described as an embrace: a comforting sense that the world may not have to be as bleak or brutal as it seems, even if the school and the archive and the genderqueer abolitionist superhero only exist in our shared imagination.

4. The Fantasy of Good Politics

I began this article with Muñoz's description of "moments of queer relational bliss" that have "the ability to rewrite a larger map of everyday life"

against "the dominance of an affective world, a present, full of anxiousness and fear."[73] In tracking such moments through thingswithwings' *Known Associates*, I hope I have demonstrated that fan fiction is a fertile ground for utopian imagination. Yet I want to end by returning to anxiousness and fear. Fan fiction, as a form, is centered on pleasure, and this shapes its political engagements. To appropriate real violence, oppression, or genocide in the name of fannish pleasure is considered, rightly, inappropriate within the shared values of social justice fandom.[74] Yet the media on which fandom builds its collective pleasures is often grounded in violence. To leave violence unchallenged may make pleasure impossible for many on that violence's receiving end; yet to focus wholly on naming and critiquing the violence risks removing the pleasure. *Known Associates* treads a careful line in its efforts to name structural violence while retaining the trust of readers who come to the fic for erotic excitement and political comfort. Indeed, I have found both in the fic myself, as I have returned to it for the last eight years to revel in the utopian prospect of a world where speculative superpowers coexist with queer transformation. And yet I am not comfortable in my pleasure. I still cannot say whether it is a good idea to incite queer ecstatic affect from even a fictional version of the U.S. military industrial complex, to reconfigure a corporate, Disney-trademarked avatar of empire as a site of radical hope.

I have been thinking and writing about fan fiction's utopian politics in the shadow of genocide, watching in horror as the U.S., where I live, supports the ongoing devastation in Gaza and universities violently repress student protest against their institutions' investments. I have wondered what thingswithwings' Steve Rogers might think of the legacy of the genocide he fought, how trauma turned to fear begat further genocide.[75] I have imagined that, ten years after his disinvestment from national heroism, they (Steve mentions a possible future switch to they/them pronouns) might be joining with a cadre of superpowered artists, scientists, and ex-military teachers to protect Palestinian children. But another left-wing, fresh-faced military volunteer, who knew that queer socialist politics would mean nothing if it came hitched to the perpetuation of genocide, is also haunting me: Aaron Bushnell, the twenty-five-year-old Air Force serviceman who self-immolated in protest of ongoing destruction of Gaza in February 2024. Would a real-life version of thingswithwings' Steve find it similarly impossible to live? In its memorialization of Bushnell's life and death, the anarchist website Crimethinc urged its readers not to take him as an example, to

find ways to live on.[76] I wonder whether fan fiction's capacity to reimagine the problematic world into erotic and political perfectibility could be, for some people sometimes, one of those ways. It is utopian to suggest that an embrace could be a successful response to fear, that queer love and radical collectivity could outpace the military industrial complex to such a degree that its very weapons would reject it and build institutions to reproduce alternatives. But utopian fantasy does sometimes make it easier to live in the world. If fan fiction creates visions of better worlds where the pleasures of dominant media and dominant politics no longer have to be accompanied by a willingness to accept the untenable, perhaps its distance from political reality is one of its strengths.[77]

Known Associates offers us an experience where social justice politics, comfort, and pleasure intermingle in ways that in our lived realities, they rarely do. Kadji Amin has called for a de-idealization of the objects of queer studies, arguing that holding individuals and communities up to an ideal of radical queer subversion is less productive than acknowledging the failures, limitations, and complicities that characterize every human individual and collective.[78] I agree fully with his call—and yet I also thrill to the idealizing work that a fantasy like *Known Associates* provides. The utopian politics of queer fan fiction assert that taking pleasure in the fucked-up world, including in the envisioning of fantasy pathways to the world's improvement, does not preclude seeking its transformation in the less fertile soil of reality. I continue to be profoundly uncertain that fan fiction's readers and writers, or anyone, can live within contexts where our pleasures will fully align with our politics and identities. But it is joyful and relaxing to imagine, if only for a moment, that they might.

ALEXIS LOTHIAN is Associate Professor in the Harriet Tubman Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at University of Maryland College Park. Her research centers on speculative fiction, digital media, and fan culture and their relationships to gender, race, and disability justice. She is the author of *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility* (NYU Press, 2018) and has published in *American Quarterly, Feminist Studies, Transformative Works and Cultures, International Journal of Cultural Studies, Cinema Journal*, and *Camera Obscura*, among other venues. She is currently working on two book projects, one on the politics of fantasy in slash fan fiction and one on the history of social justice discourse in online fan culture.

Notes

1. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, Archive of Our Own, March 25, 2016, http://archiveofourown.org/works/6292210?view_full_work=true.

2. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: Then Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009), 25.

3. For some vividly depicted examples, see Maia Kobabe, *Gender Queer: A Memoir* (Simon & Schuster, 2019), 154–79.

4. Throughout this article, I use "fan fiction" to refer to the form as a whole and, following fan fiction writers' convention, "fic" to refer to individual works. "Fan fiction" and "fanfiction" are both frequently used; I have chosen the two-word term because it is preferred by *Transformative Works and Cultures*, the journal of record in fan studies.

5. I have a long-term connection with thingswithwings through fandom community and have published several times on their work; they read this essay in draft and offered several important correctives and insights, which are acknowledged in footnotes and for which I am deeply grateful. For previous discussions of thingswithwings' work, see Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian, "Bending Gender: Feminist and (Trans)Gender Discourses in the Changing Bodies of Slash Fanfiction," in *Internet Fiction(s)*, ed. Ingrid Hotz-Davies, Anton Kirchhofer, and Sirka Lepannen (Cambridge Scholar's Press, 2008), 105–26; Alexis Lothian, "From Transformative Works to #transformDH: Digital Humanities as (Critical) Fandom," *American Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2018): 371–93, https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2018.0027.

6. On fan fiction and collectivity, see Kristina Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (University of Iowa Press, 2017). On fan fiction as myth, see Marialaura Grandolfo, "A Mythology of Our Own: Fanwork as Mythopoesis" (University of St. Andrews, 2024).

7. See "2017 Long List," Otherwise Award, March 31, 2018, https://otherwiseaward.org/award/2017-otherwise-award/2017-long-list; Lucy Pearson, "The Child Colonisers: Fanfiction and Young People's Reading Power," *Culture Matters*, August 31, 2016, https://www.culturematters.org.uk/index.php/arts/fiction/item/2357-the-child-colonisers-fanfiction-and-young-people-s-reading-power.

8. On the "unpublishability" of fan fiction, whose pleasures rely on "such a depth of engagement with both the canon and the fandom that it makes sense to a limited, sometimes very limited, audience," see Catherine Tosenberger, "Mature Poets Steal: Children's Literature and the Unpublishability of Fanfiction," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2014): 18.

9. This essay refers to the tradition of slash in Western media fandom because that is the context in which *Known Associates* operates as well as the one on which my expertise focuses. It is important to note, however, that similar formations operate in many East Asian fandoms (often grouped under the heading of "Boys Love"). See Jungmin Kwon, "The Past, Present, and Future of Boys Love (BL) Cultures in East Asia," in *Transnational Convergence of East Asian Pop Culture*, ed. Seok-Kyeong Hong and Dal Yong Jin (Routledge, 2021), 96–112.

10. Constance Penley, *NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America* (Verso, 1997), 145.
11. See Joanna Russ, "Pornography By Women, For Women, With Love," in *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans & Perverts* (The Crossing Press, 1985), 79–100; Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana Veith, "Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and Star Trek Zines," in *Erotic Universe: Sexuality and Fantastic Literature*, ed. Donald Palumbo (Greenwood Press, 1986), 236–55.
12. See Ika Willis, "Writing the Fables of Sexual Difference: Slash Fiction as Technology of Gender," *Parallax* 22, no. 3 (2016): 290–311, https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2016.1201920.
13. Alexis Lothian, Kristina Busse, and Robin Anne Reid, "Yearning Void and Infinite Potential: Online Slash Fandom as Queer Female Space," *English Language Notes* 45, no. 2 (2007): 103–12.
14. Rukmini Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race* (University of Iowa Press, 2018).
15. See Rebecca Wanzo, "African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 20 (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0699; Mel Stanfill, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Fandom and Fan Studies," in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* (Wiley, 2018), 305–17, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119237211.ch19.
16. See Alexis Lothian, "Sex, Utopia, and the Queer Temporalities of Fannish Love," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, C. Lee Harrington, and Cornel Sandvoss, 2nd ed. (New York University Press, 2017), 238–52.
17. Maghan Molloy Jackson, "'Reading Too Much into It': Affective Excess, Extrapolative Reading, and Queer Temporalities in MCU Fanfiction," *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 63, no. 1 (2023): 52.
18. Jackson, "Reading Too Much into It," 48.
19. Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (MIT Press, 2016), 182–83.
20. Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York University Press, 2016), 4–5.
21. Jackson, "Reading Too Much into It," 44.
22. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 32. See Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer Life* (Harvard University Press, 2007); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010). thingswithwings was influenced by this scholarly work, particularly Love; thingswithwings, personal communication, June 24, 2024.
23. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (Basic Books, 1994), 125.
24. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 1.
25. Jennifer Duggan, "Trans Fans and Fan Fiction: A Literature Review," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 39 (March 13, 2023), https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2023.2309.
26. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 3.
27. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 2.
28. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 3.

29. On the history of networked counterpublics in relationship to queer and trans community formation, see Avery Dame-Griff, *The Two Revolutions: A History of the Transgender Internet* (New York University Press, 2023).

30. See the 2024 "Platforms" special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* (vol. 42) for a wide array of examples.

31. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 1.

32. Muñoz's work is foundational to the subfield of queer of color critique, which centers the study of race in queer studies. Fan of color critique is the term I coined with Mel Stanfill to describe the critical race frameworks developed within fan communities. See Alexis Lothian and Mel Stanfill, "An Archive of Whose Own? White Feminism and Racial Justice in Fan Fiction's Digital Infrastructure," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 36 (2021), https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2021.2119.

33. See Catherine Coker and Rukmini Pande, "Not So Star-Spangled: Examining Race, Privilege and Problems in MCU's Captain America Fandom," in *The Darker Side of Slash Fan Fiction: Essays on Power, Consent, and the Body*, ed. Ashton Spacey McFarland, 2018), 97–115; J. S. A. Lowe, "Approaching Whiteness in Slash via Marvel Cinematic Universe's Sam Wilson," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 29 (March 15, 2019), https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2019.1695.

34. Suzanne R. Black, "Setting the Record 'Straight': Captain America Fanfiction, Museums and Queer Narratives," *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture* 8, no. 3 (2023): 265–79, https://doi.org/10.1386/qsmpc_00105_1.

35. See Pande, *Squee from the Margins*, chap. 4.

36. thingswithwings, personal communication, June 24, 2024. Beta readers are editorial collaborators in fan fiction, whose role may range from proofreading to deep engagement in the writing process.

37. See Lori Kido Lopez, "Racism and Mainstream Media," in *Race and Media: Critical Approaches,* ed. Lori Kido Lopez (New York University Press, 2020), 13–26.

38. Kristen Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2017): 32–37, https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2017.71.2.32. *Black Panther* is not, as Warner and others have noted, a solution to this problem exactly, though it does provide a more complex framing.

39. Black, "Setting the Record 'Straight.'" This article discusses the role of museums and archives in Captain American fan fiction and includes discussion of *Known Associates.*

40. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 8.

41. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 4.

42. On the pink triangle as an activist symbol, see Erik N. Jensen, "The Pink Triangle and Political Consciousness: Gays, Lesbians, and the Memory of Nazi Persecution," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, nos. 1–2 (2002): 319–49.

43. See Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ* 3, no. 4 (1997): 437–65.

44. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 5. For more about the memorial, see DCAdventurer, "HIV/AIDS Caregivers Memorial," *Adventures in DC* (blog), February 5, 2019, https://www.adventuresindc.com/hiv-aids-caregivers-memorial/.

45. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 5. On a visit to Washington, D.C., after the publication of *Known Associates*, thingswithwings and some friends wove roses through the memorial in a real-life enactment of this moment in the fic. Personal communication, thingswithwings, June 24, 2024.
46. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 9.
47. Shama Rangwala, "Liberal Containment in Marvel Movies of the Trump Era," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 52, no. 2 (2022): 172.
48. Rangwala, "Liberal Containment," 185.
49. For example, thuviaptarth's critical fan video "Hey Ho" (2014) showcases the ways Marvel superheroes reinforce American hegemony and the military industrial complex, by highlighting how the heroes themselves come to occupy their roles as a response to coercion and trauma—even as their iconic actions teach new generations on and off the screen that state violence can be righteous (thuviaptarth, "VID: Hey Ho," accessed June 15, 2024, https://thuviaptarth.dreamwidth.org/274968.html).
50. See "Captain America Comics (1941) #1," accessed June 15, 2024, https://www.marvel.com/comics/issue/7849/captain_america_comics_1941_1.
51. See Jason Dittmer, *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero: Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics* (Temple University Press, 2012), 9–10, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umdcp/detail.action?docID=1053910.
52. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 1 (source cited in chap. 9). For the full text of Wright's speech, see Richard Wright, "Not My People's War," *New Masses* 39, no. 13 (June 17, 1941): 8–9, https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/new-masses/1941/v39n13-jun-17-1941-NM.pdf.
53. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," in *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings* (Library of America, 1987), 923–38; James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Random House, 2021).
54. Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 178. On Richard Wright's relationship to the war effort, see Dan Shiffman, "Richard Wright's '12 Million Black Voices' and World War II–Era Civic Nationalism," *African American Review* 41, no. 3 (2007): 443–58. I am grateful to thingswithwings for correcting my omissions in an earlier version of this paragraph.
55. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 1.
56. See "Howling Commandos," Marvel Cinematic Universe Wiki, May 24, 2024, https://marvelcinematicuniverse.fandom.com/wiki/Howling_Commandos.
57. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 1.
58. Talking with Jim Rhodes, Steve recalls his "pacifist friends. In the N – in the black civil rights movement"; Jim's reaction veers away from critique of the military to focus on language change, asking whether Steve "used to say Negro" and learning that Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) gave Steve a "firm talking to" about "that kind of bullshit." Steve's racial vocabulary takes center stage and moves the conversation away from racial politics themselves.
59. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 5. On the politics of "fangirl," see Suzanne Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* (New York University Press, 2019).

60. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 4.
61. This genealogy is laid out in the bibliographic final chapter of *Known Associates.*
62. I am choosing not to provide a direct citation to this comment since it shows the faces of people who may not have expected it to circulate beyond its original context.
63. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 2.
64. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 3.
65. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 6.
66. On abolitionist thought before and after the murder of George Floyd and the movements to defend the police that followed it, see Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Haymarket Books, 2021).
67. Rangwala, "Liberal Containment," 185.
68. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 4.
69. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 7.
70. On the limitations of nonprofit structures for political activism, see INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (Duke University Press, 2017).
71. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 7.
72. thingswithwings, *Known Associates*, chap. 8.
73. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 25.
74. See Angie Fazekas, "Alpha/Beta/Omega: Racialized Narratives and Fandom's Investment in Whiteness," in *Fandom, Now in Color: A Collection of Voices*, ed. Rukmini Pande (University of Iowa Press, 2020), 95–108.
75. On the ways that the memory of the Holocaust contributes to Zionist militarism in North American Jewish education, see Naomi Klein, *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023), chap.14.
76. CrimethInc Ex-Workers Collective, "'This Is What Our Ruling Class Has Decided Will Be Normal': On Aaron Bushnell's Action in Solidarity with Gaza," CrimethInc., February 26, 2024, https://crimethinc.com/2024/02/26/this-is-what-our-ruling-class-has-decided-will-be-normal-on-aaron-bushnells-action-in-solidarity-with-gaza.
77. For a similar argument, with a somewhat more hopeful conclusion than mine, see Charlie Ledbetter, "The Dysphoric Body Politic, or Seizing the Means of Imagination," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 34 (2020), https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1751.
78. Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Duke University Press, 2017).