

The Celebrity Imprint: “Religion” and Identity Among Fans of
John Lennon and Johnny Cash

by

Kathleen Ann Riddell

A thesis
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Religious Studies

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2023

© Kathleen Ann Riddell 2023

Examining Committee Membership

The following served on the Examining Committee for this thesis. The decision of the Examining Committee is by majority vote.

External Examiner	Dr. Elizabeth Rae Coody Assistant Professor Department of Religious Studies Morningside University, IA
Supervisor(s)	Dr. Douglas E. Cowan Professor of Religious Studies and Social Development Studies Renison University College Department of Religious Studies University of Waterloo
Internal Member	Dr. David Seljak Professor Department of Religious Studies University of Waterloo
Internal Member	Dr. Doris Jakobsh Professor Department of Religious Studies University of Waterloo
Internal-external Member	Dr. Sharon Roberts Associate Professor Department of Social Development Studies Renison University College University of Waterloo

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Fandom-as-religion literature examines similarities between fandom and religion and, in particular, dimensions of the fan experience such as beliefs, emotion, and ritual. This area emerged in the last thirty years and includes perhaps twenty to thirty scholars who direct their attention to this phenomenon. A fundamental line of inquiry guiding this area of study is that scholars question why fandom looks so much like religion and why many fans use religious language and metaphors to describe the fan experience. This dissertation examines why fandom is often compared to religion, what scholars may learn from this comparison, and what similarities and differences of experience between fandom and religion say about fans experience as “religious” actors. “Religious” appears in quotation marks to signal that the fan experience complicates our understanding of the binary between the sacred and the profane by occupying an “in-between” space, in which fans find “direction, order, meaning and purpose.”

Given the fandom-as-religion argument is often made in the absence of sufficient field data, I address this limitation by participant observation in New York and Nashville among fans of John Lennon and Johnny Cash, respectively, along with follow-up interviews. I argue that the premise of fandom-as-religion should be reconceptualized as “fandom-as-lived-religion,” a reflection of the reality that fans of Lennon and Cash develop at least part of their fan identity through three “points of articulation”: (a) the extension of the self, an externalized reality that remains part of the fan’s self; (b) the growth of the fan-celebrity relationship in the fan’s religious imagination, an act of the extension, and (c) the celebrity’s death, often a turning point in the fan’s relationship with the celebrity. These points are the focus of the three published articles that serve as the focal point of this dissertation, which asks the question whether the imagined relationship the fan has with the celebrity does religious work, by providing a multi-faceted point of identification.

The concepts of the “religious,” the extension of the self, the religious imagination, and religious work come together to tell the story of how fans of Lennon and Cash create the fabric of fan identity that is of “religious” consequence. In the Introduction and Conclusion, I consider how the driving questions of lived experience of celebrity fans say something about the phenomena of religious “nones.” Concluding thoughts concern how celebrity fandom may help address modern religious experience and issues in religious studies as a field.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Douglas E. Cowan, for his sage advice, support of my work, and criticism of my writing. Through his feedback, I learned to write in a much improved clear and concise manner. My Ph.D. would not have been possible without the support of my committee members Dr. David Seljak and Dr. Doris Jakobsh. Their feedback improved my argument greatly and their good humour made my experience in our program much more enjoyable. Thank you to my External Committee Member, Dr. Elizabeth Coody, and my Internal-external, Dr. Sharon Roberts, for their contributions. I would also like to thank the faculty with whom I took courses at the University of Waterloo and Wilfred Laurier University for helping me learn how to ask the right questions and broaden my understanding of the religious diversity of North America.

A special thank you to my former and current colleagues in the Joint Waterloo-Laurier Ph.D. Program. In particular, I extend my gratitude to Brooke Brassard for her support of my work and her friendship.

I want to acknowledge the administrative assistants I have worked with at the University of Waterloo: Maureen Fraser, Fiona McAlister, and Priti Nayak. Their quick action and dedicated service made my Ph.D. experience much smoother, efficient, and lessened the stress. In kind, I would also like to acknowledge the University of Waterloo Library.

I am indebted to my undergraduate and graduate instructors at Carleton University and McMaster University. These two academic institutions provided me with an excellent foundation for my doctoral work.

Thank you to the fans interviewed for this project. Your willingness to share your insight and affinity for John Lennon or Johnny Cash is deeply appreciated.

I would like to thank my partner and my parents for their ongoing love and support. Finally, to my late dog, Bentley, and my new best friend, Brigus, who both brought much reassurance and comic relief during my doctoral journey.

Dedication

For Dylan McCarthy
(2002-2016),

and for fans everywhere.

Table of Contents

FRONT MATTER

<i>Examining Committee Membership</i>	ii
<i>Author’s Declaration</i>	iii
<i>Abstract</i>	iv
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	v
<i>Dedication</i>	vi
1. INTRODUCTION	1
<i>History of the Project</i>	12
<i>Overview of Articles</i>	13
<i>Methods</i>	16
a. <i>The Multi-site Approach</i>	20
<i>Conclusion</i>	21
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	25
<i>Introduction</i>	25
<i>Vague Definitions of Religion</i>	30
<i>A Focus on One or Two Features of Religion</i>	44
<i>Are fandoms equivalent to religion, similar to religion, or substitutes (i.e., replacements) for religion?</i>	58
<i>Conclusion</i>	60
Interlude	65
3. ARTICLE 1: “The Celebrity Imprint: Fan-Celebrity Attachments and Religious Work Among Fans of Johnny Cash and John Lennon”	66
<i>The Role of the Celebrity among Fandom of John Lennon and Johnny Cash</i>	71
a. <i>A Sense of Discovery</i>	71
b. <i>The Celebrity Imprint</i>	76
c. <i>When an Emotional Bond becomes “Religious”</i>	81
<i>Conclusion</i>	85
Interlude	88
4. ARTICLE 2: “My Whole World Shifted”: Identity and Transformation in Becoming-a-Fan Narratives”	90
<i>Introduction</i>	90
<i>Becoming-a-Fan Narratives</i>	97
a. <i>The Early Years</i>	97
<i>The Awakening</i>	100
<i>The Extension of the Self</i>	101

<i>The Revival</i>	105
<i>Transformation? Concluding Thoughts</i>	111
Interlude	114
5. ARTICLE 3: “The ‘Religious Response’: Experience of Celebrity Death Among Fans of John Lennon and Johnny Cash”	116
<i>Introduction</i>	116
<i>Methods</i>	122
<i>Understanding Fan Emotion Through Responses to Celebrity death</i>	122
<i>Fan Responses to Celebrity Death</i>	125
<i>Fan Responses to Celebrity Death: Sarah, a Case Study</i>	129
<i>Conclusion</i>	135
6. CONCLUSION	137
<i>Limits of Research</i>	143
<i>Directions Forward</i>	144
BACK MATTER	
<i>Letters of Copyright Permission</i>	147
<i>References</i>	149
<i>Appendix I</i>	165
<i>Appendix II</i>	167

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Driving the rough and untended county roads in northeast Arkansas, I spent the better part of a day searching the town of Dyess for Johnny Cash's boyhood home. In the 1930s, President Roosevelt's administration focused on relocating families, including the Cashes, to the area to farm for cotton. The land is completely flat and gives new meaning to the term "flash flood," as many times the Mississippi rose up and flooded the plain. It was a Sunday morning, and the roads were nearly deserted, save a small shack of a church whose parking lot was full. I finally found the home; it was modest, but newly renovated with a fresh coat of white paint and green trim, surrounded by a chain link fence. There were no houses outside of the Cash house, as if a flood wiped all of them out, except this one. The hot sun beat down on dehydrated cotton crops and dry, cracked soil, while the fragrant air rustled through the fields.

I parked my car on the side of the road, rolled down all four windows, and listened to Johnny Cash. I recall the song "Daddy Sang Bass"—"just poor people that's all we were, trying to make a livin' out of black land dirt"—with its simple chord structures and gospel chorus. A warm rush of feeling at "home" came over me, despite the fact I was thousands of miles away from everything I knew and made sense to me. I have no particular attachment to Cash or his music, other than I guess I "like" it. This was a place of dry counties, gun drops, and heavy drawls, all foreign to me, but I felt at "home," as if Cash made more sense here in the South.

I had a similar feeling at the anniversary of John Lennon's death at the Imagine Memorial in Central Park West. It was about five o'clock on a December evening and a beautiful blanket of white clothed Central Park, with the peaks of the Dakota—Lennon's one-time residence—

visible through the falling snow. Lennon's "Jealous Guy," with its ethereal piano chording, played in the background. Now, when I reflect on these moments, they capture a realization that, as a researcher, I sought to understand my research subjects as united (in some ways) by Cash or Lennon. The reality is that fandoms are far more complicated and diverse than these preliminary assumptions and to understand this community in these fleeting moments clouds our understanding of the real work of fandom.

My dissertation tells a story, and the focus of this story is about fandom and religion and a celebrity and their fans. The title, *The Celebrity Imprint*, reflects the indelible effect of Lennon and Cash on the lives of fans in my sample. This title comes from an interview with Lennon fan, Ruth, in which she describes his legacy on her life: "It's an imprint, an effect . . . It's like a baby duck with its mother" (Interview December 19, 2018). For many fans, Lennon or Cash is a lifelong preoccupation. While this relationship is not consistent, Lennon or Cash punctuates the fan's life while shaping their identity. By adding a new source of field data, I help to address what has been a significant limitation of fandom-as-religion scholarship. Many criticisms were lobbed at scholars in this area who made claims of parallels without supporting data. While it is important to address parallels between fandom and religion, I go beyond "parallelomania," as religious studies scholar Sean McCloud (2003) once dubbed it, to discuss how the definition of religion developed in fandom-as-religion scholarship. I propose reworked definitions of a number of concepts, such as religious work (Chidester 2005), the "religious imagination" (Cowan 2018; 2022), the "religious" (Laderman 2020), and the "extension of the self" (Sandvoss 2005) as well as an examination into why fandom is so frequently compared to religion, what we may learn from this comparison, and what the limitations of such a comparison are.

In *Understanding Fandom*, fan studies scholar, Mark Duffett, said that the comparison between fandom and religion or the suggestion that “fandom is simply a surrogate for religion,” is “an ongoing joke that acts to normalize mainstream audiences by locating fans as misguided, irrational and servile zealots” (2013, 143). Sociologist and Beatles scholar Candy Leonard responded to Duffett by indicating that “Those who are discomforted by the comparison may be holding to the traditional Western model of organized, patriarchal, monotheistic religions. A broader understanding of religion and the religious impulse is required” (2021, 20). This is where I situate my argument. That is, the definition of religion proposed by many opposed to the comparison is a caricature that has been dismantled in the field of religious studies decades ago. By complicating the orientation to the sacred and profane,¹ I offer a different way of looking at the comparison between fandom and religion and suggest new avenues for studying fan identity.

In addition to the introduction, literature review and conclusion, the three articles in this dissertation help form a conceptual whole by examining how fan-celebrity relationships reveal important characteristics of contemporary religiosity, such as how fans locate a sense of meaning and purpose outside of traditional religious institutions. Various threads weave themselves through the articles. For example, I examine: (a) the self and its relation to religion through the extension of the self (defined below); (b) points of articulation throughout the fan-span (the length of time someone is a fan), such as (i) becoming a fan (ii) celebrity death, and (iii) religious work performed by the celebrity. These “points of articulation” help answer the questions set out

¹ My use of the term “sacred and profane” accords with sociologist Emile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*: “The division of the world into two domains, one containing all that is sacred and the other all that is profane—such is the distinctive trait of religious thought. Beliefs, myths, dogmas, and legends are either representations or systems of representations that express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers attributed to them, their history, and their relationships with one another as well as with profane things” ([1912] 1995, 34). This dissertation complicates the nature of the sacred and the profane by considering a liminal space called the “religious.” Fandom occupies this in-between realm and manner in which fans carry out fan belief, practice, and ritual.

in this project: is the fan-celebrity relationship ever “religious?” Why is fandom so often compared with religion? And what may we learn from this comparison? Each article, in its own way, helps to answer these questions. I conclude the dissertation by discussing the significance of celebrity fandom to the study of religion and popular culture.

Coming from the specific perspective of religious studies, and clarifying the arguments made by these scholars and their reasons for making them, I indicate how we might understand fandom and its repeated comparison to religion. Fandom and religion reflect individuals’ efforts to bond through a shared sense of devotion (see Cavicchi 1998, 51). Fans seek out others like them to share a similar love of a television show, film, music, or celebrity—anything that a group of fans may enjoy. This common focus becomes a shared meaning, to be “in” on something (see, for example, Mills 2013). In *Tramps Like Us*, music scholar Daniel Cavicchi’s book about Bruce Springsteen fans, fandom and religion share “similarities of experience” but they are not one and the same (Cavicchi 1998, 51). To understand how the two became entwined, we must examine the literature that makes up this area of study.

In a 2005 publication related to her 1999 book, *Elvis Culture*, Erika Doss drew a fandom-as-religion comparison to analyze the posthumous fandom surrounding Elvis Presley. Doss writes, “My references here to ‘religion’ are not meant as metaphorical or rhetorical flourishes; nor do I want to mitigate the reverence that many fans have for Elvis as a ‘kind of’ religion” (2005, 69).² This expression, that reverence for Presley is a “‘kind of’ religion,” is but one example from a body of literature I refer to as celebrity fandom. I focus more on Lennon and

² Doss clarifies what she intends in her reference to religion by indicating that, “Religion constitutes those practices and attitudes that imbue a person’s life with meaning by linking him or her to a transcendent reality: that which is beyond purely immanent, or secular, experience and understanding” (2005, 69).

Cash as celebrities than I do on their music, while accounting for the way fans frame their relationship with them. One aspect of this literature, Doss being an example, looks at parallels between religion and fandom. This literature encompasses generations of scholarship dating back to Edgar Morin's 1957 book, *Les Stars*. Morin's work examines the star system and its implications for fans who adore them. Morin focuses on early cinema stars and culture (see Morin [1957] 2005 and DeCordova 2001; Dyer [1979] 2009; [2004] 2013; Marshall 1997). This type of literature remains concentrated in the 1990s and early 2000s—likely related to the twenty-year anniversary of Elvis's death, a time of heightened relevance of the dead celebrity, when first-generation fans were still alive but second-generation fans were beginning to take interest. The interest of second-generation fans became apparent to me in a different context, when I was doing fieldwork for my Masters and wanted to explain the massive popularity of the film *The Doors* (1991), which reignited interest among a new generation of fans in Doors frontman Jim Morrison (who died in Paris in 1971).

In the 2000s, celebrity fandom literature with “religious” underpinnings continued to be of interest to scholars (see, for example, Duffett 2003; 2013; 2015; Hills 2013; Leonard 2021; Rojek 2007; Ward 2011; 2020). I write “religious” in quotation marks because the type of religion we are writing about cannot exactly be defined as religion; rather it occupies a realm between the sacred and profane, an in-between space Doss termed “‘a kind’ of religion” (2005, 69).³ However, the “religious” is much more than that. In his book *Don't Think About Death: A Memoir on Mortality*, religious studies scholar Gary Laderman defines the “religious” as providing “order, meaning, transcendence, and orientation.” This conceptualization of the

³ In the third article, “The ‘Religious’ Response,” I do not use quotation marks around religious at the request of one of the reviewers.

“religious” stems from Laderman’s writing about Disney and death in an article entitled, “The Disney Way of Death,” in which he details how Disney films “convey distinctive messages about life and meaning in the twentieth century” (2020, 119). Laderman suggests, “These messages can be characterized as ‘religious’ because they teach about order, meaning, transcendence, and orientation” (2020, 119). Laderman’s concept of the “religious” aligned with what fans of Lennon and Cash expressed in my interviews. For example, fans of Lennon and Cash connect themselves with the celebrity in the sense that the celebrity becomes a lasting focal point for the fan, and, through the extension of the self and the “religious imagination” (defined below), helps to create meaning and transcendence in the fan’s life (Cowan 2018; 2022). The celebrity’s appeal to the fan, in large part, is because the celebrity is an extension of the fan’s self reflected back to them, whether the fan is conscious of this process or not. For example, in my study, Diane turned to Cash as a means of finding a healthy orientation when she struggled with substance abuse and lost her father at an early age. Diane identified with Cash, who also struggled with drugs and alcohol, and turned to her notion of Cash for direction, love, and support.⁴ According to Sandvoss, the extension of self should not be thought of as “out-there.” Rather, “the object of fandom forms part of the self” (Sandvoss 2005, 100). This self is built through identification (Sandvoss 2005, 100). Because Diane so intensely identified with Cash at different junctures of her life, she built up this extension to such an extent that it has a reassuring, soothing power over her. The extension becomes self-comforting.

The concept of the extension of the self appears differently in each of the articles. In “The Celebrity Imprint,” the extension appears in full effect shaping the identifies of fans. In “My Whole World Shifted,” the extension is seen in its initial stages through the process of

⁴ Diane’s story is a feature of the first article, “The Celebrity Imprint.”

becoming-a-fan. In “The ‘Religious’ Response,” fans demonstrate how, in death, identification and attachment to Lennon or Cash resurfaces as an extension of the self. The extension of the self has an exceptional ability to explain why the fan object comes to interest us, why it holds our attention, and how it can become an “ultimate” concern.⁵

Like religious studies scholar Douglas Cowan, whose work appears throughout this dissertation, I adopt William James’s concept of an unseen order to define religion. James writes, “the life of religion . . . consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto” ([1912] 2002, 61).” However, my use of this term differs from Cowan in the sense that, for fans of Lennon and Cash, the unseen order represents an idealized self to which the fan seeks to align themselves. This idealized self consists of the extension of the self which takes place as an act of the “religious imagination,” another of Cowan’s concepts (2018; 2022). Cowan characterizes the “religious imagination” as “aggressively separating the world into varieties of the sacred, the profane, and the liminal spaces in between, then appealing to an array of doctrines and beliefs, practices and rituals to both understand and negotiate among them” (2022, 21). I use the “religious imagination” differently, although inspired by Cowan’s work both in *America’s Dark Theologian* (2018) and *The Forbidden Body* (2022). Among fans of Lennon and Cash, the “religious imagination” acts as locations, physical, psychological, and social in which the understanding the fans have of themselves and the celebrity begins to form. It is in this liminal space that the “religious imagination” of fans is born. The fan uses this encounter to help, and to use Cowan’s words, establish “an array of doctrines and beliefs, practices and ritual to both understand and negotiate

⁵ Chidester defines an “ultimate concern” as “that which defines the final, unavoidable limit of all our ordinary concerns” (2005, 1). In my use of this term, I consider both greater and lesser forms of the ultimate, such as fans considering Cash as a moral compass in their lives, to Lennon as a larger spiritual or psychic force.

among them” (2022, 21). The “religious imagination,” in my use, originates through socialization, including religious socialization, but is supported by the fan’s continued identification with Lennon or Cash.

A fan is something rather easy to define. I agree with Duffett’s analysis in *Understanding Fandom*, that “everyone knows what a ‘fan’ is” (2013, 17). A fan is someone who is focused on an object of interest, on a spectrum that ranges from liking to revering a celebrity, television show, film, music, sports team, or anything really (see Duffett 2013, 17). Although Duffett characterizes fans as “obsessed,” fans display a range of commitment, from a passing interest to full-on fanaticism (2013, 17). Fans of Lennon or Cash, for example, display a spectrum of degree of commitment, although my sample does involve fans with more than a casual interest.

On the other hand, a fandom is not a “singular entity” (Duffett 2013, 19). Not all fans experience their fandom the same way and mean different things to different fans (see Duffett 2013, 19). According to fan studies scholar, Henry Jenkins, in *Textual Poachers*, “Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media” ([1992] 2013, 23). This identity construction helps to create multiple discourses within a fan community, and addresses why fans do not and cannot speak with one voice. Even in light of this diversity, I call fandom a “community” because of this shared interest in the object of fandom and how fans of Lennon or Cash experience their fandom at fan events. No fan in my sample experienced their fandom in isolation from other fans, although this may be something that other fans experience in other contexts. As fan studies scholars, Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington point out in the second edition of *Fandom*, “Scholars who have sought to explore and theorize the intrapersonal bond between fan and fan object still acknowledge the collective and

communal dimensions of fandom, too” (2017, 8). Further, Jenkins described fandom as an “imagined and imaginative community” (2007, 361). All spaces, whether ones of the fandom, the “religious,” and even traditional religion, are imagined. This act of imagination also explains how fans, in many cases, so readily identify with the celebrity. The fan is not relating to the celebrity per se, but with their own conceptualization of the celebrity. It is the imagined relationship, in the imagined world, that does the religious work.

The article entitled “The Celebrity Imprint” was the first article I wrote in the series. In this article, I too narrowly defined the concept of religious work occurring when the fan viewed the celebrity as a mediator between themselves and their concept of God. With the experience writing subsequent material for this dissertation, I came to realize that there are many other examples of religious work, such as a lifelong preoccupation with the celebrity as well as the celebrity’s function as a moral compass. Both of these manifestation of the fan relationship with Lennon or Cash are examples of religious work. It is important to note that I initially wrote “The Celebrity Imprint” (the article rather than the dissertation as a whole) in the summer of 2020, so more than two years passed before this dissertation began to assume its final form. As I mention below, religious work is a concept I have thought and rethought throughout my doctoral journey.

As discussed in my literature review in Chapter 2, the fandom-as-religion literature struggles with defining the concept of religion. For example, fandom and religion literature does not know how to articulate these in-between spaces, where connection to a celebrity falls short of the definition of traditional religion but is not entirely secular either. Indeed, the celebrity provides a means of the pursuit of an “ultimate” concern that ties into themes of transcendence and, at times, an aura of otherworldliness (see Chidester 2005; Doss 1999; Laderman 2009; 2020;

Tillich 1957).⁶ One reason for this struggle is that scholars in the area of religion and fandom do not have a lot of data from fans. From both the data of fans of Lennon and Cash and in the literature review, we come to find that the term “religious” helps to describe a middle point between as well as the dynamic of “crossing over” to and from the sacred and profane.

In “Fandom as a Religious Form: On the Reception of Pop Music by Cliff Richard fans in Liverpool,” sociologist Anja Löbert claims that scholars “search for other phenomena in the real world that we can use for comparison or for paradigms. Religion is one of the things ‘out there’ that is useful for this purpose” (2012, 131). Yet, as I will demonstrate, the distinction between the religious and secular, the sacred and the profane, is not so clear cut. Two examples of this are the spirituality practiced by some religious ‘nones’ and the emerging scholarship on nonreligion. Sociologist Anna Strhan indicates that, “A now burgeoning literature has emerged, challenging the idea that ‘non-religion’ is the mere absence of religion and exploring the substantive beliefs, practices and identities that are associated with so-called unbelief” (2019, 1094). Indeed, the secular is not empty. One example of this stems from a study by sociologist of religion, Lori Beaman (2017), of sea turtle activism. In this study, Beaman asks many of the same types of questions I do: “What motivates people to rescue sea turtles? How do sea turtle rescuers understand their place in the world and in the environment in which they live? Are their approaches located in notions of transcendence, immanence, or a combination of the two? Is sea turtle rescue a site of shared human experience that moves beyond specific religious/nonreligious beliefs and practices?” (2017, 10). Like Beaman, I ask, how can we, as scholars, “reimagine the secular?” (see Lee 2015). Belief, practice, ritual, and human experience do not fall in a binary

⁶ I considered Paul Tillich’s use of “ultimate concern,” which he defined as “faith” and its “unconditional demand” but found his concept too all encompassing to reflect the role of Lennon or Cash in the fan’s life ([1957] 2001, 1-2).

secular/religious, serious/frivolous fashion. Rather, people find meaning and purpose in a mix of social activities and circumstances (see Strhan and Shillitoe 2019). In many instances, fans of Lennon and Cash experienced religious socialization growing up. This may affect how they frame their understanding of the celebrity and what helps to fuel their “religious imagination.” For example, Sarah came to find a “Spirit Guide” in Lennon through her childhood experience in Christian Science whereas Chris identified with Cash through his Lutheran upbringing.

How fans engage the celebrity shares some similarities with the concept of lived religion (see especially McGuire 2008; Orsi 2002; 2005; Tweed 1997). Lived religion involves how people think, act, and embody religion in their day-to-day lives (McGuire 2008, 12-13). Although the term lived religion is used primarily to critique traditional concepts of religion that focus on official doctrines, sacred texts, and formal hierarchies, we could use it to understand how fans engage with celebrities in their everyday lives. Just as the body of work in religious studies known as “lived religion” explores how humans build relationships with sacred figures through faith and daily practice, we could explore how fans cultivate relationships with celebrities. In this study, I consider that the actions and beliefs of fans as they relate to the celebrity may be better considered fandom-as-lived-religion. With its focus on the everyday experience the fan has with the celebrity, this move captures what is actually happening in fans’ lives. In contrast to the traditional fandom-as-religion literature, it reimagines this relationship as something outside of traditional definitions of religion.

Although fandom-as-religion interpretations of fandom are valid, they depend on an outdated definition of religion that most scholars in the field of religious studies critiqued decades ago. For this reason, I would like to see a turn to fandom-as-lived-religion, which means that fandom can involve experiences, beliefs, values, practices, and institutions that are transient

or long-lasting, intense or quotidian, deep or superficial, consistent or intermittent, helpful or harmful, or inclusive or exclusionary, among others. This sets a lot of the old debate between first generation theorists (fandom-is-religion) and second generation critics (no, it is not religion) aside and asks instead, “What does understanding fandom-as-lived-religion teach us about fandom? About religion? At this point, we do not know because we are stuck in the theoretical dead-end of “it’s a religion/no, it’s not” debate. As Elliott (2021) argues, not enough empirical work has been done to ask bigger, more important questions.

History of the Project

This dissertation is the culmination of a journey in understanding religion and popular culture. I started out writing in 2005 an undergraduate Honours Thesis, loosely based on a 2004 talk at Ideas Boston by religious studies scholar, Stephen Prothero. I still remember the excitement I felt when I saw the segment of the video where he described “celebrity as the new sainthood”: “Celebrity is the new sainthood. When celebrities die, we treat them as martyrs who die for a cause. What those causes are takes you to the development of popular values in America, where the meat of the sacred mixes with the milk of the profane.” This undergraduate project grew into what became my Master’s Thesis, a Geertzian discussion of The Doors frontman Jim Morrison as a religious figure for the fan community in Paris, France (see Riddell 2008). Over the course of my Ph.D. my research evolved immensely but still maintained its focus on religion and popular culture.

The first draft of my dissertation applied Chidester’s concept of “religious work” to data gathered from fan interviews, but only with the second and last round of interviews did the concept of religious work become clearer to me. For example, according to sociologist Ellis

Cashmore in *Celebrity/Culture*, fans make real the celebrity: “In other words, celebrities aren’t just *there*: we create them out of the two-dimensional material presented on the screen. In the process, they become so real to us that we feel we know something about them” (2006, 81; emphasis in original). Put differently, media scholars Benson Fraser and William Brown term this process as one in which “Fans develop self-defining relationships with celebrities and seek to adopt their perceived attributes, resulting in powerful forms of personal and social transformation” (2002, 196; see also Cashmore 2006, 82). The process described by Cashmore and Fraser and Brown helps to explain how fans take the celebrity as a manufactured consumer product and make them into a readily consumable, personalized, and identifiable human being, thus cultivating a sense of intimacy with them. They can do this because the celebrity is their own creation, the product of their own imagination. Media theorist Joshua Gamson describes it by quoting one of his interview participants, “The ultimate selling strategy is to foster audience identification” (1994, 68). This is how Lennon or Cash become part of the fan’s life, always there as a touchstone, providing comfort, inspiration or whatever the fan needs.

Because the celebrity is a product of the fan’s imagination, fans do not maintain static or unchanging relationships with the celebrity. As fan studies scholar Cornel Sandvoss indicates, fan-celebrity relationships are subject to “ongoing transformations” (2005, 112). Fans continually search, develop, and structure the relationship with Lennon or Cash. Often this search happens over lengthy periods of time, as the celebrity weaves in and out of fans’ lives.

Overview of Articles

In the most recent and completed iteration of my dissertation, I chose to do an Integrated Thesis Option (ITO). The ITO is a manuscript-based dissertation consisting of three published

(or in the publication process) articles “packaged” by an introduction and conclusion (I also did a literature review). While in a standard dissertation, data appear only in the analysis chapters, in the ITO, data appear throughout.

A few issues guide the articles that make up the bulk of this dissertation. The first of these concerns the relationship between the fan and the celebrity, how it develops, and how, for some fans, it can do religious work. Given the lack of research into how people become fans, I am also interested in what this process looks like and how it shapes the fan’s identity at the moment of “conversion” or “awakening.” Further, I ask how fans respond to the death of Lennon or Cash and how is this response, at times, “religious.” Finally, I explore how the celebrity helps lessen a fan’s grief by providing direction, order, and purpose. Questions, such as these, shape this dissertation as well as my published articles on fandom-as-religion.

The first article, “The Celebrity Imprint: Fan-Celebrity Attachments and Religious Work Among Fans of John Lennon and Johnny Cash,” examines aspects of relationships that fans develop with Lennon and Cash. For example, fan attachments consist of an initial curiosity that may turn into a more profound emotional bond akin to a “religious” conversion and relationship. To frame this argument, I use Sandvoss’s concept of the extension of the self (2005). I argue fans develop relationships because consciously or not they see more of themselves in the celebrity than do other consumers of the celebrity’s work. Anthropologist Tanya Luhmann’s concept of the “interpretive drift” helped me to explain how these shifts happen over time. I conclude by considering what degrees of fan attachment say about the relationship between celebrity fandom and religion.

“‘My Whole World Shifted’: Identity and Transformation in Becoming a Fan Narratives” concerns the transformative process of becoming a fan, which is sometimes referred to as a “conversion.” I wrote this article for a non-religious studies journal; thus, the conceptual focus and target audience are different compared to the other two articles. Whether conversion is sudden or gradual, a fan’s sense of self shifts to encompass their newfound identity. Sandvoss’s concept of the extension of self—a kind of alternate idea of self-reflection—informs this process. The idea of the extension of the self takes into account not only the process by which people become fans, but how their fandom is sustained across the lifespan or fan-span. It also allows us to explore fandom’s *texistence*, a word used by sociologists C. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby to describe how “the self develops in ongoing dialogue with the media texts that help define and sustain it” (2018, 411). In this article, I use the concept of the extension of the self to explain how people become fans, specifically at the moment or moments of conversion.

How fans respond to the death of John Lennon and Johnny Cash is the focus of the article, “The ‘Religious’ Response: Experiences of Celebrity Death among Fans of John Lennon and Johnny Cash.” This article provides context for fans’ experience with the death of Lennon or Cash, framing this response, in some cases, as “religious modes of acting and thinking” (Laderman 2009, 161). This reaction, I argue, is more than simply meaningful, as it shares similarity in form and experience with religion. Understanding fans as responding “religiously” helps add to the conversation on fandom and religion as it raises questions about the similarities between the two. I argue these similarities reveal important characteristics of celebrity fandom, and why these relationships are so consequential for some fans, especially why they grieve the death of the celebrity so intensely.

Methods

When I began this study, I anticipated that most fans I interviewed would have a deep and intimate relationship with the celebrity, characterized by an “ultimate concern” (Chidester 2005, 1). In reality, the fan experience is varied and dynamic. There is a spectrum of fan experiences from mere admiration for their work to deep reverence and devotion. Also, fandom is not static. It may be marked by intimacy at one point in the fan’s life only to fade for a certain period and later return. I did not anticipate the fans I interviewed to have a long-term relationship with the celebrity. As a result, when I realized I was wrong after my initial set of interviews in 2013-2014, I had to complete a second round in 2018-2019. This second round investigated more deeply the role of Lennon or Cash in the fan’s life. I re-interviewed twelve fans and added seven new fans. A different set of questions comprised the second round, although there was some overlap in questions given that I had new fans to interview (see Appendix II). Overall, I did forty-nine interviews with thirty-seven participants. My sample consisted of twenty-five men and twelve women. I contacted more men than women, but I was also referred to more male fans. Study participants were selected first through convenience, then through snowball sampling. Recruitment of new fans occurred through contact with fans from the original sample. This is a limitation of the study given random sampling was not used. The fandoms encompassed a wide cross-section of people. There were a number of both married and single people, and a few divorced. Many fans had children. Most were college-educated. I had fans who were unemployed, students, retired, artists, and professionals (see Appendix I).

I used a case study approach with multi-site, participant observation, such as Lennon and Cash memorial events. One way to access fans of dead celebrities is through dead celebrity commemorative events. Most often, these events take place on the day of their death and on their

birthday. With Lennon, such events occur on October 9, his birthday, and December 8, the anniversary of his death. One location of these events is the Imagine Memorial at Strawberry Fields, Central Park, in New York City. Events there have been ongoing since the day of his death, when over a hundred thousand people gathered in Central Park for a moment of silence (see Elliott 1998, 840; Shaw 2021, 95). Fans celebrate the birthday of Johnny Cash on February 26 in Nashville, Tennessee.

Given that dead celebrity events are often short and infrequent, it is difficult to observe in-depth accounts over an extended period. For this reason, I attended dead celebrity memorial events for one day or a course of days. For example, I visited the Imagine Mosaic in Strawberry Fields (located in Central Park), the focal point of Strawberry Fields, and this is where I did my initial recruiting of Lennon fans. The mosaic is at the centre of a convergence of paths, close to Central Park West, and is surrounded by a relatively small courtyard. On October 9, his birthday, and December 8, the day of his death (in 2013), fans gather to sing songs with the accompaniment of a “plastic” Beatles band (a term used in the music business to describe changing or rotating members of a band). While some fans spend the day at Strawberry Fields, many come and go as the day progresses. Lennon fans ranged in age from young children to older adults. The varied age demographic at Lennon events may relate to the multi-generational appeal of The Beatles as well as Yoko Ono’s active promotion of him.

The format of Cash’s birthday, which takes place in Nashville, Tennessee on February 26 (I attended in 2014), is quite different from Strawberry Fields as it is much more structured. The event takes place in a space adjacent to the Johnny Cash Museum, just off-Broadway Avenue in the heart of Nashville. The day is replete with fan trivia, guest speakers with expertise on Cash, and live musical performances, including one by Cash’s son, John Carter. The Cash community

does not commemorate his day of death to the same extent as does Lennon fandom because Cash died of natural causes when he was older, compared to Lennon who died suddenly and violently at age forty, thus garnering more of a response (Mills 2020, 104).

There are other events for Lennon and Cash, such as the annual Johnny Cash Music Festival in Jonesboro, Arkansas, which I attended in August 2013, and tribute concerts for Lennon, which I attended in October 2013. The Johnny Cash Music Festival has since become the Johnny Cash Heritage Festival. The festival now takes place at the location of Cash's boyhood home in Dyess, Arkansas.

At both field sites, I approached fans by engaging them in casual conversation, and at some point, I would introduce myself as a researcher. Some fans were uninterested, while others were happy to talk with me. In some instances, a fan who appeared promising at the field site did not respond to my follow-up emails or calls. It was not easy to get interviews. I believe the cause of this difficulty was the relatively brief period of contact that I had with fans at the field sites, followed by a reliance on the fan I interviewed at the time to provide me with an additional contact to interview (snowball sampling). There were no specific criteria that determined whom I would approach at the field site. Because it was crowded at all events, I moved around throughout the day. Events for both for Cash and Lennon were disproportionately populated by white people, with few racialized individuals.

All interviews were completed over Skype, telephone, and two were over email. Interviews lasted an average of forty-five to sixty minutes, although several went much longer. All interviews were immediately transcribed. When the interview concluded I would ask, "Is there anyone else you suggest I speak with?" The fans to whom I was referred had in-depth

knowledge of Lennon or Cash. It felt as though I was accessing an inner circle of fans. The fans I met at fan events, especially Strawberry Fields, were dedicated to their fandom, but it did not become a more focused pursuit of John Lennon or Johnny Cash to such an extent that it enveloped their life. As such, there is a range of depth of fan commitment in my sample. No fans I interviewed experienced their fandom in isolation from other fans, although this phenomenon exists in fandom more broadly (see Hills 2002, 86; Kelly 2004, 10-11). I occasionally followed-up with fans over email, particularly if I was seeking clarification of something they said.

Although I developed a thematic approach to my interview questions, when I went to dead celebrity events, I remained open to how these events unfolded and what interpretations may arise in the research setting. In participant observation and interviews, I used a grounded theory approach and thick description, in terms of seeing what would spontaneously arise in the research setting. I was interested in the context in which identity, socialization, and behaviours occur. At first, I used open-ended questions, followed by more targeted questions, determining follow-up questions based on the fan's response to the open-ended questions.

There are a few fans who appear more frequently in the articles. One of these fans is Sarah. I first encountered Sarah because she had authored a newsletter about Lennon. Sarah has a lot of insight into her fandom—she is articulate and has thought about her relationship with Lennon a great deal. She is also one of the few fans who made a direct connection between herself, Lennon, and God. That being said, I tried to present the spectrum of fan engagements with celebrities.

The Multi-Site Approach

Influenced by *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* by George Marcus, and *Multi-Sited Ethnography* by Simon Coleman and Pauline von Hellermann, I do not consider this study a traditional ethnography because it does not consist of extended participant observation. Given that dead celebrity events are often short-lived and infrequent, it is difficult to obtain in-depth accounts over an extended period of time. From Marcus, I developed several approaches to my study, including the importance of being self-aware of why I am doing the project, but, I hope, not falling victim to self-indulgence (1998, 15). I am aware of my role, my “vantage points,” but I do not insert myself into the story in an overt way, aside from limited recollection of valuable field experience relevant to analysis. I use my voice to situate the reader in the atmosphere of the story, in other words, to set the scene.

Multi-site ethnography examines the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in “diffuse time-space” (Marcus 1998, 79). Chains, systems, and paths connect the sites, such as Appadurai’s notion of “scapes” (see Appadurai 1996; Marcus 1998, 90-1). Marcus writes,

Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography (1998, 90).

In multi-sited fieldwork, you must understand the operation of systems (e.g., information systems) as much as you must understand the everyday life of these communities (Marcus 1998; Coleman and von Hellermann 2011). I remained aware of James Clifford’s critique of multi-site ethnography as a “loss of depth” in interaction (Marcus 1998, 245). Multi-site ethnography does

not consist of the same kind of “deep hanging out” (see Tomlinson 2011, 169). In addition, I took into consideration that I made these decisions on site selection partly based on an attempt to capture the “essence of the object of study” (Tomlinson 2011, 168). Marcus and Coleman and von Hellermann guide my conceptualization of the landscape of my analysis.

My participation at fan events is marked by multipositionality. I adopted the identity and approach of Jenkins and the academic-fan or ‘aca-fan’ ([1992] 2013, 5-8; see also Booth 2013, 121-23; Ford 2014, 61). The academic fan is open about their research agenda and scholarly identity in all interactions with their subjects. They are also aware of the power dynamics implicit in engaging participants as a fan. I was able to connect with fans and put them at ease by participating in fan activities demonstrating awareness of the cultural reference points in both the Lennon and Cash fandoms. In some cases, however, I felt like an outsider. For example, there were instances that fans appeared uninterested in talking to me after I told them I was a researcher. On occasion, fans assumed I was not “in the know” and felt it necessary to make certain references clear.

One avenue of research I did not pursue was online fandom. While John Lennon, The Beatles, and Johnny Cash have active Facebook pages, I felt doing a more intimate interview structure would elicit better and more reliable data. For example, in depth interviews allows a researcher to engage participants more fully than purely online interaction.

Conclusion

Often, I am asked why I chose dead celebrity as the focus of my doctoral work rather than simply celebrity, and specifically why I selected Lennon and Cash as my case studies. In

Afterlife as Afterimage: Understanding Posthumous Fame, Steve Jones best captures some of the reasons I chose dead celebrity,

In the era of recording, celebrities have the last word, but after death no longer can speak first. The echo remains in our compact discs, video-recordings, in our minds. And yet it is not unchanging. Like an echo in the valley, it morphs, sometimes fading, sometimes phasing and other times resounding; but unlike the natural echo it never fades away for some celebrities. Silence, it seems, is not an option. The echo, of the recording may be altered, sounds shaped and reshaped, meanings metamorphosized . . . And with those posthumous sounds our memories are reborn, rekindled, and reshaped. The meaning and character of the performer, performance and performed, changes—even if ever so slightly—with each hearing of the echo, its meaning relived and re-implicated in our lived experience (2005, 269-70).

Unlike living celebrities, a dead celebrity cannot make another film, television show, musical recording, performance, or statement; they cannot suddenly interrupt what had been a consistent narrative with an unusual or uncharacteristic narrative-changing incident. Kanye West, now known as Ye, is a good example. However, it is not that the dead celebrity narrative is unchanging, rather it develops layers of meaning, enriching, and resounding for some dead celebrities more than others, and it is important how and why this happens. Why are some fans so dedicated to a dead celebrity decades after the celebrity's death, and how is this passion passed on to the next generation? Consequently, the first developments of my Ph.D. work were gathered under the heading, "Sacred Reverberations," because these meanings are "re-implicated in our lived experience" as celebrated and shared moments within a fandom (Jones 2005, 270). These echoes or reverberations reaffirm our commitment to dead celebrities, who live on long after their natural death.

Given that there is a high-level devotion to both Lennon and Cash, I chose them as case studies because religious work is more easily seen with them than in the study of other dead

celebrity fandoms. Lennon and Cash had widely successful careers and amassed a great number of fans. Further, I needed dead celebrities with sufficiently dedicated fan bases to have access to fans to interview. It would be ideal if they had a gathering place, such as Strawberry Fields, in Central Park, New York City or Nashville, Tennessee, for Cash. Originally, I thought of including Jimi Hendrix, but his birthday and day of death celebrations were not as active as Lennon and Cash, and I did not find enough fans to interview. This is important because it demonstrated to be difficult to secure interviews with Hendrix fans yet recruiting Lennon and Cash fans proved more successful.

As Duffett says, “In media and cultural studies, then, celebrity remains a missing, perhaps repressed, dimension of fandom research” (2014a, 168). In addition to building on celebrity fandom literature, dead celebrity fan communities are an important, if under examined, pop culture phenomenon. Simply measured in terms of sales and downloads, dead celebrities still generate enormous amounts of income, and the reasons for this are fascinating, from the historical life of the celebrity, the cause and timing of their death, the estate regulation of the pictorial image, and management of assets in death. More importantly, though, is the role that the dead celebrity plays in the imaginations of their fans. The body of literature I refer to as celebrity fandom asks us to consider the possibility that celebrities, specifically celebrity musicians, play a fundamental role in the lives of fans. The connection with these celebrities represents the pursuit of direction, order, meaning and purpose in a fan’s life, and, in more involved accounts, serve to incite “religious” responses in fans and mediate or redeem their deepest concerns and anxieties. Rather than simply fandom-as-religion, it is fandom-as-lived-religion. The next chapter, the literature review, offers insight into the conclusions of the role of celebrity and religion in fans’

lives, the range of fan experience, and the groundwork of how some fans respond “religiously” to celebrities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In the opening to “Fandom as religion: A Social-Scientific Assessment,” sociologist Michael Elliott captures the difficulty presented by studying fandom and its frequent comparison to the concept of religion, “While it is not the most coherent or widely accepted research agenda in fandom studies, it is certainly one of the most persistent and provocative ones” (2021, 107). As Elliott points out, this agenda is a long-standing source of debate in both fan studies as well as in the study of religion and popular culture. Through its often “fuzzy” and unclear presentation as well as difficult to determine boundaries, fandom-as-religion poses important questions about our understanding of these two phenomena and has implications for what we do and do not consider “religious” (Elliott 2021, 118). “What is the relationship between religion and fandoms, exactly?”, Elliott asks (2021, 118).

A study of fandom-as-religion creates various challenges, such as how religion might be a helpful metaphor for fan belief and practice, how fandom shares patterns of belief and practice with religion, and how it does what we might call “religious work.” Another focus of fandom-religion literature concerns controversy about how scholars have characterized the comparison. Some scholars challenge the idea that fandom is a form of religion or even bears any resemblance to religion. These debates reveal how scholars have approached this issue over time and why it led to conflicting views. Moreover, one concern of fandom-as-religion scholarship is that “the specific meaning of religion tends to be assumed rather than defined,” making the comparison difficult to evaluate (Elliott 2021, 118).

Elliott suggests there are a few questions that come to mind as we undertake the task to understand fandom and its similarity to religion: which scholars assume rather than define religion? Which scholars focus on one or two dimensions of religion, thus “simplify[ing] the comparison?” Do scholars see fandom as similar or even a “substitut[e] for religion?” Do scholars hyphenate religion (e.g., para-, neo-, quasi-), thus potentially unnecessarily complicating an understanding of fandom and religion? Further, what approaches do we have moving forward? (Elliott 2021, 118)

Given fandom-as-religion makes a consistent appearance in the literature, we need to understand what makes fandom look like religion or be interpreted as being like religion. It is evident there are gaps in our understanding. One gap is the definition of religion, central to our discussion given the oftentimes uncertain boundaries between fandom and religion. For this reason, we need to carefully investigate the claims of each scholar. The issues most relevant to this body of literature are (a) the definition of religion; (b) the significance of the relationship between religion and fandom; and (c) the method we use to investigate claims about fandom-as-religion.

The main concern of this chapter is how fan studies scholars approach the definition of religion, particularly those who use vague definitions of religion. One iteration of scholarship using religion to comprehend fan experience is that popular culture does “religious work.” According to religious studies scholar David Chidester, a consumer product does religious work “if it is engaged in negotiating what it is to be human” (2005, 18) and is of “ultimate concern” (2005, 1). Religion necessarily involves human life and concerns, and popular culture offers products that speak to these concerns. For example, Chidester tells us that baseball does religious work “because it defines a community of allegiance” (2005, 33). Sports and popular culture can

both unite and divide audiences, but actions can help to generate a unifying expression of solidarity, such as through fans cheering for an opposing team. This coming together generates “collective effervescence,” which serves “to put the masses into motion” in the words of Emile Durkheim ([1912] 1995, 386). Chidester suggests this act creates “a dynamic process of giving and receiving,” that is more fully realized through this exchange (2005, 34). A game or performer gives the audience a “gift” that is actualized in the performance generating this “effervescence” (2005, 45) The concept of religious work is useful for our purposes, but it needs more development in order to have analytic utility. This is a focus of this chapter as well as the articles, particularly the first article, “The Celebrity Imprint.”

The energy manifested by religious work creates “religious” overtones through the emotional and “collective effervescence.” Here, “the religious” helps to orient the audience towards the performer, to provide direction, and to create a ritualized space in the performance (see Cavicchi 1998, 27-35). This space is temporal in the sense that the performance has a beginning and an end, but the audience carries this energy home, and it may filter into their every day lives, at least for a period. The keyboardist for the Doors, Ray Manzerek, described how the audience emerged from a liminal zone (the concert) into a reaggregation stage when they returned to their homes: “People are together inside, and when they get outside into the parking lot, and start driving home, and get into their homes, I hope that they still realize they’re together.”⁷ This same notion may be applied to dead celebrity memorial events. When fans gather at the Johnny Cash Museum or Strawberry Fields, it creates an energy, one that characterizes this togetherness of which Manzerek speaks, that continues when they leave the

⁷ [The Doors - Interview Richard Goldstein 1969 \(French Subtitles Interview\) - YouTube](#) (accessed August 21, 2022).

event and return home (see Turner [1969] 2017). Caitlyn, one of my interviewees, said about Lennon's Birthday, that "I wanted to see what it would be like to be around all those people that love him like I do, and I just thought it was really beautiful" (Interview November 18, 2013). One reason fans attend events is to be with other fans, and these events result in a type of high that stays with the fan afterwards. The concept of religious work offers an important perspective because it gets at how popular culture does a kind of work that is "real" and "genuine" (Chidester 2005, 9, 43). Chidester emphasizes that it is "real" because popular culture is often seen as superficial and "genuine" because, in this case, it is accomplishing what religion is normally expected to do.

In opposition to Chidester and Cavicchi, fan studies scholars such as Matt Hills, Henry Jenkins, Mark Duffett, and Andrew Crome, a theologian, argue that "religion" is not a useful category for understanding fandom. They argue that fandom-as-religion scholars tend to focus on one or two elements of religion that bear similarity to the fan experience. The heart of the question is how scholars have sought to explain the emotion produced by the fan experience. For many, fans and scholars alike, religion provides the best explanatory concept. Scholars who oppose using religion as a concept to explain fandom indicate there is little benefit to such an explanation. Fan studies scholars Henry Jenkins and Matt Hills, for example, argue that we need to have a vocabulary separate from religion to understand fan experience. In *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, Jenkins and Hills note that fans often use such terms to describe their experience of the fan object. In his interview with Jenkins, Hills suggests the term "affective semiotics," where scholars could divorce themselves from the use of religious language and analogies and work on developing an affective language and conceptual terms that articulate fan relationships with greater accuracy and thoroughness. "In *Fan Cultures*," Hills begins, "I focus on two languages

that are available to fans to rationalize or defend their sense of fan experience; religiosity is one, and the other is aesthetics—being transformed by one’s experience of an art form” (2006, 22).

The reality is that many fans, such as the fans in my sample, employ religious language. For example, one fan described listening to a Sunday morning radio show about the Beatles as her “church,” “because we religiously turn on ‘Breakfast with the Beatles’ on Sunday morning and I go, ‘like, God, this is our church, isn’t it? This is where we get our sermon from the DJ”

(Interview January 31, 2014). Another fan decided to draw up a map of sites related to Cash in Nashville and Hendersonville (a suburb of Nashville and location of Cash’s former home) and to call it the “Johnny Cash Pilgrimage” in order to distribute it to fans (Interview April 8, 2014). As scholars, we can ask follow-up questions of such fans to ascertain if the Beatles or Cash do indeed function in ways similar to religion for them or are they self-consciously employing a religious metaphor. However, we must accept what fans say about the fan object without simply assuming that their claim is not valid or sincere. The aesthetic language of which Hills speaks never fully materialized, however. Instead, the focus remained on debating the merits and usefulness of fandom-as-religion. There is a tendency among scholars who oppose using the concept of religion to understand the fan experience to hyphenate religion, using prefixes such as neo- (Hills 2002; Duffett 2015), quasi- (Doss 1999), or para- (Ward 2011). Other argue that these prefixes introduce more confusion rather than clarity.

Since the early 1980s, when both fans and scholars struggled to understand Elvis’s legacy and his posthumous fame, there has been an ebb and flow of scholarship in this area. Scholars represent several perspectives, most with a common theme of explaining in more in-depth terms why religion as a concept is so often used to understand fan experience. Scholars who oppose understanding fandom as a form of “religious” devotion most often do so on the grounds that the

comparison is not an appropriate characterization of fandom or religion. Religious studies scholar Andrew Crome captures this sentiment in his study of My Little Pony or “Brony” fandom: “The idea that fandom is a form of pseudo-religion, particularly in media reporting, makes assumptions not only about what fandom is like but also about the nature of religion” (2015, 130). Further, Hills argues that aligning fandom with religion is “typically speculative, disconnected from empirical audience study and asserted through theorists’ discursive framings of fandom” (2013, 8). One reason these critiques exist is that past attempts to connect fandom with religion related to an absence of field data to support claims of parallels. In this study, I hope to address this criticism through participant observation and interviews with fans.

My contribution to fandom-as-religion scholarship, as outlined above, is to help clarify debates about the use of the concept of religion to explain the fan experience. In addition, I add a voice to the conversation about why fandom is compared to religion, with the benefit of data from actual fans, something fandom-as-religion scholarship often lacks. I believe the fandom-as-religion comparison has merit, but only when it is not directly compared to traditional understandings of religion. Rather, the fan experience occupies its own space, one that is not entirely secular. The literature review examines what fandom-as-religion looks like in its different forms, why some forms of interpreting fandom-as-religion are more prominent than others, and what threads may we carry forward to help bring forward questions raised by this research in a study of celebrity fandom.

Vague Definitions of Religion

At times, undeveloped, vague, and narrow definitions of religion occur in fandom-as-religion scholarship. In examining these scholars and their proposed definition of religion, we can better understand some of the issues in capturing why the concept of religion is so often

compared to fandom, and how some scholars came to criticize the area as a misguided representation of both fandom and religion.

A central concern of religious studies scholar David Chidester, in *Authentic Fakes*, is “what counts as religion” (2005, 9). “Even fake religions,”⁸ writes Chidester, “can be doing a kind of symbolic, cultural, and religious work that is real” (2005, 9, 227, emphasis in original; see also Grossberg 1992). Chidester defines religion as “ways of being a human person in a human place” (2005, vii). Further, Chidester clarifies the nature of this definition as “the activity of being human in relation to superhuman transcendence and sacred inclusion, which inevitably involves dehumanization and exclusion” and “a point of entry into the meaning, power, and values at work in the production and consumption of authentic fakes in American popular culture” (2005, viii). The problem in this wide-ranging definition is it does not give the reader much of an understanding of what religion really is. To take his first premise to task—“ways of being human in a human place”—we are left to question what are these ways, what exactly is a human place, and what is excluded or not counted as “religion.” Given Chidester’s emphasis on both superhuman transcendence and sacred inclusion, we do not know exactly where to start. It is only when Chidester gets into the Introduction and provides examples of religious work, does his concept of religious work become much more useful.

What is important about his definition of religion—from baseball’s “community of allegiance” to celebrity’s “sacred solidarity,” Coca-Cola as a “sacred object” and rock ‘n’ roll as a “sacred ritual of exchange”—is that all these forms of popular culture are “engaged in

⁸ By “fake religions,” Chidester implies “not only things that are made up and invented, but also people who are frauds and charlatans” (2003, vii). Despite “artificial or fraudulent claims,” Chidester argues, “these religious fakes still do authentic religious work in and through the play of American popular culture” (2005, vii).

negotiating what it is to be human” (Chidester 2005, 33-34, 18). According to Chidester, religious work “engage[s] the sacred—that which is set apart from the ordinary. And they engage the ultimate—that which defines the final, unavoidable limit of all our ordinary concerns” (Chidester 2005, 1). Through this mixing of the serious work of religion and the play of popular culture, Chidester asks, how do the two relate to one another?

Although Chidester considers several cases, I want to focus on his notion of sacred solidarity. Celebrities evoke sacred solidarity because of their “extraordinary personality” and for their ability to “mobiliz[e] an ongoing community of sacred allegiance” (Chidester 2005, 33). Drawing on the Max Weber’s notion of charisma, he argues that celebrities “[embody] that ‘certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (Weber [1947] 2012, 358 quoted in Chidester 2005, 15; see also Leonard 2021, 32). What Weber and Chidester do not make explicit is the charismatic bond—the way the fan understands the celebrity and their relationship with them—which is always and everywhere attributive, and never inherent. It is the fan (audience) that holds the power, rather than the celebrity (see Marshall 1997).

In *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History*, Leo Braudy suggests fame “celebrate[s] an aspect of personality, a sense of uniqueness, which, thanks to Max Weber, we have come to call ‘charisma’” (1986, 387). I prefer the notion of the celebrity as “unique” and the drive for “uniqueness,” to Weberian notions of charisma (Braudy 1986, 5; see Marshall 1997, 20). My reasoning behind this relates to the fact that fame is a complex concept built upon “four elements,” as Braudy articulates, “a person and an accomplishment, their immediate publicity, and what posterity has thought of them ever since” (1986, 15). While Braudy articulates a

myriad of accomplishments, more recent forms of fame come from being famous itself. As Daniel Boorstin comments “The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness” ([1961] 1987, 57). A good example of this are celebrities who came to fame from publicity through reality television, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, other social media influencers, or even by accident. While these celebrities may be skilled in crafting a brand, they do not find success through more traditional forms of accomplishment, such as being a talented (or highly visible) actor or sports figure. In addition to the qualities of uniqueness Braudy articulates, I would also add the current relevance of the celebrity, the fact that they speak to the concerns of a fan base. If one were to focus on charisma at the expense of the machinery behind fame, one would miss important elements of the socio-economic context of celebrity that drives the inclination of “being unique.” Charisma helps to explain the draw of the fan towards the celebrity—this is the uniqueness—but the production of fame, the framing, the marketing, reveals how the celebrity comes to find themselves in the spotlight. In other words, it is only when an unknown actor, for example, gains notoriety that we begin to attribute celebrity. By representing the concerns of a fan base, through unique and exceptional qualities, do we understand this celebrity to have charisma. The forces of charisma and uniqueness, combined with the production of fame, help to distinguish the celebrity as a star (see Dyer [1979] 2009, 10-11).

At a fundamental level, Chidester’s definition of religion is not all that analytically useful. What are we, as scholars, to ascertain what is meant by “being a human person in a human place?” (Chidester 2015, vii). It is a broad proposal. We know that one thing products of popular culture do, beyond entertainment, is inspire some people to a greater sense of meaning and purpose. However, this idea alone does not allow us to think of fandom as religious. There

also needs to be a certain direction and orientation akin to religion (see Laderman 2020, 119), such as transcendence or ultimacy. Further, just because something “works” the same as religion, does not mean it does “religious work.” Perhaps “religion” does cultural work, and fandom does cultural work. As such, the key category is “cultural work” and fandom and religion do two distinct kinds of cultural work. To put it this way, when does pop culture provide meaning and purpose and when does it become a central preoccupying force in a fan’s life. This is addressed in the first article, “The Celebrity Imprint.”

A consideration of a celebrity’s charisma and uniqueness and Chidester’s emphasis on sacred solidarity is important for two reasons. First, similar to Chidester’s concept of the fetish, in which he draws on Geertz’s definition of religion as a system and circulation of symbols, the celebrity helps to focus desire.⁹ The celebrity, such as Lennon or Cash, gives the fan something to strive for in the way they live their life. For example, Cash became a focus of desire for Sharon as a musician when she became the only woman ever to play lead guitar for him. Sharon indicated that “I watched his television show, The Johnny Cash Show, every week and recorded the shows on a cassette recorder. I would learn the songs and started playing guitar at eleven years old because of that influence.” She continued, “I discovered the Johnny Cash Fan Club when I was twelve and became a member. Later, I was the Virginia Representative for the Fan Club” (Personal email April 22, 2019). Sharon’s early involvement with Cash culminated in a once in a lifetime experience when she met Cash in 1972. For fans such as Sharon, an early fixation on Cash as an object of desire came to fruition in her career as a musician. Second, when

⁹ Chidester writes of Coca-Cola as a “fetish” for its ability to be “an icon of the West” and “a symbol that can mark an initiatory entry into modernity” (2005, 42). While this sounds rather confusing, Chidester’s discussion of the fetish as an example of religious work is meant to describe how an object becomes desired and through this desire, circulated globally as what the West, in this case, considers representative of Western ideals (2005, 40-43).

devotion to a celebrity does religious work, “allegiance,” “solidarity,” “desire,” “exchange” are all components engaging “what it means to be human” (Chidester 2005, 33-34) and characterize aspects of religion. Chidester argues that popular culture puts the serious work of religion and the play of popular culture in conversation with each another. In this way, consumer products create “meaningful religious worlds” (2005, 4). Consumer products help to create these worlds because, for the fan, the consumer product helps to answer questions the fan has of themselves and their world. Take for instance Lennon fan, Carolyn, who is partly a focus of the article, ““My Whole World Shifted.”” After Carolyn became a fan, in a very sudden way, she began to incorporate elements of Lennon and the Beatles into her world so that it became a central part of her life. Carolyn indicates:

Soon our world was inundated with news, pics, and music centering around this new group from England. I remember that my father brought home the album, Meet The Beatles, and we played it over and over on the Magnavox record player . . . There were lots of kids on our block in suburban Houston, Texas in the ‘60s, and we girls all developed major Beatlemania. A small group of us played like we were Beatle wives, and I remember someone baking a raspberry flavored birthday cake for Ringo on his birthday. I was, of course, John Lennon’s wife. I had little interest in Paul’s puppy eyes, Ringo’s goofy nature or George’s seriousness. I was from the start devoted to John (Personal email February 1, 2019).

For some fans, the celebrity infiltrates different dimensions of their lives at different times, mostly dependent upon a point of identification. The more the fan engages the celebrity, the more the celebrity becomes part of their life, such that the feelings associated with the celebrity are authenticated and validated through the process associated with the extension of the self. It is through this extension and the “religious imagination” that the fan creates these worlds. The extension is an act of the “religious imagination” and fuels its creativity in and through identification.

The term religious work, however, can only explain some relationships between religion and popular culture. Not all products of popular culture do religious work, and some do so more than others. One of the challenges of deciphering religious work is that some literature does not use this term, although, in other cases, one may infer its usage based on the use of certain conceptual language (such as a primary or ultimate focus). I use religious work because it helps explain the serious work popular culture can do (Chidester 2005, 1-2).

In a different manifestation of concern for the definition of religion at the centre of fandom-as-religion debates, Duffett questions the effort to make Elvis into a “religious icon” (consider Rodman 1996; Chadwick 1997; Doss 1999), but grounds his understanding of religion on a rather limited definition of religion. Indeed, he references the *Oxford English Dictionary* for a definition of religion: ““religion,” the definition begins “is a system of faith and worship; a human recognition of superhuman power, and especially of a God figure who is entitled to obedience” (2003, 515). Many modern scholars of religion would argue that this is a rather narrow and problematic definition of religion that does not encompass a full and complex range of belief and practice. Duffett also uses the *OED* to define other terms of religious concern, including “faith” and “worship” (2003, 515). The reason a definition of religion from the *OED* is problematic is because the definition of religion is the object of significant debate in religious studies and has been for decades. There are more wide-ranging definitions of religion, such as the one put forward in this dissertation, that capture the nuance associated with fan belief and practice. The greater complexity of such definitions helps to counter Duffett’s argument that religion is “a loaded analytical tool brought to fan studies” (2003, 519).

In an article on Elvis’ gospel music, but which covers a lot of ground in the debate over fandom, popular music, and religion, Duffett furthers his case for a non-religious/non-

spiritual/non-sacred understanding of fandom. He asks, “The key question is how *analytically and ethically useful* it is to frame fan participation as a form of sacralising activity” (2015, 187; emphasis in original). “One of the problems with liberal definitions of spirituality,” he contends, “is that they stretch almost *ad infinitum*” (Duffett 2015, 188; emphasis in original). Further, suggests Duffett, “Generalizations about spirituality and sacredness . . . [are] in danger of *constantly overstepping the mark*” (Duffett 2015, 188; emphasis in original).¹⁰ That is, these scholars “misidentify their community” whose “priority it was to frame Elvis phenomena as a new kind of spiritual practice” (2015, 190, 191). Duffett calls this “drive-by academia,” meaning the work of scholars whom he believes do not critically engage Elvis Presley fandom in their argument (2015, 191). In other words, Duffett implies that by not critically engaging Elvis fandom, these scholars overlook field data in favour of a theoretical stance (see also Hills 2013, 14).

Duffett’s work raises important questions in terms of the origin of some fandom and religion arguments, which often stem from popular works:

Advocates of religious interpretation are therefore drawing on a parody of fandom that makes fans’ interests seem bizarre, trivial, overblown, silly, misguided, and sad *by dint of the comparison*. It is particularly interesting in this respect that the next appearance of “Saint Elvis” was in academia; nobody from Denisoff to Doss openly discussed the wisdom of basing an academic theory on such a pervasive popular parody (2003, 516; emphasis in the original).

As Duffett suggests, popular literature ranging from *Rolling Stone Magazine* to John Strausbaugh’s “*E: Reflections on the Birth of the Elvis Faith*,” considered Elvis’ fandom a “religious faith” (2003, 516). Some of Duffett’s arguments about Elvis scholarship, such as its

¹⁰ Neo-religiosity scholarship is about how fandoms appropriate religious discourses, often as a way to pathologize them (see Hills 2014, 101).

legacy, are specific to Elvis, while Duffett does pose questions for approaches to fandom-as-religion scholars as well. The problem with Elvis scholarship is it carries a lot of issues in terms of it being prone to stereotypes, which Duffett points out, such as Elvis becoming a caricature of himself (think the bloated, drug-affected, jumpsuit Elvis) and his fans as being poorly educated zealots (Duffett 2003, 516; see also Rodman 1996, 13-14). For these reasons, Duffett argues that Doss's work "cannot be inductive" (2003, 516). Duffett raises some important issues about Elvis scholarship, but I believe many of these are specific to Elvis fandom. Further, Duffett compares religion to fandom as though religion has only lofty and respectable elements, when really, like fandom, religion is equally trivial and serious and wise and misguided at times.

One of Duffett's most critical stances is towards Doss's writings. Finding little merit in *Elvis Culture*, he considers her assessment of Elvis fans misleading. Scholarship and popular writing on Elvis has a certain legacy, one in which religious interpretations are common. This is where Doss's *Elvis Culture* situates itself and where Duffett aims his critique (see Doss 1999; Duffett 2003, 513-16). For example, Duffett contends that the field evidence Doss presents does not provide compelling enough data because it is "impossible to test conclusively" and "provides a limited understanding of fandom" (2003, 513).

Duffett criticizes Doss almost exclusively from a methodological point of view, such that Doss, he argues, is "promoting a particular understanding" of fandom that "could be seen in other ways" (2003, 516). Duffett argues scholars interpret fan practices and beliefs from their own personal views as well as the discipline, field, or area they come from. Duffett writes that "trying to understand Elvis fandom by way of religious comparison is so reductive that something seems almost laughable about the idea" (2003, 520). This is where Duffett's critique of Doss is most evident, especially in his claim that scholars who posit "religious"

understandings of fandom “actively manage it” (2003, 516), that is, what Hills describes as “discursive framings” (2013, 8). I do not disagree that scholars must be wary of making arguments strictly from a “methodological point of view,” meaning their argument says more about the particular disciplinary, field or area perspective from which they write, but some fandoms actually have “religious” content (Duffett 2003, 516). What Duffett misses, and is a major concern of Doss’ book, is that many Elvis fans consider their belief and practice as it relates to Elvis “religious.” In terms of fandom “being seen in other ways,” one of those ways is to explore similarities between religion and fandom and to look at the consequences of this comparison. It is important to look at the role of the celebrity in the fan’s life, which is often an entry point into fandom-as-religion arguments. For example, one way to approach fans in the field to garner an understanding of how they see celebrity is to ask them about the role of the celebrity in their lives. In the case of fans in my Lennon and Cash sample, this question resulted in some fans making a “religious” connection that helps to articulate the types of experiences fandom engenders whether they have religious content or not. In turn, such a viewpoint helps scholars to better understand the comparison between fandom and religion. These viewpoints articulate how the fan situates themselves in relation to the celebrity, the extent of the fan’s involvement with the celebrity, and whether the celebrity becomes an “ultimate concern” (Chidester 2005, 1). For these reasons, I do not agree with the argument that comparing fandom with religion offers an unreasonably “limited understanding of fandom.” Further, Doss spent several years in the field with Elvis fans. Although Doss does not provide the interview questions in her book, *Elvis Culture*, thus making her argument more difficult to assess, I do not agree that her findings are without merit. Doss’s work on Elvis carefully considers the belief and practice of his fans, especially through her discussion of fan areas, sometimes referred to as shrines. Doss

is one the earliest scholars to capture fan areas in such detail and remains an important source for its account of fan shrines near the height of Elvis's posthumous fandom. I discuss Doss further below.

Duffett accuses Doss of placing herself in a power dynamic of “bourgeois interpretations” and “value judgments” (Duffett 2003, 516-518). Duffett believes Doss maintains a superior attitude towards Elvis fans in her position as a university professor, thus maintaining an *ad hominem* argument: “I want to argue that, instead of making a neutral comparison, Erika Doss used the notion of religion because it supported her concern as a representative of bourgeois culture” (see Duffett 2003, 518). Scholars who forward arguments that, as Duffett suggests, “*actively manage* fandom” (2003, 516; emphasis in the original) are not in my estimation manipulating fandom but are sometimes responding to legitimate yearnings of fans for what they see as a sacred connection with the celebrity.

Scholars who favour “similarities of experience,” to use the words of Cavicchi, are not arguing that fandom is a form of religion but that religion bears similarities to ways in which fans experience devotion to their fan object. Framing these factors as “religious” helps scholars of religion and fan studies to understand how fans actively pursue a relationship with the celebrity as well as contemporary expressions of religiosity. The “religious” resides in a liminal zone between the secular and traditional understandings of religion. In turn, the “religious” characterizes an orientation of meaning, purpose, direction, and order that may be a central concern for the fan—that the celebrity occupies a significant role in the fan's life—but falls short of the organized and institutional elements of traditional religion (Laderman 2020, 119). One helpful way to think of this in-between state where we find the “religious” is through sociologist Chris Rojek's work. Rojek understands “Celebrity culture” as “Movtivat[ing] intense emotions

of identification and devotion, but it is basically a fragmented, unstable culture” (2007, 179-80). While I disagree with Rojek’s follow-up statement that this culture “is unable to sustain an encompassing, grounded view of social and spiritual order,” I do appreciate his observation that “some elements of celebrity culture do have a sacred significance for spectators” (2007, 179-80). The “religious” speaks to the concerns of some fans as a “grounded view of social and spiritual order” in the case where Lennon and Cash provide this to fans in the extension of the self and the religious imagination. However, Rojek is correct to say that celebrity culture does not provide a complete and coherent orientation (2007, 179-80). The lack of such an orientation is because a fan’s identification with the celebrity is not a consistent narrative, at least among Lennon and Cash fans. That being said, many religious phenomena also do not provide a complete and coherent orientation.

Theologian Andrew Crome is another scholar who questions the comparison between fandom and religion. In “Religion and the Pathologization of Fandom,” Crome found that in both scholarship and popular media, the often-made connection between religion and fandom “pathologizes” and mischaracterizes the nature of fandom (2015, 130; see also Jenkins 2013). Crome considers My Little Pony or “Brony” Fandom and how this fandom responds to the promotion of a religious characterization of the fan community (2015, 142). The claim is that the media, as well as some academic sources, place fandoms in a binary framework of “irrational”/“fanatic” (i.e., religious) and rational/ “scientific” (i.e., empirical) (Crome 2015, 137, 132). According to Crome, this pathologization occurs through scholars’ inability to account for the way fans actually respond to religion, “The comparison [between fandom and religion] offers a very limited view of what both religion and fandom actually are” (2015, 132). Like Duffett, Crome argues what he believes to be a misguided approach in fandom-as-religion scholarship

where fan belief and action filter through religious interpretations. Crome suggests that “This popular comparison between fandom and religion has often been borne out in scholarship, with religious language being applied largely to the affective appeal and rituals of fandom” (2015, 131). These readings indicate that it is the scholar who has the “power to arbitrarily declare what is and what is not religious, even against the protests of those actually engaging in the practices being described” (Crome 2015, 132). Crome addresses an important point, and one often mentioned in comparison between fandom and religion. In *Elvis Culture*, Doss responded to this issue by indicating fans, many of whom are Christian, feared reprisal and even condemnation from others, such as their faith community, for viewing their fandom as a form of religion: “it isn’t surprising that many fans hotly deny fidelity to any sort of Elvis cult or religion, suspicious of facile analyses that come close to equating them with the Branch Davidians or the Japanese followers of Aum Supreme Truth” (1999, 74). Crome is correct to assert that this debate often centers on the definition of religion, particularly functionalist definitions, such as those proposed by Durkheim or Geertz, but one reason why the fandom-as-religion debate continues after many decades is the desire to explain where religion goes with the decline of religious institutions. Hills suggests the “loss hypothesis,” i.e., the idea that with the loss of traditional religious faith, media fandom among other phenomena become sacralized. Hills counters that media fandoms “replace” religion, arguing instead “that fandom compensates for contemporary society’s disenchantment and the absence of ‘cosmic meaning’, adopting an implicitly or explicitly functionalist view of religion whilst at the same time accepting modern disenchantment as a given (2013, 9-10). As stated in the Introduction, this entire dissertation should be understood as complicating the binary between the sacred and the profane, the enchanted and the disenchanted.

Fans may be best understood as passionate enthusiasts who find purpose and meaning in the fan object. To analyze this joy and commitment as “pathological” misses the mark, at least among my sample of fans. Lennon and Cash are one dimension, rather than sole focus, of how these fans engage the world. As Jensen points out in “Fandom as Pathology,” this understanding skewed academic perceptions as well (1992). In the *Fandom Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington write, “Such negative representations can still be found—on occasion even at the hands of those engaged with the field of fan studies” (2017, 4). In other words, understanding fandom as a form of pathology has not entirely escaped even more recent analyses.

Crome does not go as far in his critique as Duffett, and suggests that the “fandom-as-religion” argument has some merit:

Some of these experiences undoubtedly resemble those found in religious traditions (such as fan conversions), and it is correct to see fans using their fan objects to help define what it means to be human (Ammon 2014; Porter 2009), which can be seen as a core feature of both implicit and explicit religiosity (Bailey 1997, 48) (Crome 2015, 132).

My articles focus on experiential dimensions of fan belief and action, such as becoming a fan, celebrity death, and the nature of fan-celebrity relationship. I spend most of the articles building arguments around fan experience and its tendency to engender “religious” sentiments, while utilizing scholars such as Duffett, Hills, and Crome to demonstrate how religious interpretations of fandom are questioned in the field of study.

A Focus on One or Two Features of Religion

While some scholars provide questionable or vague definitions of religion, other scholars focus on one or two elements of religion, such as practice or ritual, then adopt a widespread use of “religion” to understand fandom. One element of dead celebrity fandom in which such a lens is often used in scholarship on Elvis Presley.

While Elvis is not the only dead celebrity who serves as a focus of fandom and religion scholars, it is important to start with him because he is central to the paradigm. While this paradigm does not begin with Presley (some, such as religious studies scholar Gary Laderman, cite Rudolf Valentino as the original modern dead celebrity [2009, 65]), in his posthumous popularity among fans, he is the pinnacle. For example, the twenty years following the death of Elvis Presley in 1977 witnessed a flurry of popular and academic articles trying to make sense of fan devotion to this dead icon (Chadwick 1997; Goldman 1981; Harrison 1992; Hinerman 1992; Frow 1998; Joyrich 1993; Marcus 1991; Silberman 1990; Vikan 1994). Rodman’s *Elvis After Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend* argues that there is something exceptional, even religious, surrounding devotional fan phenomena, as well as around Presley himself. Rodman claims that, when it comes to stardom, most “display[s] of devotion” are metaphorical, “except, that is, in case of Elvis” (1996, 112). Given Rodman’s claim, I would attribute such an understanding to the relatively early publication date of *Elvis After Elvis*. The literature around adoration of dead celebrities and the insights that go along with it have increased since Rodman published his study. Later in this paper I will argue that, for some fans, the fan-celebrity relationship bears more than a metaphorical relation to religion—as Rodman suggests. With Elvis, Rodman argues “that his role in many fans’ lives is similar to that which might be played by a major religious figure” (1996, 112).

Rodman gives two primary reasons for Elvis's exceptional status and the role he plays in his fan's lives as a "religious figure" (1996, 112). The first relates to the system of Elvis impersonators, which create "spiritual healing" and "religious ritual" for fans, similar to the "gift" and "exchange" in rock 'n' roll detailed by Chidester (Rodman 1996, 114; 2005, 45). Rodman draws on communications scholar Lynn Spigel's study of impersonators to discuss how they act as mediators, meaning "a medium who channels the spirit of a savior, all the while opening up a public space where people can express their mutual faith in an abstract principle that no one can name" (Spigel 1990, 193). In *Celebrity Worship*, theologian Pete Ward provides a more accessible and, in my estimation, useful definition of celebrity mediation and media processes: "these terms in my view describe complex interactions where audiences are engaged in making meaning in relation to production, representation and consumption. I take media processes and the idea of mediation as an arena in which audiences are actively shaping their own meanings" (2020, 8-9). While both Spigel and Ward describe a process, Ward's definition is much more "democratised" (2020, 9). For example, mediation applies to all types of celebrity relationships, not simply those with Elvis or even posthumous ones. Some mediated relationships are channelled through a god figure, while others describe a consumer relationship. We only know which is which through the words of fans. For some fans, celebrities are important and mediate fans' admiration because celebrities are one of the primary resources used in processing the self (see Ward 2020). In other words, mediation helps to open a conceptual space or location in order for the fan to process and understand their relationship with the celebrity. The extension of the self is an example of this space, and it is where mediation happens. In my study, Beatle fan, Stephanie, described the output of this process as a "philosophy of life," a way of being in the world. Her abstraction of Lennon and George Harrison, whose spirituality influenced her,

helps orient and ground her in a unique world view that makes sense in the context of her everyday life, especially as a Beatles scholar (Interview February 10, 2019).

Rodman's second argument relates to Graceland and Tupelo, Mississippi (Elvis's birthplace) as locations of significance that help enshrine Elvis as a religious figure. In a section entitled "Promised Land," Rodman suggests Elvis can be distinguished from other celebrities in part because of the uniqueness of Graceland, which is considered a sacred place by fans (1996, 111-29). Located in Memphis, far from the celebrity centres such as New York and Los Angeles, Graceland helps to collapse the distance between Elvis and his fans, a distance that is "physical, emotional, and psychological" (Rodman 1996, 102). Elvis's fans have access to Graceland year-round, and it serves as a permanent venue (Rodman 1996, 125).

To address Rodman's first point, the notion of Graceland as a sacred place, Lennon also has a physical location associated with him, Central Park's Strawberry Fields, which is similarly accessible all year. For Rodman, Strawberry Fields does not rival Graceland because it can only hold a few hundred people at a time, "whereas," Rodman begins, "50,000 Elvis fans gathered at Graceland on the tenth anniversary of his death, the analogous ceremony marking the tenth anniversary of Lennon's murder found only a few hundred gathered outside the Dakota apartment building in New York to commemorate the occasion" (1996, 117). Part of the reason only a few hundred fans can gather is because the paths leading to the Imagine Mosaic bottleneck at this location. At Strawberry Fields, fans tend to come and go, with several thousand stopping by the mosaic during an anniversary day. In addition, security at the Dakota discourages fan gatherings. On the other hand, Graceland has expansive grounds, allowing more fans to gather. Graceland also charges a fee for visitors, which means it has a vested interest in putting through as many people as possible (see also Ward 2020, 126). Graceland has an entire

promotional industry, including marketing and visitor enticement supporting it whereas Strawberry Fields is a public space devoid of an advertising campaign apart from some social media activity around anniversary days. An entire week of festivities commemorates Elvis' death, compared to two days for Lennon. Moreover, many who stop by Strawberry Fields on an anniversary day are drawn by Lennon's vision of peace, more than by the celebrity himself.

Consideration of physical, social (both public and private realm), and media spaces is essential to our conception of religion because these realms reflect the performance of religion in our actions and behaviours. For example, fan performance in physical spaces such as Graceland or Strawberry Fields is much different than fan interaction online. These physical spaces make "abstract places real" (Leonard 2021, 41). This may be largely traced to characteristics of human contact with the physical world compared to that in an online environment facilitated by technology. In "Beatles Fandom: A De Facto Religion," sociologist Candy Leonard indicates that "Fans gather at the memorial Imagine mosaic . . . on [December 8] and on October 9, Lennon's birthday, to make music together, celebrate his life, feel his absence, and collectively express sadness about his senseless murder" (2021, 41).¹¹ In turn, fan belief and practice conforms to these platforms informing our understanding of fans as "religious" actors and performers. In this performance, participation has a transformative effect on fans by helping to create purpose, order, meaning, and transcendence. This change occurs because fans make an emotional and psychological investment in Lennon that is met in a different way in different

¹¹ Leonard's "Beatles Fandom, A De Facto Religion," which appears in a collected edition, *Fandom and the Beatles*, was published after the articles were written. However, I did make an effort to incorporate the book chapter in the revision of the third article and in the literature review. Leonard (2021) argues the Beatles maintain a "philosophy" akin to religion. Similarly, she bases her understanding of comparisons between fandom and religion on Cavicchi and Doss. Her conclusions on the Beatles' effect on fandom and society more broadly are wide-ranging, including their impact on health and well-being as well as political functions such as addressing "right-wing nationalism" (2021, 46).

spaces (see Bennet 2017; Cowan and Dawson 2004; Cowan 2010; 2018; Morimoto and Chin 2017).

One example of this investment is fan areas or fan rooms, sometimes referred to as “shrines” (see Doss 1999). Ruth told me of her childhood bedroom, replete with Beatles posters, books, and records, “My father used to say pray three times a day toward Liverpool! . . . Mostly when I spend time in the room it makes me happy” (Interview December 19, 2018). Another space created by the fan is through emulation. Devin, who once worked at the Johnny Cash Museum, indicated he likes to dress like Cash, “I sort of comb my hair like him in the 70s. I sound a little bit like him, I’ve been told . . . I do have a long black coat I wear in the museum when I feel good” (Interview March 5, 2013). Robert is an example of a fan who sought an opportunity to befriend Cash: “I met him back in the mid-1980s. I owned a hotel, and he stayed at my hotel, and we just got to talking and to knowing each other” (Interview March 9, 2014). Fans such as Ruth, Devin, and Robert seek emotional and psychological fulfillment in these different spaces by identifying with Cash or Lennon. Doss suggests that “[fans] collecting and displaying Elvis stuff make Elvis meaningful and help shape their own identities” (1999, 40). In addition to identity formation, the spaces help to align the fan with the celebrity through a certain physical location (e.g., a fan room), a psychological place (e.g., through emulation) or an emotional one (e.g., by becoming friends with Cash). The fans retreat to these types of spaces help to strengthen their relationship with Lennon or Cash through repeated exposure as well as identification. This is what Leonard means when she says make “abstract places real” (2021, 41). The imagined notion of the fan’s relationship with Lennon or Cash takes on a concrete form when the fan encounters the celebrity in the space, helping to “shape their own identit[y]” (Doss 1999, 40).

Another important point raised by Rodman that applies to both Lennon and Cash and contribute to their spiritual status among fans is how their images have been “sanitized,” often referred to as “white-washing” (1996, 121). Elvis had his image refined over time by removing controversial elements, such as his appropriation of Black music, his sexualized performances, his involvement with a much younger Priscilla, and his pill-addled later years. It is often forgotten that Lennon treated his first wife and son poorly and that he was a difficult person. Cash struggled with drug and alcohol abuse. Rodman claims that this tendency, in the case of Elvis “mythologize[s] [Elvis] as an almost flawless saint figure, rather than a real and imperfect human being” (1996, 121). Yet, and as argued in the first article, “The Celebrity Imprint,” fans readily recognize Lennon and Cash as flawed and this makes no difference in their admiration.

Published in 1999, *Elvis Culture* is a landmark study of fandom and its relation to religion that led to significant discussion and debate. In it, media historian and fine arts scholar Erika Doss considers Presley’s continued appeal. Written twenty years after his death and based on multi-year participant observation at Elvis Week, Doss explores why Elvis continues to inspire fan devotion, and asks why some fans construct their devotion to Elvis as a quasi-religion, replete with a saint figure, prayer, and home shrines.

Like Rodman, Doss discusses “Elvis exceptionalism” (i.e., Elvis maintains a posthumous celebrity and fan-based industry unlike those of other dead celebrities) and bases her argument on the widespread appeal of Elvis’s pictorial image.¹² Complete with mass-produced and hand-

¹² One possible reason for Elvis exceptionalism is the location of Memphis and Elvis’s primary fan base in the bible belt. As white Evangelical Christians, his fans may be more likely to interpret their experience in religious language.

crafted memorabilia, argues Doss, Elvis inspires devotion akin to notions of personal piety in the contemporary American landscape.

While “Saint Elvis” is the primary focus of *Elvis Culture*, Doss also considers other factors in the appeal of his pictorial image, such as the discussion of his “all-white” persona among fans. For example, although Elvis demonstrated an acceptance of other races on both a personal and professional level, proponents of his all-White image—“an icon of whiteness”—focus on (prejudiced) White Southern and Pentecostal background and downplay his message of tolerance and acceptance (Doss 1999, 168). These fans “claim Elvis as a singer who emerged out of what they choose to remember as an essentially white culture” and “image an all-white Elvis who corresponds to their nostalgia for an American culture that never really existed, but that they fear is fading from national consciousness” (Doss 1999, 168, 181). Doss indicates these types of tropes are common among certain groups of Elvis fans (1999, 195-96) because “the culture itself has been organized as a distinctive, deified even, site of whiteness” (1999, 195).¹³

Doss is correct to say that Presley is unmatched when it comes to mass-produced material culture compared to his contemporaries or even more recent dead celebrities. Much of the focus on other dead celebrities, especially musicians, has been on releasing new material from their catalogue of music. A good example of this is the posthumous career of Jimi Hendrix. Subject to much internal fighting among members of his family, Hendrix left behind a wealth of unreleased

¹³ While race and ethnicity are not a focus of this dissertation, this is an emerging area of fan studies (see, for example, Woo 2017). In general, fan studies is often devoid of research on race in fandom. In fact, this omission is well known. For example, Jenkins claims that the area “has been ‘colour blind’” (2014, 97). Much of the debate about race in fan studies relates to the composition of fan groups as mostly white (although this is changing) (see Woo 2017, 246-7).

music. It is only with the conglomeration, Experience Hendrix, run by his stepsister, Janie, that fans heard lost recordings (see Jones 2005, 14).

Similar to *Elvis Culture*, Americanist and music scholar Daniel Cavicchi's *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* is an early inquiry into fan culture which pays close attention to issues fundamental to the area, such as defining fandom, becoming a fan, and gaining an understanding of fandom through religious analogies. Both fandom and religion involve the pursuit of meaning and community, and both "[centre] around acts of devotion, which may create similarities of experience" (Cavicchi 1998, 51). Cavicchi writes,

Fans' use of religious language in explaining and thinking about fandom and the clear parallels between their behavior and that of Christian believers do not mean that fandom is a religion; rather, they point to the fact that both fandom and religion are addressing similar concerns and engaging people in similar ways (1998, 187).

Cavicchi highlights an important understanding of why scholars turn to religion to help to understand fan belief and practice. Some reasons for a desire to use religion as a comparator for fandom are: (a) to understand the relationship between religion and fandom; (b) to help clarify, better, religion and fandom as two separate entities; and (c) why "religious work"¹⁴ happens in something so seemingly secular yet shares many characteristics and, more importantly, consequences with religion. These elements are a central concern of *Tramps Like Us*.

Cavicchi examines this parallel through narratives about "becoming a fan." How people become fans is a phenomenon not well understood in fandom studies. In fact, for reasons related to the tendency of scholars to simply classify someone as being a fan or not, but not digging into its origins, Duffett calls becoming a fan "a mysterious process" (2013, 153-4). Cavicchi, who

¹⁴ Cavicchi does not use the term "religious work," but he discusses fandom and religion along a similar theme.

provides an early assessment of this process, likens such narratives to a conversion experience, “or significant change in one’s attitude and behaviour toward the music and image of Springsteen” (1998, 42; Duffett 2013). Fans, he claims, “use the idea of conversion in a specifically religious sense,” and he places these narratives in a framework of conversion developed by William James (Cavicchi 1998, 42). In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James states that “To say a man [or woman] is ‘converted’ means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy” ([1902] 2002, 218). This conversion may happen suddenly but more often happens gradually over time.

Conversion is also a focus of literature on New Religious Movements (NRMs). In “From Healing to Protest: Conversion Patterns Among Practitioners of Falun Gong,” sociologist Susan Palmer indicates four phases of conversion among Falun Gong practitioners: healing, moral reform, spiritual salvation, and apocalyptic activism. Spiritual salvation, the third stage, is much like the fan conversion about which Cavicchi writes. For example, one practitioner of Falun Gong described this stage of conversion as “energy rushing,” while another cited “a warm sensation” accompanied by a change in outlook (Palmer 2003, 354). This is not unlike how Cavicchi conceives of a sudden change among fans of Bruce Springsteen in becoming-a-fan narratives. Cavicchi tells the story of how John Landau, a music writer, turns his negative attitude towards new (at the time) rock musicians into a wholly overwhelming and energizing experience when he saw Springsteen and became an instant fan (see Cavicchi 1998, 52).

Similar to Springsteen fans, some fans in my sample described an immediate shift when they heard the music of the Beatles or Johnny Cash for the first time. Carolyn was “riding in the car with [her] mom,” she begins” “‘I Want to Hold Your Hand’ came on the radio,” Carolyn

continues “I was like, ‘Wait! What’s this?’ Honestly, my whole world shifted the first time I heard that song. I was only about 10. That didn’t matter; life had gotten interesting all of a sudden. I became a huge fan the minute I heard ‘I Want to Hold your Hand.’ Something shifted in me; a sound that lit me up” (Interview December 20, 2013).

Other fans received a more gradual introduction. Dale mentions about his first experience with Johnny Cash, “The more I heard, the more I wanted to hear, and the more it became part of my life” (Interview June 9, 2014). In these instances, and applying James’ framework, something in the fan’s life—“religious ideas” that move from the periphery to the centre—initiate when the fan (at some point) hears the music, and the fan becomes what James calls “hot and live” or feeling an increase in bodily or mental sensation (2002 [1902], 218). New ideas about themselves and their world flood the fan’s consciousness at the point of conversion. As James points out, we do not know all of the reasons this happens (2002 [1902], 218). The data indicate, however, that the fan’s identity grows alongside the celebrity after the point of conversion, whether this is sudden or more gradual.

However, Sandvoss suggests that becoming a fan is better understood as transforming a fan’s identity through a projection that he calls the extension of the self, suggesting “a model of fandom as a form of self-reflection” (2005, 10). In celebrity fandom, the extension of the self captures how fans abstract a notion of themselves and the celebrity that exists in this conceptual space. The extension operates to reaffirm and validate what the fan already believes to be true of themselves. The extension is both a form of self-validation and challenge to the self because it reflects the fan’s values that, in this case, they locate in the celebrity (see Sandvoss 2005). The celebrity emphasizes these values in their performance, both on and off screen and through their music. Because the celebrity is a cultural product, this product is what contains the value

emphasis. For the most part, my use of this concept (the extension of the self) accords with Sandvoss, particularly in the sense that the extension is “a part of the self,” rather than a separate entity (2005, 100), and that they are “not simply points of identification” (2005, 102). Where I differ from Sandvoss is that he believes fans are “narcissistic” in their pursuit of the extension (2005, 102-4). The reason I disagree with the use of the term narcissistic is because the extension could be a projection of values by the fan, but it could also be a form of self-criticism (i.e., I should be a better person like John Lennon). The extension of the self is a core concept in this dissertation, used in all three articles, and I focus on its role in the celebrity becoming a central and significant focus for the fan.

In her discussion of Cliff Richard fandom, Anja Löbert finds the comparison between fandom and religion helpful, although she does not conclude that fandom is a form of religion. Löbert argues that the notion of Cliff Richard as a sacred object derives from the power of the concert experience, but this power makes its way into fans’ everyday lives. In some cases, this power helps to, in her terms, “redeem fans.” Löbert draws from a previous article she wrote—“Cliff Richard’s Self-Presentation as a Redeemer”—to define this presentation through his “song lyrics, pictorial self-representation, and image components” (2008, 77). For example, Löbert indicates Richard’s song lyrics contain “recurring motif[s],” such as “surrendering to the singer-persona,” a type of “consistent semantic pattern of performance and self-presentation whose similarity to Jesus and deliverance is difficult to ignore” (2008, 78, 96). With its focus on performance, this type of analysis is more common in examples of popular music fandom (see, especially Duffett 2014b; Sylvan 2002; 2005). The difference between popular music fandom and celebrity music fandom is the focus on the effects of an individual—the celebrity—on the fan, as a primary focus, with music being a secondary consideration. In other words, the music

takes centre stage in the initial encounter with the celebrity, and the celebrity takes prominence later. For example, as a child, Walter's interest piqued when he heard his last name in a random Beatles lyric. He could not explain why at the time, but this began a life-long fascination with Lennon and his music. Later in life, he wrote and directed a play based on Lennon (Interview February 7, 2014). Further, both Lennon and Cash fans often listen to their music when they become fans, but this practice lessens over time (see also Cavicchi 1998). For example, Bruce told me he listens to the music "about every three months." He said, "you can get burnt out listening to the music every day. Then, I might listen to it, reminded of it, some way, and post a YouTube video of the song [on Facebook]" (Interview October 11, 2013). This practice of listening to the music of the Beatles (or Cash) occasionally, as background music, doing a chore, or when triggered, is common of many fans, although some fans listen every day.

In a subsequent article discussing fans of Cliff Richard, Löbert focuses on a type of "redemption" involving daily tasks. The "redemption" brings these fans to a place where they can forget life's burdens. For example, she suggests that "identifying the specific moments in which the sacred object is relied upon may provide some clues about which secular aspects of fans' lives are most in need of being 'redeemed' by Cliff Richard" (2012, 134). The use of the term "redemption" for this type of fan experience is likely too strong and carries too much heft in religious studies because of its conceptual weight. These burdens of daily life described by Löbert (2012) more accurately *relieve* fans of burdens associated with daily life, rather than redeem them. Instead, in his discussion of Springsteen, Cavicchi discusses the "everydayness" of a devotion that stems from a desire for the fan to alleviate the small discomforts of life that arise over the course of a day.

In *Gods Behaving Badly*, theologian Pete Ward considers that “Celebrities are sacred because they represent the sum of the possibilities for the self. Through representation these possible selves are reflected back to us as image and idol, and we are asked to choose between them” (2011, 111; see also Braudy 1986). While we extol celebrity, argues Ward, we also stand in judgement of them, and it is this complexity that make them so appealing in a fan’s construction of the self (2011). An important celebrity that we both celebrate and judge is Britney Spears. From the heights of her late 1990s and early 2000s success to her 2007 emotional breakdown and subsequent conservatorship, the media (more than her fans) had been quick to condemn her apparent “irrational” behaviour. Yet, her fans rallied behind her to release her from the conservatorship of her father in the Free Britney movement.

Celebrities, even dead celebrities, are dynamic rather than static figures. While the celebrity maintains a type of historical integrity (as with living celebrity) or copyright (with dead celebrity) the image celebrities morph into whatever projection the fan has of them (see Sandvoss 2005; Ward 2011; 2020). One of my respondents Chris suggested that, “People look to [Cash’s] music because it has meaning, it’s not superficial like so much of the music today. And Johnny Cash has been able to cut across so many genres throughout his career. His music has substance and he always put out something real” (Interview May 17, 2014). Just as Tom remarks, one reason Cash’s music lasts is because its substance has multiple meanings and is meaningful for many different fans in many different ways. There is no right Cash or correct interpretation of Lennon. This is why the notion of a *master image* or singular representation is contested; we need to ask what the celebrity represents and to whom (see Jones and Jensen 2005; Marshall 1997). A master image is one representative image of the celebrity that speaks for a fanbase. In *Heavenly Bodies*, media theorist Richard Dyer disagrees with any ultimate image of

the celebrity because, as communications scholar Erin Meyers suggests, “all aspects of her image are produced and constructed” (Dyer 1986; Meyers, 2009, 894). Lennon and Cash mean different things to different fans and some fans emphasize certain images over others. For example, Leigh identified with the image of Lennon and the Beatles during their psychedelic years. “Once they started expanding their minds, and taking acid,” Leigh begins, “I think, it just like, had a big impact on their music. You can hear it, you know what I mean?” he continues (Interview November 23, 2013). The reason fans connect with different images relates to the extension of the self. The particular socialization the fan brings to their identification with Lennon or Cash relates to why they identify with him and in what way. For example, with Leigh, experimenting with drugs is part of his lifestyle, causing him to relate more to the psychedelic years of the Beatles. When he sees their drug use was a big part of their creativity, especially during the Sergeant Pepper album, it reinforces his own choices.

In Ward’s follow-up book, *Celebrity Worship*, he furthers his argument about the celebrity as a sacred self. “What is sacred, or religious,” Ward begins, “is not the celebrity, or even the relationship that fans have with celebrities, but the way in which both these things are a means to process and to construct a meaningful sense of the self” (2020, 26-7). According to Ward, the nature of the celebrity is religious, “not because it acts as a form of religion, but because it forms a central aspect of change in culture that has had a profound influence on the way that religion is experienced and lived” (2020, 27). The celebrity is “religious” in the sense that it is a venue for which the fan may construct “religious” sentiments and sensibilities centering on themes of purpose, meaning, direction, order, and transcendence (see Boorstin [1961] 1992; Laderman 2020, 119) in our day-to-day lives. However, it is in the religious imagination, discussed in the Introduction, that brings the experience of the fandom and the experience of religion together.

The religious imagination curates a physical (in the form of fan shrines, for example) social (the fan community) and the psychological (the extension of the self) location in which varying degrees of fan attachment and identity are carried out. An appropriate example of this is the transformation of music columnist John Landau at the Springsteen concert. In the religious imagination of Landau that borne the much-acclaimed piece, “Growing Young on Rock ‘n’ Roll,” the concert he attended (physical venue, social location) interacted with his idea of himself a rock writer colliding with the new experience as a fan, helped to usher in a new identity. In a similar fashion, through repeated exposure, Martin envisioned a Cash that helped him (and others) overcome barriers in life. Martin indicates, “I think that’s what people want to believe in. I think the personal message that he brings for me is being able to climb out, no matter how tough it is, and bring yourself to a period of rebirth. That no matter how difficult things are you can always find a way to achieve and move forward” (Interview April 25, 2014). Martin encountered Cash early in life, as a childhood fan, but it is only through his reimagined relationship with him that Martin is able to internalize Cash to such an extent that Cash helps to shape his life experience. The religious imagination helps the fan entertain and create possibilities that reaffirm the fan’s identity.

Are fandoms equivalent to religion, similar to religion, or substitutes (i.e., replacements) for religion?

How scholars define religion is fundamental to understanding why some align fandom with religion. Do they see fandom as fulfilling a similar purpose as religion? Or do they think fandom and religion are entirely different? Media and fan studies theorist Hills notes that the comparison of fandom with religion often lacks an empirical base. These areas of scholarship are “typically speculative, disconnected from empirical audience study and asserted through theorists’ discursive framings of fandom” (2013, 8). Hills cautions fan scholars of the

. . . need to remain focused on discourses of fandom and religion rather than positing (speculative) substances which probably say more about the theorist's commitments to methodology or the sociology of religion or a specific fan culture than they do about the 'object' of study (2013, 14; emphasis in original).

An example of a scholar's commitment to a specific fan culture, and that of which Hills cites in his article, is theologian Anthony Mills writings on Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Mills brings together aspects of traditional understandings of religion, such ritual, religious language, and sacred objects to argue that Buffy fandom is more religious than traditional religion because of the degree of commitment of Buffy fans. Mills provides a framework of "bio cultural" religion, which is "the deep biological structures and impulses which have contributed to the formation of both traditional religion . . . and contemporary religion, such as pop culture fandom" (2013, 135). In other words, how does religion meet our basic needs, such as a desire for acceptance and fulfillment, and how does such a faith develop naturally over time. Mills' definition of religion centres on "about being part of something bigger than oneself in a way that is personally fulfilling" (2013, 135). Mills shows how Buffy fandom addresses the same needs as traditional religion but is even more like a religion because it is "more genuine and respectful of other's uniqueness and flaws" (2013, 137; see also Hills 2014, 10). Mills presents Buffy as a superior example of how fans rally behind the fan object. If we were to look at Mills' definition of religion, there are many human, rather than sacred, dimensions of personal fulfillment that fall under the scope of his definition. It is very difficult to say if any fandom presents a more unifying world view, at least in the way that Mills explains it, because every fandom involves a multitude of experiences and worldviews, many of which are seldom in contact with one another aside from occasional fan gatherings. In addition, Mills entertains the idea that fandom can be a substitute for religion or even replacement for religion, but his reasons for indicating Buffy fandom is as a substitute lacks robustness given his emphasis on what is a very basic human

experience (e.g., “about being part of something bigger than oneself in a way that is personally fulfilling” (2013, 135). Further, Mills sets up traditional understandings of religion as an ideal, when, in reality, religion is a mix of commitment, consistency, and cohesiveness. As a result, Mills’ notion of religion requires some additional thought before we can compare it to Buffy fandom.

Another way that fandom-as-religion modifies the concept of religion is by hyphenating the term. “Para-religion” is often used by scholars “to describe the similarities and differences” between fandom and religion (Elliott 2021, 110). Elliot asks, “When scholars use a hyphenated term, they are still invoking or implying a particular meaning of religion, which means they cannot avoid the same lingering issue-what does the author mean by ‘religion’?” (2021, 111). For the most part, I do not employ hyphenated terms (e.g., neo-, quasi-, para-) because I think it confuses the issue. What scholars in the area should be getting at is clarity of the use of the term religion, rather trying to justify their use of religion by adding a prefix, in an attempt to modify religion. One area where I do think some qualification is helpful is Doss’s use of the notion of Elvis culture being a “‘kind of’ religion” (2005, 69). One could say it is close to a quasi-religion, but my use of this concept relates to an understanding of fandom being similar to religion, but not actually replacing traditional religion.

Conclusion

The concept of the “religious” helps to explain data gathered from fans of Lennon and Cash in the sense that these data demonstrate and expand on how these fans express meaning and purpose and direction and order in their lives. Given that many claims about fandom-as-religion were made in the absence of field data to support them, my data does not exactly align with any

of these accounts. I started out following Doss's theory, but later found her book, *Elvis Culture*, too focused on fan shrines. I also did not see fandoms replacing traditional understandings of religion. Cavicchi (1998, 51) had the right idea of "similarities of experience" and a common sense of devotion," but I felt the fandom-as-religion comparison needed to be taken further analytically. In no instance did I have a fan say that they see Lennon or Cash as "a God figure who is entitled to obedience" (Duffett 2003, 515). With the exception of one fan, I did not come across opposition from fans to making a connection between the concept of religion to understand the dynamics of fandom, despite a belief that this practice "pathologizes" or mischaracterizes fandom (Crome 2015, 130; see also Jenkins 2013). Nor did I find a coherent worldview among fans, yet, traditional religion does not necessarily present one either. As such, what conclusions may be drawn?

First, literature on fandom and religion lacks a well-founded criticism about using the concept of religion to explain fan emotion, ritual, and practice because these critiques were aimed at studies that mostly did not use field data. This is how I position my study, as one that can hopefully challenge scholars who are wary of connecting fandom with the concept of religion. Second, the "religious" helps to address the middle ground that some aspects of Lennon and Cash fandom occupy. The "religious" gets at fan phenomena that is not entirely secular, but does not meet the definition of religion in a traditional sense. Some dimensions of fandom are, as Doss indicates, "a 'kind of' religion" (2005, 69), but the "religious" is a very transitory, temporal space, born out of the fan's "religious imagination" (Cowan 2018; 2022), dependent upon identification. The "religious imagination," in my use, combines various elements. For example, the "religious imagination" consists of a physical component (e.g., fan rooms), a social one (the community) and a psychological element (the extension of the self). These three locations are

where fan identity is carried out. The extension of the self feeds the religious imagination each time the fan identifies with Lennon or Cash. This connection between the extension of the self and the religious imagination occurs because as the fan identifies with Lennon or Cash, this act is inspired by a grounded experience, such as Sarah lighting a candle in front of Lennon's photo, or by attendance at a fan event, an expo (such as Beatlefest), a concert, listening to their music, watching a film or documentary, or any other fan activity. As consumer products, Lennon and Cash provide many ways to socially, visually, or auditorily connect.

The "religious" occupies a liminal space between what we understand to be traditional religion and a more secular space, devoid of religion. I hesitate to use the word *secular* because it carries so many different connotations in religious studies, but the "religious" is a bridge from a more secular connotation to religion proper. In maintaining this space, the "religious" helps to orient the fan towards a deeper meaning and purpose, but becomes more than simply this when, for example, the fan object becomes an object of "ultimate concern" (Chidester 2005, 1). It is this characteristic, the "ultimate concern" that helps the fan object "drift into religious territory." I do not indicate that the celebrity is a form of religion, but that fandom bears similarities to religion—and that thinking about it in these terms helps us understand something important about fandom and religion. This is a significant distinguishing factor that helps to situate this dissertation in the fandom-as-religion literature.

In "Celebrity and Religion," religious studies scholar Kathryn Lofton examines four dimensions of inquiry in the study of celebrity and religion: "Are celebrities gods?", "Are celebrities saints?", "Is celebrity worship religious?" and "Does celebrity religion matter?" These four dimensions characterize the types of understanding we currently have of celebrities and religion in what Lofton calls an area of "nearly nonexistent" scholarship (2018, 95). Because

celebrity studies may benefit greatly from “a stronger contribution from the study of religion,” Lofton calls a lack of engagement between the two “a real loss” to both (2018, 95). This loss relates to the many similarities of experience between both areas, especially a focus on ritual (2018, 101). Evidenced in this literature review and in the articles, a pursuit of ritual in celebrity fandom and religion helps to explain why the comparison between fandom and religion is so often made. In engaging in ritual, fans enact forms of meaning similar to actors in traditional religion. This notion of ritual speaks to Lofton’s claim that:

If we see the field of celebrity as a field of religion, we may be more willing to understand the serious reverberations to reports of star’s new haircut or a singer’s struggle to get pregnant. Religion is a word that magnifies whatever it touches, turning a touch into a blessing and an utterance into a prayer. Imagining celebrity studies as a study of such magnifications may connect it to the broader humanities and social sciences through routes it has not yet accessed” (2018, 104-5).

Although Lofton focuses mostly on celebrity and religion, her notion of the implications for religious studies extend to understandings of how scholars interpret fandom-as-religion arguments. Mostly, this understanding extends to a central preoccupation of this dissertation: why is fandom so often compared to religion, and what may we learn from this comparison? An in-depth evaluation of fandom-as-religion will benefit religious studies through a thorough investigation into how we define religion and how this definition addresses a less than “coherent” area of scholarship (see Elliott 2021, 107). As found in the articles, fans of Lennon and Cash do not exactly fit the fandom-as-religion mold as it stands in the literature reviewed. With the influx of new data, we can begin to explore concepts that help to address the persistent questions in fandom-as-religion literature. I hope this thesis represents a contribution to that project.

Returning to the set of questions asked at the beginning of the literature review, moving forward, I focus on the latter, “what threads from this research may we carry forward to help address questions raised by this research in a study of celebrity fandom?” My primary interest in this exercise is to expand upon our definition of religion, to understand what this area of study can offer religious studies and fandom research, and what it says about fan belief and practice. In other words, how does the celebrity inspire and provide a religious outlook for fans—through fan-celebrity relationships, becoming a fan narratives, and death— and what does it reveal about the “religious imagination?” (see Cowan 2018; 2022).

Interlude

When I started the process of writing the Integrated Thesis Option (ITO), I wanted to contribute to an understanding of religion and fandom that would be of benefit, first, to religious studies and religion and popular culture more specifically, and second to fan studies. As discussed in the Introduction and Literature Review, religion in fandom is a longstanding issue in religion and popular culture and fan studies. In particular, and as outlined in the Introduction and Literature Review, there is a dearth of qualitative data and insight into the lives of fans.

The first manuscript, “The Celebrity Imprint,” which takes its name from commentary provided by John Lennon fan Ruth, examines the range of fan-celebrity relationships, what these relationships look like, and when and if “religion” and “religious work” enter the picture. In fact, there is a lot of diversity of experience among fans. The data indicate that while some fans, such as Melvin, have no interest in seeing John Lennon, or any celebrity for that matter, as an “idol,” others at the other end of the spectrum, such as Sarah, regard Lennon as a conduit or “Spirit Guide.”

A consideration of the range of fan experience not only provides a good look into the typology of fan experience but also reveals why some fans come to accept the relationship with the celebrity as discontinuous, given the celebrity weaves in and out of fans’ lives. This article also helps counter the criticism that fans do not have spiritual encounters with the celebrity and even that religion has nothing to do with it at all (see Crome 2015; Duffett 2003; 2013; 2015; Hills 2013)

The Celebrity Imprint, Fan-Celebrity Attachments and Religious Work Among Fans of John Lennon and Johnny Cash¹⁵

Based on in-depth interviews, this article examines the relationships fans develop with John Lennon and Johnny Cash. Fan attachments consist of an initial curiosity, to a more profound emotional bond or relationship with “religious” underpinnings. An externalized sense of self as well as the concept of a product of popular culture doing the work of religion highlight how fans develop relationships because they see more of themselves in the celebrity than do other fans. The notion of a gradual development of an interpretive lens helps explain how these shifts happen over time. I conclude by considering what degrees of fan attachment say about the relationship between celebrity fandom and religion.

Keywords: religion, fandom, extension of the self, religious work, identity, interpretive drift, the Beatles, John Lennon, Johnny Cash

“I was from the start devoted to John. To me, he represented ME ... he stood for everything I wanted to be ... clever, intellectual, creative and irreverent” (Personal email February 1, 2019; emphasis in original). In this quotation from one of the John Lennon fans interviewed for this study, Carolyn reveals the complexity of fan attachments. As a young child, her identification with Lennon gained traction and intricacy as she developed. In *Celebrity Society*, sociologist Robert van Krieken (2012, 92) observes that a fan’s “self-perception” increases when the celebrity plays a more significant role in his or her life. These types of fan–celebrity relationships, argues van Krieken, “can be understood as a social relationship operating alongside real-life relationships” (2012, 92). In other words, celebrities matter to fans long-term because some fans identify with the celebrity as playing an important role in their lives, and this role increases with identification (see also Harrington and Bielby 2010). People become fans for

¹⁵ Riddell, Kathleen Ann. 2022. “The Celebrity Imprint: Fan-Celebrity Attachments and Religious Work Among Fans of John Lennon and Johnny Cash.” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. 34(2): 113-26.

different reasons, but in some cases, they continue their relationship with the fan object because it fills a void or need in their lives. The fan object, in this case, the celebrity, may spark an intellectual curiosity such as looking more deeply into the celebrity's catalogue of music. In other cases, a more intimate emotional bond may develop where the celebrity becomes one's child or father figure or "spirit guide" (e.g., a conduit). Whatever the reason, Lennon and Cash fandom entails a relationship with a normally distant celebrity that the fan brings closer through continued and vested interest and/or through identification. In particular, this article examines types of fan interest and attachments to the celebrity.

The central question I pose relates to our understanding of celebrities as occupying a "central" and "ultimate concern" in fans' lives and their ability to mediate our fears and anxieties (see Chidester 2005, 1). In religious studies scholar David Chidester's estimation, a consumer product does religious work "if it is engaged in negotiating what it is to be human" (2005, 18). In some cases, this interest culminates in the celebrity attaining a "religious" influence over the fan. In *Celebrity/Culture*, media theorist Ellis Cashmore (2006, 253) reveals that celebrities provide experiences for fans that "are every bit as meaningful as religious experiences." Further, Frow (1998, 204) asks "how is it that a form of religious experience can, under certain circumstances, be so central to the secular culture of mass-recording?" Frow raises a point addressed by Graves-Brown and Orange (2017, 2) in an article about the posthumous veneration of musician David Bowie that questions whether these experiences are "genuinely religious or spiritual" or simply "metaphorical." I argue that the experiences of fans of Lennon and Cash indeed bear more than a metaphorical relation. Rather, these experiences test the boundaries of what we normally consider "religious" and create a meaningful worldview inspired and informed by religion (see Geertz 1973, 90).

What do these experiences among fans of Lennon and Cash entail? What does this “drift” towards such an understanding look like and what does it say about the way fans of Lennon and Cash confront their fandom in “religious” terms? More broadly speaking, what is the relationship between religion and fandom, and how does Chidester help to explain this connection?

In tandem with “religious work,” Cornel Sandvoss’s “extension of the self,” which he details in his 2005 book, *Fans*, helps to frame how fans regard themselves in relation to the celebrity, similar to how one recognizes him- or herself in this externalization or “mirror.” Because the celebrity reflects the fan’s innermost desires, the fan internalizes the celebrity, creating the grounds of identification. Some fans identify more than others, but when this identification moves from the periphery to the centre—to employ sociologist Edward Shils’s language—it becomes an “ultimate” concern (see Shils 1975). Given that not all products of pop culture do religious work, part of our task is to determine the conditions under which the celebrity performs this function. Through such an examination, the celebrity’s role in fans’ lives—framed by the extension of the self and mediated through an “ultimate concern”—becomes clearer (Chidester 2005, 1). Bringing together these two elements reveals the complex patterns fans create to engender experiences of “religious” consequence. In doing so, I hope to add to the discussion of the relationship between fandom and religion, why this conversation has more substance than simply “parallelomania” (direct comparisons between religion and popular culture; see McCloud 2003), and why fans sometimes perform as “religious” actors.

In fan–celebrity relationships, people search within the celebrity to define themselves. In other words, they *respond* to the fan object in certain ways. When fans respond “religiously,” it means an ongoing search within the celebrity to answer the fundamental questions we have about our lives and our world and help to identify and explain our beliefs and fears. This search must

be transformative in some way and connect the fan to something greater than him- or herself. This connection may be otherworldly, but it also entails lesser forms of transcendence, most often of mundane aspects of human existence (see Cowan 2010; Löbert 2012, 134). “Religiously” is in quotation marks because it cannot quite be defined as religion, but it possesses a similarly “religious” consequence, such as a concern for ultimate meaning, order, and direction in life (see Laderman 2020, 119). This thread of “almost” or “kind of” religion runs through other texts on religion and fandom, as in historian Erika Doss’s study of Elvis fans in *Elvis Culture* (1999) and her follow-up work (2005, 69). Similar to music scholar Daniel Cavicchi’s study of Bruce Springsteen fans in *Tramps Like Us*, most fans in this study had prior exposure to a religious tradition or socialization (1998, 51). This is important because it helps to explain why fans frame their relationship with Lennon or Cash in certain ways.

One way this article addresses the most often gradual shift that takes place in fan identity is through Tanya Luhrmann’s “interpretive drift,” which she describes in her book *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, “I call this the ‘interpretive drift’—the slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone’s manner of interpreting events as they become involved with a particular activity” (1989, 312). In this process, the individual comes to accept certain beliefs as true and valid, similarly to how one would subscribe to a “theory” or “interpretation of events” (see Luhrmann 1989, 15, 312, 353). Although belief can lead to action, more commonly action leads to belief (Luhrmann 1989, 310). For example, among fans of Lennon and Cash, the process of becoming-a-fan is a good example of an action (e.g., conversion) creating lingering sentiments of identification, leading to the establishment of an extension of the self. An extension of the self engages “processes of projection and introjection” and acts as “a model of fandom as a form of self-reflection” (Sandvoss 2005, 94, 10). This is an instance where, in the extension, the beliefs

the fan has about him- or herself act back upon him or her, although the fan is “unaware that it is his own reflection” (Sandvoss 2005, 99). The effect that action has on a fan’s beliefs is directly related to this practice. According to Sandvoss, extensions of the self are not static and are subject to “ongoing transformations” (2005, 112). A focus on Sandvoss’s theory helps to clarify how fans come to identify with the celebrity, but he does not fully explain how “religion” comes to the fore. In turn, I extend Sandvoss’s explanation of the extension by a focus on how fans use the externalization to create direction, order, and purpose of “religious” consequence (see Laderman 2020, 119).

The methodology consisted of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Initially, I attended memorials and celebrations for Lennon and Cash at Strawberry Fields in New York City and at the Johnny Cash Museum in Nashville. At these locations, I met fans to interview, gathering others through snowball sampling. I did a total of 49 interviews with 37 fans (25 men and 12 women) during the fall of 2013 and the winter of 2014 and completed a second round of interviews in fall 2018 and winter and spring 2019. In the second round, I reinterviewed twelve fans, while adding seven new fans. A different set of questions composed the second round. These data supplemented the initial interviews. I interviewed fans from many different backgrounds, single, married, and divorced, and a range of occupations, from professionals, artists, and students to the unemployed. Fans ranged in age from eighteen to their seventies. Fans were disproportionately White, with relatively few ethnic minorities. A possible limitation of the study is that I recruited fans for the second set of interviews from the original sample, rather than seeking a new sample.

The reasons I chose John Lennon and Johnny Cash are rather simple. I needed dead celebrities with sufficiently dedicated fan bases for me to have access to fans to interview. It

would be ideal if they had a gathering place, such as Strawberry Fields, in Central Park, New York City or Nashville, Tennessee, for Johnny Cash. These gathering places served as initial locations to meet fans to interview and to conduct participant observation.

The Role of the Celebrity among Fans of John Lennon and Johnny Cash

A Sense of Discovery

The data on John Lennon and Johnny Cash exhibit varying accounts of the celebrity–fan relationship. In this section, I discuss some of the ways fans of Lennon and Cash conceive of their relationship with the celebrity figures. First, I examine types of fan–celebrity relationships where the celebrity does not do religious work or does so in a limited sense, followed by examples of a more developed emotional bond. Establishing this comparison will highlight factors associated with the celebrity becoming a central or “ultimate concern” in the fan’s life (Chidester 2005, 1).

I had several male fans indicate that the Beatles and Johnny Cash piqued their curiosity, causing them to seek and to continually discover new information. Beatles fan Melvin called this “a process of discovery.” “I like developing my inventory of Beatles Trivia,” he relays. When I asked Melvin to tell me about the nature of his connection with John Lennon and the Beatles, he told me that “[He] is always learning something new. John was a very interesting individual, and all the stories that go along with him. The music and John really inspired my creativity as an artist and it’s his creativity I love most” (Interview January 3, 2019).

The sense of discovery Melvin conveys is also shared by Johnny Cash fan Tyler. A stage actor, Tyler recalled hearing Cash growing up but never made much of him. He was working at a

record store during downtime from the stage when a co-worker put on Johnny Cash. Tyler recounts, “He put it on, and I was pretty much hooked.” Tyler bought the album that day, followed by *American Recordings*, *Unchained*, and the Sun era recordings and “any books I could get my hands on.” “The obsession began!” Tyler exclaimed (Interview March 17, 2019).

A first-generation Beatles fan, who, like many first-generation fans, saw the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan show in 1964, Mike indicated that “The first time I saw them, it was in our living room. I was sitting on the floor with my younger sister.” “I just thought,” Mike continues, “‘Wow! I wish I could be them!’ That’s when I got heavily into them.” Mike and his sister both developed a passion for journalism, a passion he claims was heavily influenced by his interest in the Beatles, “We were living in Boston, going to private school, and we used to listen to Bruce Bradley on WBZ. He was a big Beatles fan and knew a lot about them. I really made a connection” (Interview February 13, 2019). This is an example where curiosity about the Beatles helped to establish Mike’s self-development, ultimately culminating in his career as a journalist.

The experience of Melvin, Tyler, and Mike highlights how some fans come to pursue John Lennon and Johnny Cash through an initial curiosity, one maintained through a sense of discovery. Cashmore indicates that “being an active player” means to be “a creator as well as consumer of celebrities” (2006, 77). Through interactive play, an important component in the fan–celebrity relationship, these fans help to make the celebrity more dynamic. The celebrity becomes a source of inspiration, transforming both the fan and the celebrity in the process. These fans develop an identity independent of the celebrity, retaining a greater sense of self, independent of the extension (Sandvoss 2005) compared with fans, discussed below, who retain more of a sense of dependence upon the celebrity to complete their identity. “For the object of fandom,” writes Sandvoss, “to be experienced as part of the fan’s fabric of self, fans need to

build an intense identification with their object of fandom” (2005, 101). With Melvin, Tyler, and Mike, the celebrity operates as a catalyst in their lives to developing a greater, yet independent self.

Some evidence from fans suggests how the celebrity functions in more minor, but still important ways. For example, Martin and Daniel describe Johnny Cash as a model for the way they live their lives or at times emulate him. Cash’s imperfect and hardscrabble nature is part of this identification. Martin suggests that Cash taught him some important life lessons, “There are things about him that I try to live up to,” Martin begins. He continues by emphasizing the “importance of having pride in yourself and forgiving yourself.” “I feel that I learned a lot from his music and that you can see it,” he concludes (Interview April 25, 2014). In much the same way, Daniel also looked to Cash in the development of his values, “He went through a lot of hard times,” he suggests. “He persevered. He had one of the most generous hearts I’ve seen in a human. He was very intelligent, very well read, very open minded. So, I like to think that in some way I possess those traits,” Daniel implies (Interview April 18, 2014).

Martin and Daniel suggest a more limited role and presence of the celebrity in their lives. This quality relates to religious studies scholar Gary Laderman’s argument that identification with celebrities helps us to formulate moral values (2009, 73). Similarly, Fraser and Brown describe fan–celebrity contact as “reconstruct[ing] [fans’] own attitudes, values, or behaviors in response to the images of people they admire, real and imagined” (2002, 187). The celebrity does not solely develop fans’ values—there are more important sources of socialization—but fans easily recognize and embrace this point of identification. Here, the celebrity is not merely a catalyst, but the mirror of identification begins to form, even if the extension is limited at this stage. For the extension to develop more fully, the fan must not only establish an emotional

connection with the celebrity, but recognize him- or herself in his or her image. Identification, according to Sandvoss, stems not from “the fact that, objectively, [the fan object] is like us, but is instead based on the projection of our own image” (2005, 104). Before we continue this discussion, it is important to highlight the circumstances surrounding when the celebrity does not do religious work.

Fans such as Melvin, Dale, and Edward do not subscribe to this emulation and instead turn inward to understand themselves. Melvin remarks, “I can’t really say so because I can’t see myself identifying with Lennon or any other musical celebrity. I’m a person that believes in being myself.” “I’ve seen too many people try to make themselves like these people and it’s gotten to a point where it’s so ridiculous,” he emphasizes strongly (Interview December 15, 2013).

Johnny Cash fans Dale and Edward, share similar sentiments. “I’m not an obsessed fan,” Dale indicates. “I once talked to a man who Johnny Cash meant more to him than his own family. He committed suicide after Johnny Cash died” (Interview June 9, 2014). Johnny Cash impersonator Edward recalls, “On stage, yes. Off stage, I try to live my own life.” Edward felt that he “Can’t live up to the person Johnny Cash was. In the twelve years I’ve been doing this, I’ve never heard a fan say a bad thing about him” (Interview March 5, 2014).

While these fans admire Johnny Cash as a musician and in some instances for the way he conducts himself as a person, it ends there. These fans do not interpret Cash’s role in their life as extending beyond a more qualified type of admiration and emulation. In the absence of religious work, we find that these fans do not develop the celebrity as an extension to understand themselves. Rather, their identity is confined to the self alone. For the celebrity to do religious

work, the fan must have some sort of dependence upon the celebrity as an extension to complete his or her identity. This does not mean that the growth of the extension is consistent in the fan's life; rather, it recedes at times, only to grow more prominent later. Fans who find the celebrity functioning in more minor ways in their lives and/or through a pique in curiosity tend to be male in my sample of Lennon and Cash fans. This association is most often a stereotype in fan studies, but in the case of my sample, it also happens to be true (see Stevenson 2018, 152). For example, in fandom women are often associated with more emotional fan activities, such as fan vidding (making videos) and fan fiction, such as slash (sexualized fan fiction; see Jenkins 2007).

Other scholarship on fandom and gender discusses how women and men tend to associate with certain types of fandoms. For example, women occupy positions in marginalized fandoms such as daytime soaps, and men take part in more masculinized fan associations, such as sports (see Duffett 2013, 193–99; Harrington and Bielby 1995; Jakubowska, Antonowicz, and Kossakowski 2020). This is an important aspect of fan studies and requires further attention from scholars.

For fans who relate (though not necessarily identifying or doing so in a qualified way) to Lennon and Cash through a sense of discovery, the extension of self is not fully developed. The mirror does not focus enough to provide a definitive reflection, nor is the fans' sense of self reliant on the celebrity. The celebrity's role in the fan's life is that of intrigue rather than an integral factor. These fans display a self that is independent of the celebrity's influence. For them, the celebrity is a source of fascination rather than identity. Because of this compartmentalization of the celebrity in the fan's life, religious work does not come into play. However, the orientation of these fans, with the exception of Melvin, Dale, and Edward, may drift in this direction, depending upon further development of the extension. We do not have the

data to infer the circumstances under which this might take place, but fans discussed below provide a greater understanding of this shift. In the section below, I detail fan–celebrity relationships that possess greater intimacy.

The Celebrity Imprint

Beatles fan Ruth described the effect John Lennon has on her life as “an imprint,” “He was just like a baby duck and his mother.” The qualities she admires in Lennon, such as his intelligence and quick wittedness, she also finds in her husband. The celebrity as an imprint has a lasting effect on the fan, so much so that they continually search for the celebrity’s qualities in other people and dimensions of their life. Ruth became a fan of the Beatles at age 14, an age she describes as “an imprint” and “like tunnel vision.” “I had friends who were 14 in 1964 [when the Beatles hit],” Ruth began, “There’s something about 14—it’s an imprint, an effect. Rock stars say this too, similar to Paul McCartney saying he heard Elvis at 14.” I continued to question her, “So, in terms of John’s intelligence and his charm, is this the way you incorporate him into your life—your belief system?” I defined belief system to the fans interviewed for this study as the way Lennon or Cash operates in their lives and the effect he has, although they may have their own understanding of this. Ruth continued, “In the past, at 14 for example, I couldn’t have described it, but now, yes. I think his intelligence is a sexy quality. It’s an attribute that showed up repeatedly in my life. As I said, I saw it in my husband” (Interview December 19, 2018).

Michelle, who takes her name from the Beatles song of the same name, sees Lennon as one of her children. Michelle has one son, but she has “always had children living in our home.” She claims that “John has always been a boy that lives with us. He helps fill in those gaps in our

lives.” Michelle characterizes “John [as] one of my children. Every time I hear him sing, I fall in love. When I see his picture, it makes me whole” (Interview February 3, 2019).

Michelle is an example where the celebrity’s role in her life is much more developed than for fans discussed thus far. Lennon operates as a proxy for the extension in every aspect of Michelle’s life, from being one of her children to her astounding dedication to Lennon as a subject of her research and writing, which she feels called by God to do, “It’s just that you know what you’re here to do,” she tells me of her research on Lennon. “And I’m sure you know why you were born and what you’re supposed to do. That’s what I’m supposed to do,” she continues (Interview March 9, 2014). Here I depart from Cashmore’s conception of a more limited effect on the fan’s life. He suggests that “for the most part, entertainment doesn’t prompt us to modify ourselves in any substantive way” (2006, 9). Fans such as Michelle, and those described below, illustrate that this simply is not true. For these fans, the celebrity is an indelible part of their lives and a force shaping their selves.

While all fans admire Lennon and Cash, most readily recognize their flaws. When I asked Michelle if she emulates Lennon in any way, she said, “No. I hope not. John was pretty difficult” (Interview February 17, 2014; see also Elliott 1999; Goldman 2001 [1988]). As Johnny Cash fan Martin indicates about a book written by Vivian Cash (Cash’s first wife) and their “torrid letter writing love affair” during Cash’s time stationed in Germany, the book contained a letter where Johnny used the “n-word.” Subsequently, one day Martin noticed the publication of the letter on the AOL server and felt it would “significantly damage” Cash’s image. Yet he discovered,

Two weeks later, I never heard another word. Nothing. Now, why is that? That's because that didn't fit the image of what the public wanted to see about this man. So, it didn't have any traction. It didn't stick. People wanted him to be a god-fearing, patriotic, rebel rousing man, but not a racist, and he wasn't a racist, but he was raised in the South, and they have certain beliefs in 1932. So, it gets to the point of how much are we played by the icon machine. (Interview April 25, 2014).

Fans in my sample readily recognize flaws inherent in the celebrity image, but, as these pages reveal, this does not affect its appeal. Similarly, at its conception, celebrity is an aura intended to entertain and entice, but also mask a dark underside of calculated moves meant to maximize profits. Fame hides as much as it reveals, but in no way does this lessen the intensity of emotion and attachment fans feel for celebrity. Sociologist Joshua Gamson (1994) found in an early landmark study of celebrity that even though fans are aware of the manipulated construction of celebrity and fame, it does not reduce the possibility of identification with celebrity and the attachment that ensues (68–75).

Johnny Cash fan Diane recounts a harder-to-describe aspect of her relationship with Johnny Cash, “When I was in my addictions, I thought about him a lot. And I didn't know where his life was going at the time. When I sobered up, he was back in his addictions” (Interview May 30, 2014). In such examples, the religious work relates to the celebrity providing a framework in which to interpret experience and channel desire through concerns of ultimate and central meaning in her life, but Diane is a more complicated example. She relates,

I did some really weird things. I wrote a letter asking if I could come for Christmas. I was in Knoxville, and I didn't have any family then. My children were all in Mississippi. I was lonely and I just asked, you know, I've sobered up and I'm straight and I'm not writing those weird letters anymore, can I come and spend Christmas with you? (Interview May 30, 2014).

Such a sentiment drives us to consider the complexity of the fan–celebrity relationship. In cases such as that of Diane, where fan experience mirrors that of the celebrity, the celebrity provides a more intimate and identifiable experience (see Sandvoss 2005). The desire to spend Christmas with him goes beyond the parasocial into a collapse of boundaries with Cash’s celebrity. A parasocial relationship with a celebrity occurs when there is a one-sided fascination with the celebrity (see Brown 2018; Cashmore 2006, 83–4). This relationship occurs because the celebrity is not normally aware that the fan exists. Thus, the sense of intimacy is cultivated in the fan’s mind (see Rojek 2001; Ward 2011, 2020). For Diane, Johnny Cash is so intimately entwined with her life that he becomes part of her yet operates as an extension of her identity (see Sandvoss 2005). She is always searching for a part of herself in him. This collapse and move beyond the parasocial occurs because Diane actually met Cash in 1974. Diane recalls, “He had his arm around my waist. And when we got through taking the pictures, he hugged me ... and leaned down and gave me a kiss that was right at the edge of my mouth.” “And I just thought,” Diane sighed, “I am in heaven,’ you know. Nothing can ever surpass this, other than my children being born” (Interview May 30, 2014).

Increasing over the years, her desire helps to sustain the intimate structuring of this relationship. This is particularly relevant because Diane originally identified with Cash as a father figure when her father died at age 14. Diane illustrates how she felt a loss of family in her life and how Cash came to play a supporting role through a distant yet intimate figure,

I just felt a part of him. Especially back then, because I was still recovering. I was pretty sick when I went into treatment, I was very sick. And it took a while to straighten out. I went looking all my life for a family. My dad died. My mother was not ... she did the best she could with what she had to work with, but she didn't know how to be a mother. Not really. So, I went searching for one ... And I picked him to lean on, when I was 14 and when I was drinking, especially, and drugging. And when I got sober, I didn't need the comfort, like I did then, but there was still that love and admiration (Interview May 30, 2014).

In Diane, we find a fan who has more of a dependence on the celebrity, not only through her addiction, but also earlier in life when she lost her father at age 14. Diane cultivated dependence on the celebrity of Johnny Cash when other more human supports, such as her family, failed her. In her struggles, Diane mirrored Cash and the distance between his celebrity and herself collapsed in her mind, making him much more relatable and thus accessible. As she tells us, she wrote him asking to spend Christmas because she “just felt part of him.”

Diane is a good illustration of how fans develop ties with the celebrity and how these ties change and sometimes unravel according to both internal and external events in the fan's life. Sometimes the celebrity maintains greater presence than other times. The only constant in these relationships is that the celebrity is there when the fan needs them. Cash, through his celebrity, does help Diane transcend her addiction and difficulties in life as a sometime intimate paternal figure. This is indeed a quality of “religiosity” of the relationship between Diane and Johnny Cash. Through collapsing the distance between herself and Cash's celebrity, first when her father died, and later when she struggled with addiction, Diane was oriented towards a transcendence of these limitations. Johnny Cash is very much a “home” (see Sandvoss 2005, 64).

When an Emotional Bond Becomes “Religious”

A John Lennon fan, Sarah shares a remarkable bond with the late Beatle. She calls Lennon her “spirit guide,” and this intuition dates back to when she was a child, “I always had this intuition as a child.” Sarah told me she realized this in retrospect when she began writing her childhood memories as a “therapeutic exercise, and remembered some of the intuitive/psychic incidents that had occurred.” She indicates that these memories provide some perspective later on when “the connection to John Lennon began” (Interview December 5, 2018).

Sarah traces these events to the death of her father, when she was eleven years old, on a field trip with her class and “a field of energy closed in around [her].” “There were numerous things like that that led me to later realize I had some psychic ability. I did a lot of reading when I was an adult to learn more about it,” she adds. These psychic feelings continued as she got older and her “invisible friends” became “spirit friends and protectors.” “When John Lennon began to connect with me,” Sarah starts, “In my mind I could see his auric field and I also saw bright blue orbs sometimes when I meditated with him.” Lennon, she claims, was the entry point to the auric field, “It was definitely something that I didn’t see; until John came in. I don’t see them normally the way some people can” (Interview December 5, 2018).

I asked Sarah what exactly she meant by a “an auric field.” She claimed that “It’s hard to describe, but an auric field is an energy that extends beyond the physical body.” Her thoughts on what consisted of a “spirit guide” are also related to her contact with Lennon,

A “spirit guide” is a term that I became familiar with when John began connecting with me. Since he seemed to be there so strongly, sometimes very mischievously if I tried to ignore him (like his songs coming on the radio left and right, or one of his pictures falling over and startling me or feeling a physical tap on my head). I started reading a lot about connecting with those in the afterlife and realized that’s what he was. (Interview December 5, 2018).

Sarah indicates that “spirit guides “are there to “help you, protect you, and guide you.” Sarah actively sought out New Age literature and concepts to better understand her connection with Lennon. One such example of this is her belief in synchronicity, “Synchronicity is a very prevalent sign of his presence. For example, just today I lit my candle in front of John’s picture, which I use to talk to him.” “Two minutes after,” she claims, “I get an email from a fan of John’s asking me about a book that happened to be about John’s afterlife” (Interview December 5, 2018).

Sarah traces the event to the day she asked Lennon to be her “spirit guide”, “I stood in the den, put my hands up, as though I was in church—I was so nervous! And when I asked him, ‘John, would you be my Spirit Guide?’” Sarah revealed that

Suddenly a bright ray of morning sunlight came bursting through the window, filling the room, and his picture that I was looking at—with light. I suppose you would understand then, why tears came down my cheeks. It was a very emotional experience, and some would say, a religious experience. It was very powerful. (Interview December 5, 2018).

Sarah’s inspiration by and then dedication to Lennon is an example of the celebrity providing “religious,” rather than material rewards. In the construction of the fan–celebrity relationship as “religious,” Sarah goes beyond the celebrity or fandom as similar to religion in metaphor (see also Stevenson 2009). Indeed, her connection concerns religious work. In this instance, religious work functions more in terms of understanding the celebrity figure as an “ultimate concern” in

the fan's life (Chidester 2005, 1). The celebrity acts as an ultimate figure in the sense the fan turns to them for overarching meaning in their lives, helping to frame their day-to-day reality. The celebrity also helps fans to negotiate their identity in relation to this orientation. The "religious" web of this relationship connects Sarah to a greater, larger cause.

In the establishment of a "religious" connection with Lennon during a fever dream sequence that occurred the day Lennon died (December 8, 1980), Sarah channels this connection towards her vocation as a writer. She indicates that the spiritual experience she had with Lennon on the day he died "was one of those searing experiences that hit me like lightning and that lasted." Long before she wrote about Lennon, she felt drawn to a cause in his service. This cause is to reveal, as she says, the "truth about him" (Interview January 31, 2014).

Over a span of twenty years, Sarah built this relationship with Lennon, grounded in its origination, but broadened by its purpose. Lennon became an "identity-sustaining self narrative," for Sarah (Sandvoss 2005, 112). Her life took on a new direction and new course of meaning when she had the experience with Lennon the day he died (see also Elliott 2018). As Sandvoss suggests, "It is, then, precisely because objects of fandom can be so radically appropriated by fans to service their own self-reflection, that they gain the ability to profoundly shape the fan" (2005, 112–13). Sarah's story illustrates a less commonly found fan experience (at least among the informants), where the celebrity not only performs religious work, but goes beyond that into a form of mediumship and channelling (see Caterine 2015).

In Sarah and Diane, we find a more involved and intimate function of the celebrity in the fan's life. These women exhibit a nuance of degrees of fan-celebrity attachment, differing origination of this attachment, and diverse factors that sustain this attachment. In each instance,

however, the celebrity retains its prominence in their lives through its ability to organize (in part) both their understanding of themselves and their day-to-day lives. Although we do not know all of the reasons that the fan–celebrity relationship achieves such stratification, we cannot persuasively argue that these are the only types of relationships. As well, the data do not fully capture the extent of this range. One reason for this limitation is my focus on dead celebrity fandom and the fact I interviewed fans within a set time period. While fans may express the same core content in follow-up interviews, they emphasize different aspects of the relationship at different times.

The range of celebrity fan relationships—from religious work to model of moral values to absence of this dynamic—from Sarah to Martin to Melvin—helps to display some examples of the spectrum of fan–celebrity relationships. One way our interpretation of the role of celebrities in fan’s lives maintains importance is through religion as a structuring device. “Celebrity worship is not a religion,” writes theologian Pete Ward (2020) in *Celebrity Worship*, “but it points towards the prevailing sensibility of the self, and it is this sacred self that is religious” (27). Ward attributes the “significance” or celebrity to “this much larger shift in religious life” (27). Celebrity sparks the “religious imagination” and helps fans to construct their worlds with meaningful “religious” sensibilities (see Cowan 2018). This is one reason the comparison between religion and fandom should remain open to scholars looking for ways to articulate the fan experience. In particular, the range of fan experience helps to reveal the role of the celebrity as an emotive figure and the circumstances that generate this emotion. The celebrity is an impetus to the fans developing a part of themselves, something they achieve through their continued identification with Lennon or Cash.

Conclusion

In “Religion and the Pathologization of Fandom,” Andrew Crome (2015) writes that, “The idea that fandom is a form of pseudo-religion ... makes assumptions not only about what fandom is like but also about the nature of religion” (130). Crome characterizes this pathologization as to “suggest that religion is emotional rather than rational, that it becomes the focus of an individual’s world to the exclusion of all else” (130). Similarly, Eric Bain Selbo, in “Ecstasy, Joy, and Sorrow, The Religious Experience of Southern College Football,” indicates that “Certainly religion is more than just emotional experiences” (2008, 6). What I have demonstrated among fans of John Lennon and Johnny Cash, and the data confirm, is that fandom gains a “religious” foundation when the fan makes a significant emotional connection with the celebrity, engendering purpose, order, and direction, but it is not “to the exclusion of all else” (Crome 2015, 130). An extension of the self is in part an emotional bond the fan makes with the celebrity, but it is very much a rational connection as well, at least among fans of Lennon and Cash. Nothing makes more sense to them. This is not to say that religion and fandom are one in the same, but that they create “similarities of experience,” to quote Cavicchi (1998, 51). These spaces of belief and practice establish locations where fans turn to resolve questions about their identities and anxieties associated with life that their involvement with organized religion does not fully answer.

Luhrmann’s “interpretive drift” sheds some light on how fans move from becoming-a-fan to a solidified fan identity. The shift in identity among fans of Lennon and Cash reveals that as the extension of the self morphs into a recognizable entity—casting its reflection—the fan comes to understand the celebrity as influencing his or her reality. Fans move from a passing interest to cultivating intimate and long-lasting relationships with the celebrity. The reflection acts back

upon the fan, so that he or she does not understand the celebrity as a uniquely separate reality, yet this relationship is one the fan cultivates with him- or herself (see also Berger and Luckmann 1966, 131). This is how, for example, Sarah came to understand Lennon as her “spirit guide,” Michelle as one of her children, and Diane to connect to Cash as an object of compelling desire. This yearning for the celebrity drifts into “religious” territory because it becomes an “ultimate concern,” as with religious work (see Chidester 2005)

As religious studies scholar Douglas Cowan (2018) indicates, many questions seen to be in the purview of religion, such as “meaning and purpose,” “truth and beauty,” “are all *properly human questions*” (6; emphasis in original). It is the centralization of the celebrity in the fan’s life, their emotional *and* rational connection, that spills into the “religious.” In the study of religion and popular culture, understanding parallels between fandom and religion helps scholars to understand both fandom and religion in a more precise way.

In *Tramps like Us*, music scholar Daniel Cavicchi (1998) wrote, “Fandom is a process of being” (59). Beatles scholar Candy Leonard (2016) calls this way of being “Beatleness.” Fans mark identity, especially one with a “religious” underpinning, by turning their gaze towards the celebrity. In turn, this reinforces their sense of self. Fans pursue the “religious” self through understanding the celebrity as an “ultimate concern,” at the heart of religious work (Chidester 2005, 1). While fans ask human questions of the celebrity, such as through an explanation of their beliefs and fears, these questions become entwined with “religiosity” when the celebrity helps them to transcend the limits of their existence. This can be through escape from the mundane realities of life or something more life-changing, as seen with Diane and Sarah. While we cannot equivocally say that all fandom is “religious”—I have presented in detail different ways fans identify—those that seek such identification do so through the extension.

Fans who pursue Lennon and Cash from the perspective of a sense of discovery do not do religious work because the celebrity does not possess such a prominence in defining their identity and also because the role of the celebrity is external to the fan rather than an extension of him or her. The roots of fan attachments are in becoming-a-fan stories, sometimes characterized as a conversion, whether sudden or gradual (see Cavicchi 1998, James [1912] 2002; Stevenson 2018, 152). These relationships develop over time, across the fan-span and in proportion to other factors such as identity, pre-existing “religiosity” (e.g., the fan has religious socialization), and continued interest. Nearly all fans in my sample were raised in a religious tradition, although some more decidedly so. For example, Sarah was raised in the Lutheran church and later the Church of Religious Science. Through providing a framework of interpretation, this socialization influenced her pursuit of a “religious” relationship with Lennon, and especially his function as a “spirit guide.” According to the data, the celebrity doing religious work occurs more readily when the fan has been exposed to religious socialization. Consequently, the “interpretive drift” of religious work takes place when the celebrity maintains him or herself as an extension of self. As such, it is not necessarily a drift from an absence of “religiosity” towards one, but from religious socialization to the celebrity doing religious work. The range of fan–celebrity relationships among fans of John Lennon and Johnny Cash reveals a tendency to do religious work when the fan constructs the self through the extension as a central, though not necessarily consistent, preoccupation. Religious work and indeed the extension of the self highlight ways in which celebrity fans drift into “religious” territory.

Interlude

We saw in the last manuscript that fans of John Lennon and Johnny Cash experience a lasting, though not continuous relationship with them, that there is diversity in these relationships and, for some fans, the celebrity may become an “ultimate” concern. But how and why do these people become fans in the first place? What instigates this transition, why is it sometimes called a “conversion,” and how do fans develop their identity in relation to the celebrity? In addition, why does a religious understanding of this moment permeate becoming-a-fan experiences? These are the questions that inform the next article, which appears in the *Journal of Fandom Studies*.

The idea of this paper is the earliest in its origination of the three articles. That is because, as Cavicchi, Hills, and Duffett indicate, there is a pressing need to understand how people become fans, but also because these data are some of the richest I collected. Indeed, Hills called becoming-a-fan the “elephant in the room” in fan studies (2014, 9). These are also some of the richest data I collected because fans were eager to talk about their earliest experiences with the celebrity. As discussed in this article, people become fans of Lennon and Cash for different reasons but deep down the individual identifies with something, such as a value or values, expressed by the celebrity. It is in this moment or these moments that identification happens and, as Cornel Sandvoss so well articulated, the celebrity comes to operate as an “extension of the self.” The fan may or may not be aware of this process, but this concept helps to explain not only why people become fans in the first place, but why they maintain their fandom often over long periods. Like Cavicchi, I utilize William James’s discussion of conversion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* to capture the experience of a sudden and life-changing point of contact. An abrupt moment of conversion, however, is less common than a gradual shift in identification

and identity expressed by several fans of Lennon or Cash. Either way, such a change transforms the fan as they encounter this new reality.

“My Whole World Shifted’, Identity and Transformation in Becoming-a-Fan Narratives”¹⁶

Based on a multi-site ethnography and participant interviews with fans of The Beatles (primarily John Lennon) and Johnny Cash, this article discusses transformational accounts of becoming-a-fan narratives. Fan interviews took place during two intervals, in the fall of 2013 and winter 2014 and in winter and spring 2019. A primary focus is Sandvoss’s conception of the “extension of the self” concerning the object of a fan’s devotion. Extensions of the self operate to reaffirm the fan’s sense of self and inform identification with the celebrity. To clarify this concept, this article considers “becoming-a-fan” narratives as a way to illustrate how the self works in the lives of fans, and how a turn towards fan identity helps to refocus a previous emphasis on becoming-a-fan as similar to religious conversion. I argue fans of The Beatles and Cash relate to one or more values embedded in the celebrity and, in combination with socialization to the fan object, transition to a fan identity. Harrington and Bielby’s notion of *texistence* helps to explain what maintains this identity over the life course. In conclusion, I consider whether this newfound identity reveals an important dynamic about the way people transition to fandom.

Keywords, celebrity, extension of the self, conversion, fan-span, The Beatles, Johnny Cash

Introduction

Becoming-a-fan narratives—or accounts of ways people enter into fandom—establish a pivotal event in the lives of fans and provide another source of debate among scholars (see, especially, Duffett 2013; Hills 2013). Fan testimony reveals important ways that people enter into fandom, and these ways capture some of the reasons people pursue fandom. In each instance, this “conversion,” as some scholars call it, revolves around an orientation fans pursue based on several factors, including socialization to the fan object. As a process of learning “supportive attitudes” and “behaviors,” socialization is ongoing across the fan-span; in other words, the

¹⁶ Riddell, Kathleen Ann. 2021. “‘My Whole World Shifted’: Identity and Transformation in Becoming-a-Fan Narratives.” *Journal of Fandom Studies*. 9(3): 195-211.

length of time someone is a fan (see Van Maanen 1975, 207). Socialization is not the sole influence but is indicative of how fans form early predispositions to the fan object triggered, in many cases, by internal, situational, and environmental factors. A look into becoming-a-fan narratives helps to clarify what is often an entry point into discussions of fan identity. This clarification takes place through revealing how previous scholarship has dealt with these narratives and how new avenues of interpretation occur through examining data among fans of The Beatles and Johnny Cash. The significance of becoming-a-fan narratives as an entry point occurs because identity shifts the moment or moments one becomes a fan. When this shift takes place, a lifelong attachment to the fan object develops, altering the fan's life course through establishing a "contact point" aiding the transition of one stage of life to the next. Here, the celebrity helps to form a continuous, though never constant, lens of interpretation through which to filter life experience.

This article consists of accounts of how fans of The Beatles and Johnny Cash entered into and maintained their fandom, often over long periods. The framework of fan studies scholar Cornel Sandvoss' "extension of the self"—a kind of alternate idea and mirror of oneself in the fan object—is considered to explain how people become fans. Fans search within the celebrity to define themselves in ways not dissimilar to the process of conversion, as some scholars argue (see Cavicchi 1998, 53-59) engendering transformative experiences and establishing a new and exciting focus. Transformation takes place not only at the inception of fandom, but also because "[the fan] changes *how they see* their identity' and because they recognize themselves in the fan object (Duffett 2013, 155; emphasis in original). This object becomes a transitional piece helping the fan to fulfill a new identity. This is accomplished in a myriad of ways—from early socialization, to a sudden change, to a more gradual move towards fandom—detailed in this

article. While work has been done to help explain the similarities between conversion and becoming-a-fan, I focus on how fans establish and develop a new identity at the initiation of their relationship with the fan object (see, especially, Cavicchi 1998, 51-57).

I open with becoming-a-fan narratives from the data and follow with a consideration of this data concerning identity and the self's extension. This article suggests initiation into fan status using data from a sample of fans of The Beatles (primarily John Lennon) and Johnny Cash. It does not suggest this is the only way fans transition to fandom nor does it relay that these are the only reasons. For example, one commonly cited reason fans transition to fandom is that they maintain a fan-centric identity, moving from one fan object to the next over their lifetime (see, especially, Hills 2014, 19). Another hypothesized, though disputed, reason is fan contagion, meaning one achieves fan status based on the influence of another fan or fans (see Duffett 2013, 125-26).

Every individual maintains constructs (i.e., the extension of the self) in other aspects of his or her life, with his or her roles and even with other media. The celebrity strikes the fan as novel and fascinating because deep within him- or herself, the fan attunes to a particular value or values the celebrity embodies. The application of these categories happens both consciously and unconsciously. It is conscious in the sense that some fans search for meaning in the celebrity, and unconscious because they do not always realize they are looking inside themselves when they do so. The meanings constructed are never singular. Many meanings originate from both the text (celebrity) and the fan (see Sandvoss 2005). The diversity of these texts directly informs the self-reflection in the sense that this diversity increases the chances the fan recognizes him- or herself in the celebrity. As Johnny Cash fan Robert revealed, every fan has his or her own "personal Johnny" (Interview March 9, 2014).

The fan relates to the performance of the celebrity. In the words of media theorist Richard Dyer, celebrities act out ways of being human in society (2013 [2004],15-16). Sandvoss explains that “the first and foremost audience for the performance of fans is the fan him- or herself” (2005, 98). In both its conception and performance, the relationship between the celebrity and the fan helps explain how we think and act and how thoughts and actions unfold in society (see McLuhan 1964 & McLuhan & Fiore 1967, 26). As music scholar, Daniel Cavicchi indicates in *Tramps Like Us*, “Fandom is a process of being” (1998, 59). Cavicchi discusses conversion experiences among Bruce Springsteen fans acknowledging the paucity of research on this aspect of fandom. In “Returning to ‘Becoming-a-Fan’ Stories,” fan studies scholar Matt Hills quotes cultural studies scholar Mark Duffett (2013, 124) as saying that these narratives are the “elephant in the room” in fan studies (2014, 9).

I consider the fandoms surrounding The Beatles (primarily John Lennon) and Johnny Cash to be a form of celebrity music fandom. This type of fandom is about music fans centered on an enigmatic and charismatic individual, the celebrity (Duffett 2014a, 9; Vermorel 2011 [1985]). Music is the instigator or trigger, but it is the celebrity that becomes the ultimate focus among fans of Lennon and Cash.

The research methodology used is a case study approach with multi-site participant observation at Lennon and Cash memorial events and follow-up interviews. These events take place on the day of their death and their birthday. The selection of participants for interviews occurred first through convenience then through snowball sampling. Interviews took place during fall 2013 and winter 2014, and winter and spring 2019, with a total of 49 interviews (25 men and 12 women). I contacted more men than women, but was also referred to more male fans. A second round of interviews was deemed necessary to supplement data from the first

round. Twelve fans were re-interviewed, while adding seven new fans. A different set of questions comprised the second round. Recruitment of new fans occurred through fans from the original sample. This type of recruitment remains a limitation of the study given random sampling was not used or a new sample was not sought. As a result, there may be other types of Lennon and Cash fans out there that are not represented in this study.

Strawberry Fields consists of the Imagine Mosaic—a reference to John Lennon’s famous song—surrounded by a relatively small courtyard. The mosaic is at the centre of a convergence of paths, close to Central Park West. On anniversary days, such as Lennon’s birthday on October 9 and the day of his death, December 8 (in 2013), fans gather to sing songs with the accompaniment of a plastic Beatles band (a term used in the music business to describe changing or rotating members of a band). Some fans spend the day at Strawberry Fields, but many come and go as the day progresses. The mood is peaceful and welcoming, a chance to commemorate Lennon with other fans who share a common love of the late Beatle.

The format of Johnny Cash’s birthday, which takes place in Nashville, Tennessee on February 26 (I attended in 2014), is quite different from Strawberry Fields as it is much more structured. The event takes place in a space adjacent to the Johnny Cash Museum, just off Broadway Avenue in the heart of Nashville. The day is replete with fan trivia, guest speakers with expertise on Cash, and live musical performances, including one by Johnny Cash’s son, John Carter.

The ethnic composition of fans at these dead celebrity events was disproportionately White, with relatively few ethnic minorities. At John Lennon events, the ages ranged from young child to older adult. At Johnny Cash events, adults were much older with relatively few under

forty years of age. For example, the varied age demographic at John Lennon events may relate to the multi-generational appeal of The Beatles as well as Yoko Ono's active promotion of John Lennon. The fandoms encompassed a wide cross-section of people. There were a number of married people, some single, and a few divorcees. Many fans had children. Most were college-educated. I had interviewed fans who were unemployed, students, retired, artists, and professionals.

Multipositionality informs my relationship to the research data. Technically, my background and knowledge of popular culture would make me an insider. Rather, I prefer the approach of Henry Jenkins and the academic-fan or 'aca-fan' (2013 [1992], 5-8; see also Booth 2013, 121-23 and Ford 2014, 61). The academic fan straddles both worlds by having an overt presence as a researcher and awareness of the power dynamics implicit in these concerns, but also engaging participants as a fan. In many instances, I felt I put participants at ease by participating in fan activities and being aware of the cultural reference points of the John Lennon and Johnny Cash fandoms. In other words, my knowledge of popular culture undoubtedly enhanced my ability to collect data for this project. I made fans comfortable by being able to understand their points of view (see also Cavicchi 1998; Jenkins [1992] 2013; 2006). In some cases, however, I felt like an outsider. For example, there were instances fans appeared disinterested in talking to me after I told them I was a researcher. On occasion, fans assumed I was not "in the know," and felt it necessary to make certain references clear. At no time, however, did I experience hostility toward my presence as a researcher. For the most part, I simply took action to "be myself" and to listen attentively and with respect.

At the end of each interview, I would ask, "Is there anyone else you suggest I speak with?" I found the fans to whom I was referred tended to have a certain expertise in Lennon or

Cash, to such a degree that it seemed as though I was accessing an inner circle of fans. The fans I met at fan events, especially Strawberry Fields, were dedicated to their fandom, but it did not become a more focused pursuit of John Lennon or Johnny Cash to such an extent that it enveloped their life. Both the Beatles and Johnny Cash fan community—at least what I witnessed at Strawberry Fields and in Nashville, and among my sample of fans more generally—engage one another either in fan events or through scholarship and/or media on the celebrity. Through interaction with other fans, the fan community creates a body of work (e.g., scholarship) and supportive realm equal to that of the celebrity’s role in their lives. The fans to whom I was referred thought highly of other fans’ work and often take part in collaborative projects about Lennon and Cash as well as participate in conferences. Very few fans interviewed experience their fandom in isolation from other fans, although this phenomenon exists in fandom more broadly (see Hills 2002, 86 and Kelly 2004, 10-11).

Hills wrote in ‘Returning to “Becoming-a-Fan Stories”’ that there is a need to research and understand more deeply how people become fans. While he comments that important work on transformational accounts of fandom exists (see Cavicchi 1998 and Harrington and Bielby 2010a; 2010b; 2018), more studies are needed to shed light on becoming-a-fan and how fans move from one fan object to another during their lifetime. Another important task is to determine how the object of desire changes as fans move from one stage of life to the next (Hills 2014, 19; 2019, 89; Driessen 2019). This is particularly relevant among fans of Lennon and Cash because most became fans in childhood, moved to a teen phase and maintained their fandom into adulthood. Indeed, most of the fans interviewed were lifelong. Each phase of fandom is punctuated by particular characteristics, such as family socialization in childhood, adulation in the adolescent phase, and experiences of celebrity death in adulthood. Indeed, this varies from

fan to fan and is always situated by internal and external events. For example, seeing the Beatles live on Ed Sullivan in 1964 was an important milestone event among many Lennon fans in my sample. Most often, this event took place in childhood or during their early teens. Thus, this entry point into fandom is very different than of fan of John Lennon who, perhaps, encountered him through reading a biography, watching a film, or in some other happenchance way. As explained later, fans who encounter the celebrity this way tend to treat him as an artifact and satisfy their curiosity about their newfound interest through an avid collecting of information. The next section discusses how people became fans of Lennon and Cash and their reasons for doing so.

Becoming-a-Fan Narratives

The Early Years

Some fans report early childhood experiences with the music of The Beatles and Johnny Cash. For example, Jake and Leigh, both of whom I met at Strawberry Fields, claimed The Beatles were their childhood “lullabies.” When I asked Jake, “How long have you been a fan of The Beatles?” he said, “Since I was a baby. You see, I had a Nanny, a Spanish Nanny named Maria, and she had this cassette tape called ‘Beatle Lullabies,’ and every time I would take a nap, she would play the tape” (Interview December 15, 2013). Leigh suggested that he ‘grew up with music, Lennon, the Beatles, that’s all I grew up with . . . Those were my lullabies.’ He said he probably became a fan, “the day he came out of his mom” (Interview November 23, 2013). For second-generation Beatles fans (similar to being born into a religion instead of converting as an adult), such as Jake and Leigh, listening to The Beatles tied intricately into early childhood memories. They associate the Beatles with positive emotions and experiences arising from their

parents, such as soothing, bonding, attachment, love, and affection. Hearing the music all these years later conjures these same positive emotions. Jake recalls the first time he was conscious of hearing the music of Lennon, an experience he shared with his mother. He was in the car with his mother and heard the song, “Real Love,” which he described as being “absolutely in awe.” I asked him, “When you hear that song now, do you still get the same feeling?” He replied, “I sure do. I have so many memories of when I was little” (Interview December 15, 2013). Similar to the positive attachment that results from a parent or caregiver rocking and caressing their child to the tune of lullabies, fans such as Jake and Leigh come to associate these feelings and attachment to the Beatles. They cannot remember a time when they were not fans. Music is often tied to memory and has an innate ability to conjure emotions associated with the first time the fan heard the piece. Cognitive neuroscientists call this “music evoked nostalgia,” a concept that helps to explain why we prefer certain songs over others (see Barrett et al 2010). This nostalgia corresponds to why certain songs incite emotion, whether “positive, negative” or “mixed” (Barrett et al 2010, 402). Because Jake and Leigh tie Beatles melodies to early listening experiences associated with caregivers, the emotions created during the experience pervade their memories with each subsequent hearing.

Several fans of Johnny Cash indicated that their parents, their father, in particular, bringing home an album of Johnny Cash, triggered their interest in Cash as young children. These fans describe “excitement” upon first hearing the music. Nicole, Chris, Martin, Dale and a Johnny Cash impersonator, Edward, shared similar experiences of their first memory hearing the music of Johnny Cash. Edward said,

My parents were both fans, right when Johnny Cash came on the scene. They brought home records, and when they put them on the turntable, I found the sound hypnotic and mesmerizing. It was as if he reached inside and touched me. I mean, I didn't understand the content, I was only 5 or 6, but it was the booming voice of God in his vocal. It was a different sound than what you heard at that time; it was raw (Interview March 5, 2014).

Similar to Edward, several fans interviewed comment on the “raw” and notable nature of Cash’s voice. Nicole, a fan I met at the Johnny Cash Museum indicated, “But all through my life, I’ve liked the raw stuff, the raw sound . . . it’s just some internal thing, all the cells line up and say ‘Yeah! This is music that moves me’” (Interview April 8, 2014). Chris said, “It’s hard to describe what it was about that album [the *Johnny Cash Show*], that song [‘Sunday Morning Coming Down’], but it was something about his voice. It was just so unique, so striking” (Interview May 17, 2014). As someone who garnered expertise on Cash over the years, yet developed an interest in him in childhood, Martin, who hosts a podcast on Johnny Cash radio suggested, “It was very real, and that’s what I liked about it . . . We used to call Johnny Cash music ‘three cords and the truth’” (Interview April 25, 2014).

If a popular culture product such as Johnny Cash reinforces these early predispositions, it begins to work itself into the lives of fans. More than simply background music to one’s childhood, it comes to reinforce life experience and shared interest within the family. This is not to say that Cash becomes the predominant and overriding influence, but he is a source of comfort, solace, and entertainment.

The rawness and “realness” of the sound struck Nicole, Chris, Martin, Dale and Edward upon first hearing Johnny Cash. The Folsom and San Quentin Prison recordings perhaps best exemplify this type of auditory “rawness.” At times too young to understand the content of the sound, these fans could discern both the appeal and effect. Nicole told me that while she was

probably too young to understand what it meant to be a prisoner, looking back, she felt the raw sound characterized her struggles and experiences,

As a 7-year-old, I don't think I got how a prisoner knows or how he feels to have an absolute release of tension that you get at a prison when some guy like Johnny Cash comes in there, with his raw band cranking it up and yell and scream and let it all out . . . And you know this guy feels what you're feeling. And you're singing your song and stuff. I don't think I knew that when I was little, but I know that now (Interview April 8, 2014).

As Nicole describes, these initial influences and thought formations direct the fan towards further exploration of the artist and his or her catalogue of music. The continued appeal of the body of work signals a new status as a fan. For example, Dale mentions, "The more I heard, the more I wanted to hear and the more it became part of my life" (Interview June 9, 2014).

The Awakening

Three fans describe the first time hearing the music of the Beatles and Johnny Cash as a sudden awakening. One of them is Carolyn. I met Carolyn and her husband at a John Lennon Real Love Project (a charity dedicated to children who have lost a parent to cancer and adult cancer survivors) reception in New York. Carolyn was,

Riding in the car with [her] mom. "I Want to Hold Your Hand" came on the radio. I was like, "Wait! What's this?" Honestly, my whole world shifted the first time I heard that song. I was only about 10. That didn't matter; life had gotten interesting all of a sudden (Interview December 20, 2013).

Carolyn's experience is similar to William James' conception of such events, detailed in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, "We have a thought . . . repeatedly, but on a certain day the real meaning of thought peals through us for the first time . . . when one grows hot and alive within us, everything has to re-crystallize about it" (2002 [1912], 218). The sudden act of conversion changes

the trajectory of a fan's life course. At once, fandom becomes a defining characteristic of his or her identity. The fan object, in this case, the Beatles, presents a novel and thrilling focus for the fan. In "Autobiographic Reasoning in Long-term Fandom," Harrington and Bielby indicate three important foci that help shape fandom with longevity early on,

As our analysis suggests, there are at least three related reasons why media texts are important to consider from a developmental perspective, (1) early exposure to media texts shapes the legitimacy of such exposure (crucial with highly stigmatized texts such as daytime soaps); (2) this legitimized exposure, in turn, renders the fictional narrative a normatively appropriate developmental resource to call upon; and (3) fictional narratives such as soap operas offer powerful conceptions of emotional/experiential authenticity by which fans come to measure, appraise, or otherwise make sense of their own developmental and/or maturational processes. By serving as a throughline to fans' lives, soap operas offer a crucial sense of anchoring or mooring in an increasingly complex world (2010b, par. 6.2).

By helping to isolate these early trajectories of fans, the data highlight Harrington and Bielby's perspective. For example, Carolyn's experience with The Beatles helped to 'anchor' her world as a young child, seen through her search for meaning within the fan object (Harrington and Bielby 2010a). This account realizes an important characteristic of fans not only of soap operas, but also of celebrity fans. Fans of The Beatles and Johnny Cash enter into their fandom most often in early life and continue admiration shaped by life experience (see also Harrington and Bielby 2010a).

The Extension of the Self

Sandvoss indicates that the extension of the self tells the story of a type of "narcissism" inherent in the fan's sense of self, "If what we are attracted to in the fan object is in fact our own image, then the object of fandom is always read and interpreted against the framework of the self" (2005, 114). The fan receives feedback from the extension of self in the sense that it

continually informs their identity. For example, Mike, host of *Beatles News*, spoke of growing up in a media-saturated household, “There was a heavy emphasis on media and journalism in our lives” (Interview February 13, 2019). First through radio and television, and later as a journalist, his engagement with media occurred, in part, through his interest in The Beatles, “We used to listen to Bruce Bradley on WBZ [Boston]. He was a big Beatles fan and knew a lot about them. I really made a connection” (Interview February 13, 2019). Mike continues, “The first time I saw them, it was in our living room. I was sitting on the floor with my younger sister, while my parents sat behind us. I just thought, ‘Wow! I wish I could be them!’” (Interview February 13, 2019). These early childhood fascinations help explain why the fan comes to associate the celebrity with a continually pursued set of values. As a self-reflection, the celebrity embodies whatever the fan wants them to embody, so long as such a thread exists. It is important to remember that the celebrity can only convey so many meanings; their content is finite. The fan recognizes him- or herself in the celebrity because they relate to one or more of these meanings.

Beatles’ fans, Michelle and Ruth, became fans through their peers in grade school and share remarkably similar stories. Michelle, a researcher and writer about Lennon, remembers a school-mate loaning her an import Parlophone in 1963, telling her, “you have until recess to fall in love with them,” “We were huge fans” she says, “My Dad took me to see *A Hard Day’s Night* and then he said, ‘Did you want to see it again?’ Which was nice of him as I’m sure he could have cared less,” Michelle relates. “But, we did, and we saw it twice and on and on . . . what I remember is looking at those pictures and looking at John Lennon’s eyes and thinking, ‘this is the guy right here,’” she concludes (Interview March 9, 2014).

Ruth, a John Lennon fan who runs a Beatles Walking Tour Company in New York City, recalled a similar peer group influence. Ruth remembers hearing The Beatles as a child. In 1975,

a friend she met at summer camp loaned her several Beatles albums and encouraged her to listen to them, “I got hooked on how he looked or what he did. I liked his voice,” Ruth recalls. “And in October of that year,” she begins,

Back before VHS and Video on Demand and all that, the local public library in my neighborhood in Queens, New York was showing *A Hard Day's Night*. I went with my friends that first time, it was like tunnel vision . . . he was the only thing I saw . . . and I thought he was the greatest thing I'd ever seen in my life . . . I thought he was brilliant. And I wanted to know more about him (Interview February 4, 2014).

With Ruth, we have someone with early childhood experiences with Lennon, but the influence of the peer group triggered identification, similar to Michelle's experience. The pictorial image of John Lennon struck and mesmerized Michelle and Ruth. Given that most fans interviewed were first-generation who became fans when The Beatles arrived in America in 1964, there is not enough data to posit that only childhood fans had these early transformative experiences. More data on fans who entered into fandom as adults is needed and remains an important inquiry for future research.

Throughout the fan-span, but especially early on, the celebrity image helps organize complex emotions and cognitions associated with identification. Sudden identification is similar to “love at first sight” although the foundations of this identification developed since they were young children. When we determine a pictorial image to be visually striking, a lot has gone into that moment. The appeal of the image corresponds to our socialization, including our geographical location, the power we invest in the pictorial image and why we privilege certain images over others. For some fans, John Lennon as a peacenik resonates, whereas others identify with Lennon more strongly in the early days of the Beatles. Similar to interest engendered in fans by Johnny Cash's voice, it was something in John Lennon's voice that unleashed excitement.

Some fans are able to pinpoint this prompt. However, in most cases, fans describe the movement towards identification as a more generalized feeling of well-being, happiness or shift in consciousness that happens gradually. These types of movements are micro-conversions that add up to a different “aim” in life (see James [1912] 2002, 215). One possible explanation for this lack of particular recall is that, in many cases, the socialization to the popular culture object of desire is gradual rather than abrupt (see also Cavicchi 1998). Similarly, Cavicchi found a lack of recall of becoming-a-fan among his sample of fans. As children, people are exposed to the product of pop culture multiple times rather than a single incident. While some fans recall the initial prompt, most remember it as a general source of early socialization.

Diane is one of the more memorable Johnny Cash fans with whom I spoke. She told me her story with such candor and sincerity that she was “exhausted” by the end, and her small dog became most impatient with her lengthy phone call. Diane experienced her transition towards the Cash fandom when her father died, “He gave me something that, at that time, I needed . . . I needed someone to take care of me, and I kind of let him, somehow . . . He just filled a void that was there’ (Interview May 30, 2014). For Diane, identification with Cash addressed a lack of something left by the death of her father and in which she found comfort and solace. Again, Diane describes this evolution as more gradual, rather than sudden or abrupt. Her admiration of Cash originated at age fourteen, upon her father’s death, but assumed incremental significance throughout her life. Part of the reason for this relates to her father’s death and also her mother’s inability to care for her as she felt a mother should. Feeling this loss, Diane turned to Johnny Cash.

When fans such as Michelle, Ruth, and Diane recall these early sources of socialization, they formulate and reformulate their remembrance of these stories depending on narratives

situated by factors such as time, place, and emotion. As a result, these stories evolve over time and across the fan-span. For example, interviewing a fan today, compared to the initial date of the interview, would elicit the same core content, but a different emphasis on its significance depending on the emotional state of the fan. In other words, fans tell similar stories, but present different takes on the experience at different times. More generally speaking, this occurs with life experience with both fans and non-fans in the broader population. The importance is how narratives of the celebrity develop across life experience.

The Revival

Just as Michelle and Ruth found John Lennon's image mesmerizing, fans who transition to fan status by seeing the Beatles or Johnny Cash live remain affected by their stage presence (see also Bailey 2005). These fans provide similar remarks about Cash's stage presence, magnetism and "rawness." Nicole recalls, "From the minute that sound started [. . .] to the very last note and him doing his final bows, I don't think I breathed once, I held my breath the whole time. I was totally engrossed!" she exclaims. "And I thought it was an amazing show from beginning to end because he would take us through emotions, funny stuff, sad stuff, stuff in the gospel . . . It was exactly him, his grin, his charisma, just him talking would just get me," Nicole continues (Interview April 8, 2014). The "rawness" and "realness" of Cash that Nicole describes equates to the steady *boom-chicka-boom* beat combined with Cash's deep baritone and melodic tones. Fans of the Beatles provide similar accounts of seeing Lennon and/or the Beatles perform. Here, Carolyn illustrates an early Beatles' experience from a show she saw in Houston in 1965,

I had bought my ticket for five dollars earlier in the summer at a radio station. All summer long, I hid the ticket in my Bible so no one could take it . . . We couldn't hear much due to the insane screaming, and we were screaming too. A cop told me to sit down, and I shouted at him, "NO!" I wasn't sure why I was crying, but I was happy crazy crying. I kept trying to get past the barricades, but cops pushed us back. I was only eleven, but there was a definite sensuous vibe that was so new to me. The whole thing made me feel high, although, of course, I had never been high. The next day there was a picture of me in the newspaper with a lot of others, reaching our arms out and crying and sweating! . . . I can only describe the entire event as a FRENZY! (Interview December 20, 2013).

In many early Beatles' concerts in America, press reports indicate women cried and screamed so hard they fainted (see Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs 1992; see also Proctor 2018, 74-75). In a very Freudian argument, Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs tie the young girls' hysteria over the Beatles to sexual repression in the preceding era. Carolyn's account reveals some of this "frenzy," as she says. According to Duffett, "Audience screaming contributes to the live sound and appeal of popular music, and performers frequently evoke it as part of the music" (Duffett 2017, 153). Indeed, biographer Philip Norman—in *John Lennon, The Life*—suggests Lennon and The Beatles often complained and later tired of the screaming because it silenced their music (2009, 431). Duffett likens celebrity audience screaming to a kind of Durkheimian totemism and collective effervescence,

Individual followers touched by the totem experience moments of effervescence as jolts of energy that give them a mood-raising personal boost. This feeling motivates shared beliefs, values, and behavior that maintain the social system . . . It is a way to gain a star's attention, and something that demonstrates the emotional commitment of his or her fan base (Duffett 2017, 150-1).

Another explanation is that the female Beatles fans likely fainted because crying and screaming for so long is exhausting. Such actions are a standard part of seeing a band live, but reached unique heights upon the Beatles' arrival in America in 1964 (see also Leonard 2016).

Carolyn's "frenzied" experience at the Beatles concert in Houston in 1965 rings true of a tent revival meeting (a congregation of Christian worshippers, historically housed in a temporary "tent"), although this is perhaps better understood as a location of seismic shift in identity, when the fan fully senses the change (see also Cavicchi 1998, 43). The result is an all-encompassing sensory event, the first of many lifelong "peaks" of attachment to the celebrity the fan experiences. Indeed, the revival aspect of becoming-a-fan helps ignite this intensity, acting as groundwork for a lifelong dedication to the Beatles or Johnny Cash. This foundation is when the "mirror" recasts its reflection—or feeds back into the fan's psyche—signaling a growing fan disposition (see Sandvoss 2005).

Wanda, a Johnny Cash fan, is the only fan in my sample who experienced the transition to fandom vis-à-vis other fan attachments. She explained her segue from Elvis fandom to a growing interest in Cash, "Well, I'm a huge Elvis fan, too. Actually, I've been an Elvis fan for over 20 years now and he did impersonations of Johnny Cash, so I thought, 'hey, let's look it up'", Wanda relates. '*Walk the Line* [came out] in 2005, and I thought let's look into him a little bit more. And that's how it slowly started. And not until 2006 or 7 that I really started collecting stuff and everything" she continues (Interview April 12, 2014). Although I spoke to several younger Johnny Cash fans, the 2005 film *Walk the Line*—starring Joaquin Phoenix and Reese Witherspoon—did not influence their move to Cash fandom. I found fans did not make such a transition or maintained much involvement in other fandoms. This finding is contrary to other scholarship (e.g., Hills 2002) and may be unique to this sample.

Memories of first hearing the music are widespread among first generation fans in my sample. Many of these fans comment the music was not only different but contained unique arrangements and bridges uncommon to popular music at the time. For example, several Beatles

fans reported their music was “different” and “exciting” upon first hearing it. Sam, a guitar player and member of the plastic Beatles band at Strawberry Fields, is one such fan. He tells me that, “It was different, and, at the time, I didn’t know if different was good, better or worse. But by the second or third day, when I actually started listening to the radio, I could hear the musical talent” (Interview December 12, 2013). In another example, Carolyn previously commented that her “whole world shifted” when she heard the unique chording at the beginning of “I Want to Hold Your Hand.” David, a John Lennon fan and musician who once played with Lennon, was asked, “Do you remember the first time you heard the music of John Lennon and The Beatles?” he responded, “If you’re talking about the early music, it was the vocals that got me . . . Most people were into the same stuff that I was, and it just got into our heads. Literally. Melded into our brains” (Interview November 27, 2013).

Undoubtedly, this uniqueness by fans Carolyn, Sam, and David’s admission contributed to the commercial success of The Beatles’ albums. Stephanie, a Beatles’ scholar, indicated that fans mark the Ed Sullivan broadcast—which many fans refer to—as a “holy day,” “I became a fan when I saw that broadcast, at age 7. It was then that The Beatles inspired my imagination. I grew up in a media saturated household, and The Beatles brought a freshness that was exciting” (Interview February 10, 2019). While it may be difficult to understand the uniqueness of their music by today’s standards, it is important to remember that The Beatles achieved success starting in 1964. This was decades before the industry standards and electronic remixing and sampling (using digital recordings as part of the music’s composition) of today. With the vast array and electronic resources influencing sampling in today’s market, nothing seems particularly novel to the listener’s ear. In 1964, The Beatles’ sampling and bridges make their music a fresh commodity.

Other fans point to a more random transition to Cash or the Beatles fandom. Daniel, for example, said, “My fandom really started by chance in 2006. I stumbled upon a YouTube video that featured the then recently released song, [Cash’s] ‘God’s Gonna Cut You Down,’ and I was hooked!” (Interview March 16, 2019). Peter, one of two fans from Britain, recalled that he had,

Always been a Beatles fan—I attended the primary/elementary school that Ringo had attended—but it was when my wife and I moved to near Penny Lane, and had our three daughters, we enrolled them in the nearest school, which was Dovedale Primary School [John Lennon’s primary school] (Interview March 3, 2019).

These fortuitous encounters with the celebrity inspire imagination because the fan relates to a value embedded in the fan object. These occurrences are a type of small, and oftentimes, incremental conversions.

Do similar themes appear in these narratives? People become fans in different ways. For some, the celebrity contributes to socialization, through his or her music as childhood lullabies or simply growing up in a home that emphasized the celebrity and his music. Others experience a shift in consciousness and excitement when they encounter the celebrity for the first time. Still, others became fans through the influence of the peer group. Nicole solidified her fandom through live performance. For Diane, a traumatic life event initiated her attachment to and identification with Johnny Cash.

Other transitional factors include the influence of another celebrity, such as Wanda’s attachment to Elvis Presley, or recognizing the musical talent of The Beatles. For example, Sam and David noticed that their music was “different.” In discussing Laura Vrooman’s work on singer-songwriter Kate Bush, Duffett notes that “fans who passed on their musical taste to their children or stepchildren were not just securing the ongoing existence of the fan base; they were

establishing a bond and a teaching relationship that allowed them to share knowledge within their family environment” (2013, 128). According to Duffett, fan “contagion is not a fully adequate explanation. If it were universally the case, everyone exposed to a product would become interested” (2013, 128). From these findings, this is a vast understatement. Becoming-a-fan narratives demonstrate that certain patterns emerge among fans of The Beatles and Johnny Cash. However, the pattern is more often than not a gradual one and incremental assumption of fan identity.

All but three fans in my sample (Wanda, Daniel, and Tyler) were fans prior to Lennon or Cash’s death. The primary difference between these fans and fans who became fans after their death was that the latter did not as readily place Lennon or Cash in a historical or cultural context. These fans experience the celebrity as an artifact and approach him with a sense of curiosity and avid collecting of information. Wanda and Daniel started a Johnny Cash website, whereas Tyler, “started buying all of the Sun era recordings, the masters, the outtakes. Then the Columbia era recordings followed by concert videos, documentaries and any books I could get my hands on” (Interview March 17, 2019). These fans missed key elements, such as seeing the Beatles on Ed Sullivan, witnessing their arrival in America, seeing the Beatles or Cash live or experiencing the moment of their death. They develop a “*texistence*” with the celebrity, a word used by Harrington and Bielby to describe how “the self develops in ongoing dialogue with the media texts that help define and sustain it” (2010a: 444). Among fans of Lennon and Cash, “*texistence*” encourages the fan in developing a schema—or thought pattern—and narrative in which to interpret their fandom. Through this process, the celebrity bolsters fan identity by providing an oftentimes interpretive lens. While this lens sustains fan identity, its consistency may come and go over the life course. The lens is continuous in the sense that it aids the fan in

moving from one stage of life to the next by providing a contact point (e.g., the celebrity), aiding the transition. Although all fans experience these transitions at some level, a more established extension of the self reaffirms these bridges. This is because fans internalize the celebrity and, as an externalization, it helps to reinforce fan identity (see Berger and Luckmann 1966, 131). For example, one way fans bond at live events is to share stories of how they first encountered the celebrity and remembrances of their death. These stories help to consolidate growing fan identity and place them in a social context shared among the fandom. For example, Cavicchi found that “becoming-a-fan stories show that while fans . . . feel a unity with another [and] that feeling of unity is paradoxically accompanied by intense self-awareness, a detailed accounting of exactly how [Springsteen] changed their lives” (1998, 137). Fans articulate these stories differently every time because they have thought and re-thought their experiences through this increased self-awareness through contact with other fans. Indeed, as Hills comments, “Their fan object is used, actively, as a “life-transitional object,’ bridging, and sometimes smoothing over, developmental changes, and allowing for a constructed (yet naturalized) sense of self-continuity” (2019, 88).

Transformation? Concluding Thoughts

When examining the relationship between fans and the celebrity, we find similarities in purpose and in consequence. The purpose of celebrity for fans is to provide a “model of” and “model for” their reality (see Geertz 1973). However, the level to which the extension of the self takes place is varied. The data demonstrate instances where the fan object does not have such a command. For example, Phyllis suggests, “For me, the biggest thing in my life has been my family. I have three children, seven grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. That’s really what my life revolves around, but music has also been a big focus of my life” (Interview January

22, 2019). In some cases, the celebrity does not necessarily act as a self-reflection, but a refraction of the fan's self.

The difference between a self-reflection (e.g., the “mirror” of the extension of the self) and refraction (traditionally, the manner in which light bends as it flows through a prism, but here a shift in direction caused by an internal or external life event) is that the refraction causes the fan to go in a different direction based on feedback from the extension as well as other factors. Refractions take place because, as time progresses and an identity develops, self-reflections change, similar to how identity develops apart from fan specific realms. For example, just as our identity changes depending upon internal and external life events, so is fan identity influenced by these occurrences. For example, Stephanie said she,

Fell away from The Beatles. I got married, and I had kids, I just didn't have that much time. I later got back to them in the '90s. But how I got into John was really when he was murdered. That was when I realized how important he was. In the '80s I was focused on John (Interview February 10, 2019).

In part, the refraction helps to explain why the celebrity may recede from or grow more prominent in the fan's life in the sense that, in going in a different direction, the self-reflection changes. James suggests, “As life goes on, there is a constant change of our interests, and a consequent change of place in our system of ideas, from more central to more peripheral, and from more peripheral to more central parts of our consciousness” (2002 [1912], 216). The celebrity weaves in and out of the fan's life, never seamlessly, and assumes significance when there is a heightened awareness of the celebrity as a self-reflection.

Previous work on fan conversion, such as *Tramps Like Us*, tends to focus on fan conversion as a break from reality, such as the “self-surrender” type, although Cavicchi does acknowledge

this limitation (1998, 59). However, among my sample of Lennon and Cash fans, very few fans had this pivotal transformation. As most fans assume incremental identity, the conversion narrative remains a limited way of accounting for how fans transition towards fandom. Instead, more work needs to be done to understand how fans become fans, in which contexts, based on what factors, and in what ways does this incursion of fan identity affect the life experience of fans and their fandom.

More often than not, fans transition to fan identity gradually rather than through a crisis. This shift reveals that exposure to the fan object repeatedly occurs with an incremental assumption of fandom. The extension of the self establishes the origin and continuation of fandom by speaking to the need of the fan to identify with an externalization of themselves (see Berger and Luckmann 1966). Thus, fans at different times, but primarily for reasons of identification, search within the celebrity to fulfill a need that they lack or to which they aspire. In the Introduction to *Popular Music Fandom*, Duffett suggests that “an individual’s understanding of their own identity can shift depending upon whether they are speaking before, during or after their time as a fan” (2014, 7-8). Becoming-a-fan is an entry point into this discourse, but never the last word. Narratives of conversion highlight these beginnings but, more importantly, a focus on identity helps to reveal the footings upon which fandom is established and transformed.

Interlude

This last manuscript, “The ‘Religious’ Response,” which is forthcoming in an issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, is about fandom and the death of the celebrity. I often get asked, “Why *dead* celebrity?” There are three responses to this question. First, dead celebrity is a relatively unexamined aspect of pop culture phenomena, yet is a rich source of data on not only the study of celebrity, but avenues into why some celebrities linger long after their natural death. Second, I was interested in the longevity of fandom, primarily fans who became fans as children or young adults, and who maintained this fandom for a long period of time. Third, as I illustrate throughout the document, these findings also speak to celebrity more generally. Fan-celebrity relationships and becoming-a-fan apply to all fans. This study also includes fans who became fans after the celebrity’s death.

In the last manuscript, we saw how fans come to encounter the celebrity through a moment or moments of “conversion,” in turn developing a fan identity both in the short run but also over several decades in many cases. For this reason, the way the fan experiences the celebrity’s death is often life changing. The manner of death informs the extent to which the fan experiences a sense of shock, such as in response to Lennon’s murder, and ultimately how they grieve. Because some fans develop an intimate relationship with the celebrity, they often mourn Lennon or Cash as a member of their own family.

A central focus of this next article concerns the questions: how do fans respond to the death of Lennon or Cash? What does this response look like and is it ever “religious”? These questions help to explain the fabric of dead celebrity fandom because they isolate the fan’s experience the moment the celebrity dies. Further, what is unique about dead celebrity fandom, why do religious dimensions, such as channeling, ritual and prayer have to do with a dead

celebrity, and how does this all happen within the “religious imagination?” (Cowan 2018). The retreat to and through the “religious imagination” helps to clarify the conditions under which the response to Lennon and Cash’s death becomes “religious” and provides an important perspective on why fandom is so often compared to religion.

The “Religious” Response: Experience of Celebrity Death among Fans of John Lennon and Johnny Cash¹⁷

This article provides context for fans’ experience with the death of John Lennon or Johnny Cash, framing this response, in some cases, as “religious modes of acting and thinking” (Laderman 2009, 161). This response is more than simply meaningful, as it shares similarity in form and experience with religion. In some cases, fans react “religiously” because they search within the celebrity to recognize and define themselves, similar to the process fan studies scholar Cornel Sandvoss (2005) describes as the “extension of the self.” Based on a qualitative study inclusive of participant observation at memorial events of Lennon and Cash as well as interviews with fans, this article builds the case that popular culture is an important source of data for modern religious experience. Understanding fans as responding “religiously” helps add to the conversation on fandom and religion as it questions similarities between the two. I argue these similarities reveal important characteristics of celebrity fandom and help to address contemporary religiosity.

Keywords: religion, celebrity, fandom, death, extension of the self, mediumship

Introduction

A few years ago, and in response to recent gun violence in the United States, Yoko Ono shared a photo of her late husband’s blood-stained glasses from the night of his murder (Renshaw 2013). Such a graphic image is a stark reminder of John Lennon’s tragic death in December 1980 (see also Elliott 1999; 2018). Lennon fans interviewed for this study do not forget the moment of his death but forge ways to overcome the initial shock, not dissimilar to how we cope with the death of a loved one, to which many fans compare the experience (see Bingaman 2020, 6). Celebrity deaths prompt not only grief, but a new order of thoughts and actions—from placating trauma (here, a disruption of order) to remembrance rituals—even if these experiences are a temporary bridge through a troubling time. Death instigates thoughts of our mortality and reflection on our

¹⁷ Appears in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*.

lives as well as considerations of how to continue without the individual. For example, in *Sacred Matters*, religious studies scholar Gary Laderman writes, “something that remains constant . . . is that [death] is sacred and requires religious modes of acting and thinking to ensure psychological well-being, social continuity, and cultural vitality” (Laderman 2009, 161-2). “Religious modes of acting and thinking” are a range of beliefs and practices that help to assuage our encounter with human loss and inspire “religious” sentiment and ideas. They are not exactly religion, but ways of thinking and acting inspired by religion (see, especially, Doss 1999; 2005, 69 and Ward 2011, 25).

For our purposes, fans respond “religiously” (hereinafter simply religious) when there is an ongoing search within the celebrity to answer the fundamental questions we have about our lives and our world and help identify and explain our beliefs and fears. Responding religiously was initially put in quotation marks because it cannot be defined exactly as religion. Rather, it is the search for direction and order within the celebrity—similar to how one searches within religion—that defines the religious response (see also Marsh & Roberts 2015, 135-6; McCloud 2003, 188). For example, bereavement specialists Parkes and Prigerson characterize such a search as a “pining,” or “the emotional component of the urge to search for a lost object” (2010, 7, 50). These modes are what I denote as the religious response, a response that takes into consideration the unique circumstances of dead celebrity fandom, such as the “social milieu”—how, where, and when it is situated—and its “cultural vitality,” in this case, how fans keep their memory going (Laderman 2009, 162).

A religious response is one that seeks to mitigate uncertainty in the chaos of death. It helps to answer the persistent existential question of “why” when someone dies, a human question, often in the purview of religion (see Cowan 2018, 6). It bears similarity to religion

because of a desire to search both outwardly and inwardly for something greater than him or herself. In aligning him or herself in a new mode of “acting and thinking” the fan transcends grief (Laderman 2009, 161).

Through outlining how fans of John Lennon and Johnny Cash experience his death, I look to explain how these celebrities work themselves into fans’ lives. How fans respond to a celebrity’s death and the nature of this response speaks to the concerns of contemporary religiosity by questioning the boundaries of what we consider religious. The data reveal varying modes of response and different degrees of religiosity. What is important to remember is these ways of responding occur over time, implying there is an initial response that takes on layers of meaning through a process of reasoned hindsight, a type of cognitive dissonance, and within the “religious imagination,” discussed below (see Cowan 2018). This type of response puts religiosity in the mix through generating responses that share, both in form and experience, similarities with religion (see Cavicchi 1998, 51).

Why is the response religious and not simply meaningful? To answer this, I turn to Daniel Cavicchi and his discussion of devotion in *Tramps Like Us*, his book about Bruce Springsteen fans: “While religion and fandom are arguably different realms of meaning, they are both centered around actions of devotion” (1998, 51). As religious studies scholar Laura Feldt indicates in “*Harry Potter* and Contemporary Magic,” “Clearly, the question whether *Harry Potter* is religious or not depends upon different understandings of religion” (2016, 102-3). My focus remains primarily on understandings of scholars who consider celebrity death and religion.

The fan-celebrity relationships among fans of John Lennon and Johnny Cash are parasocial in nature. A specialist of communications and journalism, William Brown argues that

an examination of parasocial relationships began with Robert Merton, but their origination is more often tied to Horton and Wohl's (1956) study of television viewers (2018, 256-7).

Parasocial relationships are a standard lens in celebrity studies (see Cashmore 2006, 80; Duffett 2013, 89; Horton and Wohl 1956, 217; Giles 2002; Ward 2011, 25-7) and remain the primary analytical tool to understand how fans relate to celebrities. This perspective concerns the fan in a relationship with the celebrity, but the celebrity is unaware of this relationship—it is one-sided. Cashmore argues fans “experience the relationship as genuine and just as valid as other kinds of social interaction” in which the fan is “attentive and fully aware” (2006, 80, 83).

In writing about the posthumous fandom of race car driver Dale Earnhardt Sr., Radford and Bloch claim that parasocial relationships “may emerge in a particularly salient manner after death, and the loss is expected to be greater for celebrities with whom the individual feels a greater identification” (2012, 140; see also Brown 2010).

Our discussion of celebrity death and the religious response is made clearer by the notion of an extension of oneself. Fan studies scholar Cornel Sandvoss (2005) suggests in *Fans* that this concept refers to a kind of alternate idea, a “mirror,” in which fans see and, more importantly, recognize themselves. When people become fans, they are reacting to a value or values embedded in the celebrity triggering identification. There are degrees of identification, but fans are always responding to what they see in this reflection (see Sandvoss 2005). When a fan recognizes him or herself to a greater degree, it is more likely for the fan to respond religiously because of the meaning sought by the extension. Everything is a matter of perception for the fan (see Cowan 2018, xii). For example, Sarah, whose story I detail below, calls Lennon her “Spirit Guide,” and constructs her fan identity through this lens. Her identity construction is not a

consistent storyline. As Lennon weaves in and out of her life, her perception of him as a “Spirit Guide” continually resurfaces as an extension.

In *America’s Dark Theologian: The Religious Imagination of Stephen King*, religious studies scholar Douglas Cowan indicates that “questions of meaning and purpose . . . are all *properly human questions*” (2018, 6; emphasis in original). However, sometimes meaning and purpose become intertwined with religiosity, especially through direction and order, and particularly when it involves the unseen order. The unseen order hails from William James in the third of his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* lectures: “the life of religion . . . consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto” ([1912] 2002, 61). The sometimes momentary other times lasting transcendence a fan experiences when he or she identifies with a celebrity helps to align him or her with a sense of an idealized self, a kind of unseen order.

In a classic study of Hollywood cinema and female spectatorship, film studies scholar and sociologist Jackie Stacey suggests that “imagined selves” helped women to understand their past “glamorous” personas through nostalgia (Stacey 1994, 152, 241). For Stacey, part of this experience of nostalgia relates to a loss of self and the hope to become “the ideal” (1994, 152-9). When a celebrity dies, a focus on him or her helps the fan deal with a similar loss because each fan invests a part of themselves in the celebrity and “search[h] for ways to replace” this loss (see Radford & Bloch 2012, 146). For example, Diane lost her father as a teenager and turned to Cash for support, while Michelle channelled her grief into research and writing about Lennon, producing work that helped to overcome the loss. Part of this relates to the tendency of the fan to seek the celebrity at times in their lives when they are most vulnerable. In some cases, the celebrity’s death instigates a search for meaning that culminates in filling the space of “a lost

object” with religious sentiments such as the establishment of ritual (e.g., shrine building), meaning and devotion following grief (see Parkes and Prigerson 2010, 50). Re-establishing an order of time, space and memory following a celebrity’s death helps fans come to terms with both the loss of the celebrity and the perceived loss of part of self.

Similar to notions of an idealized self, fan-celebrity relationships are a location of rich imagination. For example, Cowan contends that “storyworlds” “can tell us about the nature of religious belief and the power of the religious imagination at work” (2018, 14). Storyworlds indicate this belief and power in ways not often captured by how people normally think of religion and its appearance in popular culture. Through this location of imagination, storyworlds connect fans to the celebrity and in turn themselves. Cowan illustrates:

Both the stories we have labelled as “religious” and the other fictional storyworlds we create emerge from the same place in our imagination. Both are manifestations of the human search for meaning, our ongoing need to question, and our constant dissatisfaction with whatever answers we find (2018, 15-16).

In fan-celebrity relationships, fans construct storyworlds where the celebrity is an important character, informing their daily lives and the way they see the world, but also how the world or the celebrity could or might be. Storyworlds help the fan develop a relationship with the celebrity others might label as “obsessive” or “irrational.” For the fan, nothing makes more sense to them as celebrity storyworlds are about building a relationship with him or herself. Religious responses happen within the storyworld connecting fans to a sphere of influence where unusual happenings take on significance, and acting as a location of transformation.

Methods

The methodological approach for this study consisted of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. I initially met fans at Strawberry Fields, in New York City, and at the Johnny Cash Museum in Nashville. After these initial encounters, I used snowball sampling to interview additional fans. My sample consists of 37 fans: 25 men and 12 women. The interviews took place during fall 2013 and winter 2014, with a second round occurring in fall 2018 and winter and spring 2019. The subsequent interviews were necessary to supplement additional data from the first round. During the second grouping, I re-interviewed twelve fans and added seven new fans, for a total of 49 interviews. In addition, I occasionally exchanged emails with fans as a follow-up. The focus of the interviews consisted of ways people become fans, their experience of the celebrity's death, and the religious history and experience of fans. The majority of fans are American and original or first-generation fans. Most are married, while a few are single, and some are divorced. Many have children. Fans come from a variety of occupations, from professionals, artists, students as well as unemployed.

Understanding Fan Emotion Through Responses to Celebrity Death

According to Laderman, death is ubiquitous in America. One could say that people die everywhere every day, but he implies that Americans think about death a lot (see Laderman 2020, 137-41). One source of these thoughts about death come from the death of celebrities which appear all over news media in the aftermath (140-1; Ward 2020, 125). Celebrity deaths are particularly memorable when they have a tragic and sometimes shocking end. For example, Lennon occupies a realm of "lives [that] are defined by death, their stories inseparable from their endings" (Schwartz 2015, 6; see also Fleming 2019, 328). In *The Beatles and Fandom: Sex,*

Death and Progressive Nostalgia, pop culture scholar Richard Mills reveals that “The effect of John Lennon’s death on Beatles fans was monumental . . . the murder generated a legendary status comparable with JFK’s, Marilyn Monroe’s and James Dean’s deaths” (2020, 103-4). Fans interviewed for this study share remarkably similar stories of hearing of Lennon’s death from football announcer Howard Cosell and the sadness which followed. In one instance, Sam described Lennon’s death as a “gut-punch” and travelled to the Dakota, Lennon’s one time residence and site of his murder, where he spent the night. Sam reveals: “It’s like Gandhi, he was such a great person for his country. But John Lennon, he was that to the world” (Interview December 12, 2013).

While there are a variety of ways a fan of a celebrity could respond to his or her death, certain patterns and discourses develop around the account of death (Ward 2020, 130-1). For example, Melvin provides insight into how fans connect their fandom to certain cultural patterns: “The [Beatles] music sort of became a boost that this country needed at the time,” Melvin indicates, “We saw how the ‘60s became a very turbulent decade . . . and the music helped us with our influences about those opinions,” he continues (Interview December 15, 2013). While Melvin speaks more clearly to the Beatles and Lennon’s life than death, these sentiments are similarly applied to his death, such as a contrast between Lennon espousing peace in the late 1960s and early 1970s and his violent end. When celebrity death has such an effect, the death can come to capture a particular cultural moment or moments. These narratives situate the celebrity in public memory symbolically connecting him or her with more broad sweeping emotions associated with his or her death. Indeed, in “The Beatles: A De Facto Religion,” sociologist Candy Leonard suggests the Beatles capture a “philosophy” akin to religion and Lennon’s death “adds weight to ideas around the quasi-religious nature of the Beatles

phenomenon” (2021, 27; see also Inglis 2005, 451). Both Melvin and Leonard highlight how Lennon became far more than just a Beatle and how his death was a large part of his impact on fans.

Celebrity death matters because of the stature we bestow upon celebrities, but also because they are timelessly representative of who we are (see Braudy 1986; Dyer [2004] 2013; Gamson 1994; Marshall 1997; Williams 2013). Our esteem of celebrities also tells us something about ourselves, and when they die some fans feel as though they lose a part of themselves. Diane indicates about Johnny Cash, “I was just broken hearted. I thought, this is almost like a parent dying or a best friend or a confidant,” she relays. “I don’t know how to say it. No celebrity has ever affected me like he did. It was just like he was part of my life” (Interview May 30, 2014). Each fan has a certain investment in the celebrity, one that often occurs over long-periods of time and at different life stages. As the fan accrues this investment, the death abruptly affects how the fan will carry-on over the lifecourse. We will consider this with a case study of Lennon fan, Sarah.

When we see news coverage in the immediate aftermath of a celebrity’s death, we normally witness it from a limited perspective, such as fans leaving flowers and symbolic reminders of the celebrity at the site of death or celebrity’s home, with the occasional news coverage of fans. These “spontaneous shrines” are a common phenomenon following a celebrity’s death (Ward 2020, 135). In an article about “grassroots memorials” following musician David Bowie’s death, Graves-Brown and Orange explain that “One of the more interesting aspects of such shrines is that they are the product of collective and demographic popular activity” (2017, 1). Graves-Brown and Orange clarify this activity as popular and more wide-spread compared to an official statute or plaque (1). Given their temporal existence, fan

reactions to celebrity death are more than simply spontaneous shrines. Detailed through fan testimony in the following sections, the reality as experienced by the fan is much more involved. The next section considers fan responses to celebrity death, followed by a more detailed case study of how John Lennon fan, Sarah, coped with his death over time.

Fan Responses to Celebrity Death

If the “continuing bond” of grief helps to re-establish order, trauma felt at the moment of death is a disruption of order (see Klass, Silverman & Nickman 1996). Trauma is understandably more commonly felt with the death of John Lennon because of the nature of his death. However, Johnny Cash fans also experience shock and disbelief. Despite having occurred several decades ago, John Lennon’s death still brought many fans to tears and shaky voices when I spoke with them. When I asked Sarah if she remembered when John Lennon was shot, she broke down and said, “Oh, absolutely. That’s a huge, huge part of my dedication to him, I guess. I mean, it was horrible. Did you want to ask me about that?” Following our conversation about Lennon’s death, she concluded, “I’m sitting here sobbing and I always think I’m over it . . . It is very painful” (Interview January 31, 2014). While trauma is a perceived loss of control, religiously inspired ways of thinking and acting as well as rituals (e.g., funerary services) help to regain control. Part of the reasoning behind this re-establishment is that structure helps humans cope with the disorder that comes when someone dies. Some semblance of control diminishes a new painstaking reality that occurs with the loss of a loved one, in this case, the celebrity.

Fans such as Nicole describe having a “feeling” about the death of Johnny Cash. A fan of Johnny Cash since an early age when her father played records, Nicole snuck out of bed to catch a glimpse of the *Johnny Cash Show*. Nicole is also a musician in a band, and in its early days she

worked at the Johnny Cash Museum in Nashville. In the following excerpt from an interview with Nicole, she describes the moment she heard of Cash's death—four months following the death of his wife June Carter—and the sadness which followed:

I got a phone call, 6:30 in the morning or something like that. The guy I played bass for in a country rockabilly band, in Milwaukee . . . called me up with the news. And it was devastating, very sad, but I often wonder if that's what I felt, that he had died, passed on. Because it was almost exactly the time, when he had passed on that I sat bolt upright and felt that something had changed (Interview April 8, 2014).

This is one example of a standard story of hearing of the passing of John Lennon and Johnny Cash. In *The Appointed Hour: Death, Worldview and Social Change in Brittany*, anthropologist Ellen Badone writes that people seek “a structure of significance” through which to interpret tragic deaths in a manner which provides meaning in their lives (1989, 324). Although Badone writes of supernatural phenomena in Brittany, the quest for a “structure of significance” to understand death is analogous to the experience of fans (see also Jones and Jensen 2005; Margry 2008; Partridge 2015; Riddell 2008). Nicole made Cash's death meaningful by inserting a narrative likely shared and told among fans in her community. Nicole's account reveals an orientation to construct the death of Johnny Cash within the “religious imagination,” especially in the way that it helps her overcome his death (see Cowan 2018). By structuring his death this way, Nicole sought meaning and direction through this response. In other words, she wished to impose some sort of order to interpret an otherworldly experience within her own understanding. This type of response helps the fan to overcome trauma by reordering the experience of Cash's death and attributing meaning and ritual to a seemingly otherwise coincidental occurrence. The lingering effect is that Nicole is left with an aura of otherworldliness while downplaying the reality that Cash's death was not unexpected. Further, Nicole sought a pattern in an otherwise unexplainable circumstance. In the sudden knowledge of Cash's death, she seeks to mitigate the

associated uncertainty (see Cowan 2018, 22). This ordering reveals how lingering religious sentiments pervade unusual happenings.

When I asked Leah, another fan, how she responded to John Lennon's death, she said it is: "One of my biggest concerns, that way, is what happens when we die. I believe in God and the teachings in the Bible, but no one really knows." "My friend," she continues, "died and that was the worst thing that ever happened to me. I've always talked a lot about dying and we talked about it together" (Interview February 21, 2019). I asked her, "Does your faith help you with these struggles? Does John play a role?" Leah replies:

John taught me about karma . . . There is no way to this beauty and also evil in this world without a creator . . . I think organized religion is not a bad thing. It keeps people accountable for their actions.

Leah indicates her mother died two years prior to our interview and, she relays, "it is very moving to be with someone when they die . . . No person can help get you through difficult times—faith does that." Leah pleaded to God about her mother, "Why do you keep her here? But, I have to trust that it's in God's hands. He has a plan" (Interview February 21, 2019). Here Leah ties meaning with religion in the sense that both are consequential when there is a "plan" for us and especially when the fan places the celebrity (Lennon) in a hierarchy with God or organized religion. Leah reveals that Lennon's death taught her about karma and, in death, he acts as an intermediary between her and God. Lennon's message filters through her religion. Fans individualize the emotion generated by celebrity death based on these factors such as situated narratives—or socially contextualized explanations—of emotion described in their responses (e.g., broader cultural patterns, a soul connection, structure of significance). Some fan

responses to the death are more detailed than others but each relate certain themes associated with celebrity death.

Many fans compare the experience of losing Lennon or Cash to someone in their own family dying. Diane became a fan around the time her father died at age fourteen: “He kind of took his place” she told me. Raymond similarly commented that when Cash passed “it was like someone in my own family had died” (Interview June 12, 2014). When Michelle heard of Lennon’s death, she indicated that “I lost, I mean, that’s a member of my family” (Interview February 17, 2014). These fans collapse the parasocial distance between themselves and the celebrity by creating an intimate space within the extension of self. When the fan turns their gaze towards this mirror, they see that they have lost a family member and they mourn the celebrity’s death this way. This response instigates religious sentiments by creating a directional focus in their grief.

Each of these remembrances of John Lennon and Johnny Cash relate to a certain level of shock at the first level of response but segues into feelings of loss and attempts to understand the circumstances and consequences of that loss. Sarah, for example, experienced Lennon’s death with a mixture of shock, confusion, and sadness. Because she experienced a very intimate experience with him right before he died, Sarah connected to this moment, helping her to re-order her thoughts and actions. She refracted Lennon’s death by developing situated narratives that helped her work her way through and beyond the image to a sacred moment in her life. We will examine Sarah’s experience below. More broadly, situated narratives helped Nicole, Leah and Diane negotiate their emotion, action, and identity. Discourses on the death of celebrities reveal the complex processes through the orientation of the fan and its reverberations in the afterlife of the image. As Jones indicates: “The

meaning and character of the performer, performance and performed, changes—even if only ever so slightly—with each hearing of the echo, its meaning relived and re-implicated in our lived experience” (2005, 270). In each act of internalization, the celebrity manifests. The next section considers a case study of Sarah, examining in-depth how she dealt with the aftermath of his death over time. This will help to clarify the nature of the religious response.

Fan Responses to Celebrity Death: Sarah, a Case Study

Sarah is a lifelong fan who grew up on the West Coast listening to her older brother’s Beatles records. She intensified her connection to Lennon on the day he died. Sarah relays an experience she had with Lennon prior to discovering his death, followed by the moment she found out. She tells me:

I remember, vividly, crawling into the bed, closing my eyes, and saying, kind of in a whisper, “John, I’m so happy for you.” And I just felt so at peace. And I just felt so happy for him . . . And then, I think I slept for about an hour and then my husband came home and I got up, and he took me by the shoulders and he looked at me in the eyes and I said, “What’s the matter?” and he said, “John Lennon’s been shot. He’s dead.” And I can’t even explain it, I was just so, I screamed. I went to my knees and I was just yelling “No! No!” It was the worst feeling. I mean my parents both died when I was young and it was not even close . . . and I was just devastated . . . I never recovered. It was one of the worst things that’s ever happened to me in my life (Interview January 31, 2014).

This account of John Lennon’s death presents as detailed and featuring emotional depth. Because his death was shocking for so many fans, as seen here with Sarah, the fan experiences a type of emotional paralysis as a way to manage the overwhelming grief. Sarah compares the death of Lennon with that of her parents which helps protect her from the sudden onslaught of devastation. This contrasts sharply with Cash’s death which was anticipated by many of his fans due to his poor health. Sarah goes on to say:

And looking back on it and seeing what I do know, it's ridiculous because I think somehow God made sure that I read all that [the Lennon *Playboy* interview], that day, before John left. It was supposed to happen that way. I was supposed to create a soul connection to him before he left the planet. For whatever reason and, at the time, I didn't know why, but looking back, seeing where I am now, I know [why I made a soul connection] (Interview January 31, 2014).

Instigated by the events she describes on December 8, 1980 but developed and coalesced more clearly over time, Sarah's "soul connection" with Lennon falls within the definition of religious work (see Chidester 2005). When a celebrity does religious work, he or she helps the fan connect with a greater, larger, central, or "ultimate concern" and meaning in life (see Chidester 2005, 1). However, Sarah's connection with Lennon goes beyond simply religious work into a kind of psychic connection and mediumship. This countered her early religious socialization, first in the Lutheran Church, and later in the Church of Religious Science. She conveys her attribution of spiritual significance to Lennon as a "huge mental struggle." Overtime, and through conversations with John Lennon, she realized that: "John helped [her] grow spiritually." Sarah indicates that: "*religious beliefs* are limited and restrictive and have *nothing to actually do with God itself.*" Finally, she embraced "a sense that true love can reach beyond the veil, and that God is within us. That was a huge spiritual undertaking for me to accept" (Personal email, February 28, 2018; emphasis in original).

Sarah's connection to Lennon gained complexity as the years progressed. She felt a paranormal element of "spirit contact," demonstrating a powerful influence in her life. A classic account illustrating the psychic connection to stars comes from the 1985 book *Starlust: The Secret Fantasies of Fans* by Fred Vermorel. It contains first-hand accounts of fans of celebrities and illustrates the complexity of attachment (see also Duffett 2014, 164). What this book does not feature is an explanation of the extent and consequence of Sarah's relationship with John

Lennon. Through this relationship, Sarah's religious beliefs evolved to incorporate Lennon into her spiritual life and at the very centre of this life. Sarah is an example of when fandom operates close to a religion, although she views Lennon not as a god, but as a type of conduit. Lennon's death was a traumatic experience for Sarah, and she found meaning by connecting it to God and, later, her vocation as a writer of all things John Lennon. Sarah is only one of four fans in my sample (Leah is another) who made a connection between the death of John Lennon, herself, and God. Four years after our initial interview, I followed-up with Sarah about the connection she created with Lennon. She responds:

The event that I described to you the day John died—my point was that it had to have been more than coincidence. It felt like a purposeful event. I strongly believe in synchronicity, and to me, that is God taking a hand in presenting situations in our path to get our attention. After he died, I “knew” John's soul must have connected with me that day—as he prepared to leave his life, and felt God's hand in it . . . I never forgot it. The bad part was that it greatly intensified my grief over his death—because I felt I'd been with him all day! You see? It felt like I'd lost a loved one. Not just a celebrity (Personal email, February 28, 2018; emphasis in original).

Sarah indicates that the soul connection is something that develops in reasoned hindsight across the fan-span, the length of time someone has been a fan. The way she legitimated this occurrence and later attachment is through the implication of “God's hand” in the matter. Her connection intensified because she felt she “had spent the whole day with him.” This experience of momentary refraction followed by a different path in future years intensified her connection, as Sarah suggests:

He began really helping me with my life, showing me things I didn't know about before—with my health, my emotions, spirituality, etc. What I'm trying to explain is that I developed a deep mutual soul-love connection to John in spirit just like you could with someone in the physical world. I began to understand that “reality” reaches beyond the physical world to the invisible. The depth of this connection took years to develop. And for that reason, it is permanent, and creates a bond that can never be broken (Personal email, February 28, 2018).

For Sarah, John Lennon as a type of conduit helps to establish her connection to God, whom she likens to a universal energy. As she explains, this energy exists both in the external world as well as inside her. Although this relationship began the day Lennon died, it developed over decades rather than as a form of self-surrender. Sarah's relationship with Lennon does not extend to seeing Lennon as a god, but this relationship does fall on the far end of the continuum. An important area of future research involves the discovery and analysis of similar types of relationships.

Similar to Nicole's intuition about Johnny Cash's death, Sarah attributes coincidences and random happenings to Lennon as her "Spirit Guide," which she describes as an "auric field." She suggests that "suddenly everything will kick into gear." As an example, she interprets it as "Beatles' songs start coming on . . . and he will come in very clear." "The synchronistic nature of all of it makes it very real," Sarah concludes (Interview December 5, 2018; see also Catherine 2015, 303).

Mediumship and channeling are a "thin spot" to use the words of Cowan where "the places where the seen and the unseen orders rub up against each other" (2018, 35). Sarah connects to Lennon's presence because she is in "tune with that channel"—or social construct—and because this construct acts back upon her psyche, framing her world as one in which Lennon takes centre stage. This is not to say that Lennon is an overriding influence in her life all of the time. She admitted that he recedes at times and becomes more prominent once she receives a "signal." Yet, Lennon's death created a supernatural influence in her life that never really disappears.

In a study of angel spirituality of mostly women in Finland, Terhi Utriainen examines how ritual and ritual framing help actors negotiate between “enchantment and disenchantment” in everyday life (2020, 198, 205). Utriainen states:

I conceive of ritual primarily as a framing device that enables people to enact and communicate important changes in their social and personal lives in terms of status, time, and place or in what can become possible in a given situation . . . Desired effects, such as healing or empowerment or the appearance of some otherworldly presence and power, are made possible and plausible, being enacted and communicated during the ritual by and through framing (2020, 197, 200).

This notion directly speaks to what Sarah experiences when she engages Lennon as her “Spirit Guide.” He is a model “for” and “of” her life (see Caterine 2015, 304; Geertz 1973; Smith 1987, 104). As Sarah suggests, “Spirit Guides provide opportunities, protection, and set me on the right course” (Interview December 5, 2018). Although Sarah does not exist in a state of “enchantment” all of the time, the situated reality that brings her back into this frame occurs when she makes oftentimes spontaneous contact with Lennon and that helps to “empower” her (Utriainen 2020, 197). This spontaneity allows her to “frame” these occasions as supernatural in nature and gives meaning and “significance” by framing them in a compelling way (see Utriainen 2020, 204).

There are also circumstances where Sarah intentionally frames an encounter with Lennon, such as when she lights a candle by his photograph or as Utriainen indicates “A ritual frame could also be a temporal boundary, marked, for instance, by the act of lighting a candle” (2020, 200). Both spontaneous and intentional contact with Lennon helps Sarah negotiate and “frame” her ritualized engagement with him (see also Smith 1987), making the experience appear “uniquely realistic” (Geertz 1973, 90).

As scholars, we must understand the context of fan declarations as these are the narratives and subtext fans bring to accounts of celebrity death, the way they grieve, and ultimately how they transform in the process (or not). Sarah responded religiously through her vocation as a writer of Lennon material and thus dedication to him, but this response also helped her to transcend the trauma of his death. Sarah reveals that she came to write first “Around ‘98-99, [John] asked me in meditation if I would be willing to ‘write about him’ and publish it.” Sarah admits this in an email she sent me on March 7, 2018, in conjunction with a series of emails we shared as a follow-up to my inquiry about her relationship with Lennon. She tells me that for her,

Writing is very cathartic, and helps me process and understand my own experiences better. It gives more heart to the connection [with John Lennon] and seems to cement the experiences into a spiritual context (Personal email, March 7, 2018).

John Lennon is the refraction of Sarah’s sacred self (see also Ward 2011, 92-4, for another perspective on the sacred self). When a fan experiences a transformative experience in relation to the celebrity image, this same process occurs, albeit cognitively. In these moments, the celebrity also becomes more dynamic, open to individualization, as it morphs into an externalization rather than simply an objectivated fact (or *master image*) distant from the fan’s subjective reality (see Berger and Luckmann 1966, 156-63). This process helps to explain how and why fans individualize the celebrity in relation to their experience with him or her and develop fan identity over time.

Similar to Michelle, Nicole, Leah, and Diane, Sarah’s response sought a sense of order in her world to make sense of a tragic loss in her life, at first, and the continuation of his influence later on. Because death creates not only a disruption of order but a void for the fan, the fan seeks

to rediscover themselves in the celebrity's image. The mirror of the extension of the self casts a reflection that reminds the fan, through a construct such as a "Spirit Guide," that he or she is not alone so long as he or she continually seeks the self in this way. Both more individualistic forms of spirituality as well as organized religion fulfill a similar purpose. The difference among these fans is that they have taken a highly manufactured product of popular culture and made the celebrity into an intimate, democratized, and personalized energy in their lives.

Conclusion

Why does celebrity death matter beyond the religious response? How does the response fit into broader patterns of religion and spirituality in America? Historian Erika Doss, in *Elvis Culture* (1999), and Gary Laderman, in *Sacred Matters* (2009), interpret fan responses to celebrities and their death as religious, particularly exemplary of personal or private religion in America. Doss indicates:

Contemporary Americans continue to mix and match religious beliefs and practices, creating and claiming their own spiritual convictions out of that amalgamation. It may be that when Elvis fans protest that their devotion to Elvis is not "religious," they are really objecting to an institutional definition of the term. In fact, their privatizing veneration of Elvis is one strong historical form of American religiosity (1999, 75).

Laderman makes similar comments: "Celebrities in the twentieth century acquired sacred standing in American religious life as the mainline Protestant stranglehold on public culture began to loosen" (2009, 64). Certain religious undercurrents underwrite fan responses to celebrity death, placing them in a socio-cultural milieu in which religiously motivated ways of understanding death and trauma take precedence. This is similar to Doss's notion of Elvis culture acting as a "kind of religion" establishing religious rituals around mourning and collecting as well as social cohesion (2005, 69). As fans move through and beyond the celebrity's death, they

continually re-experience and reorder his death to reflect the current extension of the self. The feedback the fan gets from the extension's reflection helps to pacify the trauma of reliving the experience and forge a new order forward.

Some fans, such as the Lennon fans described, turn to the celebrity as a type of coping mechanism, helping them to endure difficult life experiences. The consistency with which the product of popular culture presents, in its accessible and reproducible form, mollifies uncomfortable feelings and emotions through the process of identification. Here the celebrity operates as an escape from the burdens of life. Part of the appeal of the celebrity is not only his ability to evoke positive emotion and cathartic release, but because the celebrity is manufactured, thus readily available. As Gamson (1994) discovered, fans are aware the celebrity is fabricated, but in no way does it lessen enjoyment of them. Fans direct their gaze towards the celebrity, strengthening the bond of identification between the celebrity and the fan and transforming the fan in the process.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

In this study, I examined why fandom is often compared to religion, what is meant by religion in the context of fandom-as-religion literature, and how we may develop an understanding of the comparison through the development of more nuanced definitions of terms like religion, the “religious,” religious work, and the “religious imagination.” In these articles, I also analysed fandom-as-religion narratives through three themes: (a) the fan-celebrity relationship and religious work; (b) becoming a fan and conversion; and (c) how fans respond “religiously,” in some cases, to celebrity death. At the centre of fandom-as-religion narratives is identification. How do fans come to identify with the celebrity in the first place? What role does the extension of the self play in this dynamic? When the fan first encounters the fan object, it is an act of consumption with a product that is both manufactured and managed by the celebrity and the music industry. In the act of conversion, the fan internalizes the celebrity image, which is now in more control of the fan through the fan’s imagination. At this point, the fan recreates, rather than just internalizes or “consumes” the celebrity in their imagination. For some fans, the celebrity may become an extension of the self serving a number of functions, such as inspiration, motivation, support, consolation, role-modeling, self-evaluation, self-criticism, and emotional support, among others things (see Sandvoss 2005).

Further, it is legitimate for fandom-as-religion scholars to use religious language because it highlights the dynamic of the extension of the self. What my research demonstrates is that, for some fans, fandom acts as “lived religion” but not necessarily as religion traditionally understood. For this reason, this process is best understood as fandom-as-lived-religion.

In an early landmark study of celebrity, Gamson found that even though fans are aware of the manipulated construction of celebrity and fame, it did not reduce the possibility for identification with celebrity and the attachment that ensues (1994, 68-75). It matters little to the fan the celebrity image is mass-produced and managed (see also Miller 2005, 3). Gamson wrote about cultural products being “gift wrapped” so that they have a higher perceived value (1994, 74-75). As such, Lennon and Cash are “manufactured” so that they appeal to audiences, encourage consumption and, in some cases, inspire identification. This is important because identification is the beginning of religious work and how this type of work comes to have a hold on the fan in many cases, over several decades. The foundation of religious work occurs in the realm of the “religious,” the liminal zone between the sacred and the profane that helps to answer the question of why identification becomes more consequential. Once the fan enters this realm, they adopt an extension of the self, which is essentially an act of the religious imagination. In each act of identification, the extension provides the religious imagination a reality in which to situate the self. The extension helps to fuel the religious imagination, creating a cognitive process in which identification takes on greater and heightened meaning. In this way, when the fan identifies with the celebrity, it is in a realm created by these supporting structures. This process happens because popular culture speaks to basic human concerns but has the ability to transcend the mundane and enter into “religious” questions of our existence. Pop culture, like religion, can inform a fan’s sense of direction, order, meaning and purpose (see Laderman 2020, 119). For example, Lennon fan, Stephanie, said that “The Beatles had a profound influence on my life . . . John has gone on to live as this figure in our lives. There’s something about him that he towers over our lives. It was at this time that I started writing about The Beatles” (Interview February 10, 2019). Stephanie’s affiliation and dedication to Lennon and the Beatles helped to solidify her

career as a Beatles scholar, providing her with direction, order, meaning, and purpose. When a product of pop culture transcends the mundane, it is because the fan recognizes something in the product that they experience or understand about themselves. However, as Sandvoss indicates, this identification is possible because the celebrity becomes “part of the self” (2005, 100). In the articles, I describe how and why this happens. Why is this significant?

At the outset of this study, I posed two research questions: why is fandom so often compared to religion, and what may we learn from the comparison? Through an examination of the area of fandom-as-religion as well as data from fans of Lennon and Cash, we find that while fandom and religion share “similarities of experience,” a mistake often made by fandom-as-religion scholars is that some, such as Duffett, compare fandom to traditional understandings of religion (Cavicchi 1998, 51; 2003, 515). What I propose is that some expressions of fandom occupy an “in-between” place that I still call the “religious.” The nature of fandom complicates boundaries between the concept of the sacred and the profane, the serious and the frivolous. By understanding fandom within its own realm, we can begin to examine fan phenomena as more than an empty expression of consumerism, but not a full-blown substitute for traditional religion.

Regarding the second question, about what may we learn from the comparison between fandom and religion, we find that fans of Lennon and Cash form relationships with the celebrity that perform various levels of religious work, whether this be providing a path of an “ultimate concern,” as a moral compass, a retreat, or as a lifelong source of identification.

The manner in which this religious work is accomplished is through the extension of the self and the imagined relationship with the celebrity. The fan may or may not be conscious of this process. Either way, it is the extension that fosters identification. Often the basis for this identification is a value that the celebrity comes to represent and that the fan embraces. Through

identification, some fans identify so intensely with the celebrity because the fan object is the “mirror of consumption” (Sandvoss 2005).¹⁸

Why does it matter that celebrities perform religious work for fans? The idea of religious work raises an important question in the academic study of religion. That is, why and how do cultural products have “religious” effects? How do these products create narratives of contemporary religiosity? To answer these questions, we must go back to why people become fans in the first place.

Fans consume the celebrity in diverse ways, whether the fan object is encountered as a consumer product through film, television, newsprint, online, or music. For most fans of Lennon or Cash, the initial encounter involved the character of the music. Fans that I interviewed suggested that this point of identification was often a “striking voice.” It was as though the fan could not identify the trigger, other than the voice piqued their interest. In turn, when, in subsequent encounters, the fan saw the celebrity in-person or on screen, the identification grew. It was then that the fan encountered Lennon or Cash as a celebrity, rather than as a sound-bite.

Through identification, the celebrity-as-product becomes human, intimate, and a source of whatever the fan needs at that moment. Points of articulation in the fan’s life—when they become a fan, as they build a relationship, and at the time of the celebrity’s death—help to establish what is often a lifelong preoccupation with the celebrity. At different junctures of the fan’s life, the celebrity can “be there,” if they need them.

¹⁸ The “mirror of consumption” is the sub-title of the Sandvoss’s book and reflects the process of the extension of the self, in terms of how fans recognize themselves and internalize the extension (2005).

Lofton felt we, as religious studies scholars, should see the “field of celebrity as a field of religion” (2018, 104). She argues that insight into celebrity action and behaviour holds great promise for religious studies as a field. Because celebrity fandom touches on so many beliefs and practices that are of concern to religion, celebrity provides an apt spring board for analysis of contemporary religious practice. As I explored in “The ‘Religious’ Response,” the manuscript about celebrity death, ritual is a promising area of interest among scholars of celebrity fans. Much of the way we consume celebrities is actually through ritual. For example, we emulate them in dress and image; we actively buy products they promote and, in doing so, we not only experience material rewards, but meaningful relationships. Cash fan, Robert, says that, “Much like the finger of St. Thomas or the head of St. Catherine of Sienna, the Cash faithful—and, of course, this is not limited to him only—use relics, guitars and such, rather than body parts, mercifully, to maintain their connection to him. Everyone has their own personal Johnny” (Interview February 3, 2019). Collecting is really a means to bolster and support identification with Lennon or Cash, at least the fan’s crafted version of them. Through fan areas/rooms/shrines, fans develop an affinity for the celebrity, and create a world in their likeness (see Doss 1999, 69-113)

This dissertation explores how people are living their lives every day, as religious actors, but outside of religious institutions. It is not that we are becoming less religious, as many theorists of secularization argue, but we are becoming differently religious. By examining different dimensions of fan’s lives, we can begin to understand what “religion” looks like as a lived experience. Of note in this inquiry is what other ways (other than traditional religious institutions), do people find meaning, purpose, order, and direction (Laderman 2020, 119). One benefit of this approach is that we can explore the deeper commitments and practices of religious

“nones.” Many of the themes we have uncovered in the lives of fans are equally applicable to religious “nones.”

I have both outlined definitions of religion proposed by fandom-as-religion scholars as well as suggested my own understanding of religion, religious work, the religious imagination, and the “religious.” In my reworked definitions, I covered a range of “religious” experiences, while also accounting for fan belief and practice that does not fall in this range, such as when the celebrity provides entertainment but does not inspire identification. Like Cavicchi, I argue that fan experience and religion share “similarities of experience,” but fandom is not a substitute or replacement for religion (1998, 51).

At the beginning of this study, I proposed several themes discussed by Elliot: Which scholars assume rather than define religion? Which scholars focus on one or two dimensions of religion, thus “simplify[ing] the comparison?” Do scholars see fandom as similar or even a “substitut[e] for religion?” Do scholars hyphenate religion (e.g., para-, neo-, quasi-), thus potentially complicating an understanding of fandom and religion? Further, what approaches do we have moving forward? (Elliott 2021, 118). The introduction, literature review, and the three articles, have helped to address Elliot’s initial inquiry into the state of the fandom-as-religion approach. As stated above, the understanding of religion, in terms of how it is defined and understood, needs to be fleshed out from the outset. It is difficult to make headway with the comparison between fandom and religion because we, as scholars, often rely on a narrowly defined concept of religion.

Further, the focus on a limited dimension of religion, such as a sole focus on ritual, tends to limit the strength of the fandom and religion comparison. For example, it may only be that

element that shares a similarity with religion, making it difficult to make a broader statement on the experience of fandom-as-religion. The tendency of scholars to hyphenate religion, for example, adds confusion rather than clarity because it superficially modifies rather than deepens the concept of religion. It does not move the area forward. Rather, we need to reimagine what we mean by religion.

Limits of Research

The limits of this dissertation mostly relate to scope and method. For example, I base my study on relatively small sample of thirty-seven fans. As such, it is not possible to generalize to other fans of dead celebrities, celebrity fans, or other fans in a broader context. That does not mean that the findings are without merit. This study assesses the individual experiences of fans and how fans negotiate their world in relation to the celebrity. As there are very few ethnographic studies among fans of celebrities, this study helps to address Elliott's criticism that there is not enough data from fans to address gaps in our understanding of fandom-as-religion (2021, 118). That being said, I could have sought additional celebrities and research locations to study. Practical problems limited my pursuit of some of these other ideas, although, in other cases, I did not pursue more research contacts because I reached saturation. By this I mean two things: (a) similar themes arose repeatedly in interviews; and (b) fans began to refer me to fans I had already interviewed. This is not to say that other fans did not exist elsewhere—indeed there is more than one fan group—but within the community I accessed, I reached a data saturation point.

If I were to expand on this study, I would select additional field sites in which to observe and recruit fans. I believe that the research findings may be strengthened by visiting other sites and interviewing additional fans.

Directions Forward

One question my study does not address is how the celebrity remains relevant as time passes and first-generation fans die? How does this maintenance of the image persist? For example, Yoko Ono maintains close control of the image of John Lennon and helps to maintain its relevance through movements such as Imagine Peace and as a reference point during times of domestic or world crisis. *Imagine Peace* is a project developed by Yoko Ono to commemorate “peace awareness” and activism around the world through social media (see: imagepeace.com). An important question to ask is whether John Lennon’s image will survive her death and continue to be of influence in the future. For example, one way dead celebrities stay relevant is through connecting their image to a product (e.g., Marilyn Monroe with Chanel No. 5), in turn “disseminat[ing]” the “star image” (see Fleming 2019, 320). What is perhaps important about Lennon and Cash, is a tendency to not monetize their image. For example, a close friend and advisor of the Cash family, Robert told me that “[The estate has] people coming from all directions that want to use his image or his voice or his lyrics, to push something. And they don’t accept every single thing. Like we won’t see “Ring of Fire” be used to hawk Preparation H, like [the company] wanted” (Interview March 9, 2014).

A further question relates to how well dead celebrity fandom can withstand attacks on the celebrity image. For example, news media filmed a white supremacist wearing a Johnny Cash T-shirt during the violent uprisings in Charlottesville, Virginia, in July 2017 (Miller 2017). The Cash estate quickly condemned the incident, but further associations between Johnny Cash and White Supremacy occurred, such as the re-discovery of a song Cash wrote, “God Bless General Lee.” If you go beyond the title of the song, the lyric is a thank you to General Robert E. Lee for surrendering. A question such a controversy raises is how resilient is the celebrity image? There

is evidence that the image of Elvis Presley is on the wane, at least in North America, most likely because his fans are dying, and the attraction of subsequent generations to Elvis is not strong enough.¹⁹ Yet, auction houses saw a rise in interest in Elvis when the Baz Luhrmann film, *Elvis*, was released, and further when Lisa Marie, Elvis's only child, passed away on January 12, 2023, at the age of fifty-four.²⁰

When a celebrity has lasting power, it is because they embody what is often a timeless value. For example, while Marilyn Monroe is the epitome of feminine glamour, what is most relatable about her and which has lasted is her vulnerability, best exemplified by her victimization in her relationships with the Kennedy's. In other words, some celebrities have an essence that endures. Part of the problem with Presley, as Rodman illustrates, is that he became a caricature of himself. For example, more so than other representations of Presley, we remember the overweight, drug-addicted Elvis in a jumpsuit. Some of these questions are dependent on time but justify further inquiry in the area to understand this and related factors.

Going beyond dead celebrity and into the realm of celebrity, we might ask why celebrities such as the Kardashians retain so much audience interest. Perhaps, this phenomenon is best explained by the extension of the self. Fans are in some respects fascinated by the rather mundane aspects of the everyday lives of celebrities (think *Us* Magazine's section "Just like Us", where celebrities appear doing mundane tasks, such as getting groceries or taking their dog for a walk), and see themselves in the relationships, marriages, divorces, and parenting struggles of celebrities. When Sandvoss writes of a process of "introjection and projection," he maintains that "the extension of the fan's self" is most focused in these moments of identification (2005, 94).

¹⁹ [The Business of Elvis Presley: Can the King Rise Again? – Rolling Stone](#) (accessed February 17, 2023).

²⁰ [It's 2022. Does Elvis Presley still matter? - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](#) (accessed February 17, 2023).

Yes, the Kardashians provide entertainment, but they also demonstrate a lot of what we think of ourselves as performative actors in society. Like Diane, who understands her struggles through her identification with Cash and his drug and alcohol abuse, fans of the Kardashian-Jenner's identify with Kim's relationships, Khloe's issues with self-acceptance, and Kylie's business acumen. When fans turn inward in these moments of identification and self-reflection, they see themselves in the celebrity's reflection.

Fans' experience of the celebrity engenders an intimacy that is a powerful force in shaping their identity. What happens at the moment or moments of conversion—whether sudden or gradual—changes the trajectory of the fan's life. In some cases, the fan becomes a lifelong devotee of the celebrity's messages, internalized through the process of the extension of the self (see Sandvoss 2005). To the fan, John Lennon or Johnny Cash is a friend, a confidant, or a parent, not a fabricated consumer product. In *Consuming Religion*, Vincent Miller concludes that “This book has attempted soberly to chart the perils posed by consumer culture for religious belief and practice” (2005, 227). I have attempted to show that, along with the perils, there are opportunities for the fan to engage the celebrity through more creative aspects. Fans who elevate Lennon or Cash to an “ultimate” concern, the comparison of fandom to religion is not simply one of interest or convenience, but significance. What I have shown is that fans construct meaningful and consequential “religious” worlds in the imagined world of dead celebrity fandom.

Letters of Copyright Permission

Journal of Fandom Studies

From: **Godwin, Victoria** <vlgodwin@pvamu.edu>

Date: Fri, 18 Feb 2022 at 17:36

Subject: RE: JFS 3244 Becoming Fan Role of Religion ‘My Whole World Shifted’: Identity and Transformation in Becoming-a-Fan Narratives

To: Kathleen Riddell <kathleen.riddell@gmail.com>

You can use the content as part of your dissertation. What you can’t use is the formatted PDF (with JFS page numbers and other design layout elements such as graphics and logos, etc.) you’ll get in the proof stage. This should be the relevant section of the agreement:

“The Author may distribute or re-publish the Accepted Contribution, but may not use the format and designs of the Accepted Contribution as it appears in the Journal. The Author is not permitted to print, post, or otherwise distribute the Journal’s PDF version of the Accepted Contribution.”

Hopefully that clarifies / reiterates how Kathy explained it earlier.

Vikki

Dr. Victoria L. Godwin

Associate Professor, Prairie View A&M University

Editor, *Journal of Fandom Studies*

vlgodwin@pvamu.edu

Journal of Contemporary Religion

On Tue, 19 Apr 2022 at 11:08, Elisabeth Arweck <elisabeth.arweck@btinternet.com> wrote:

19/4/22

Dear Kathleen,

Following my message of 11 April, I am in touch again as I have now done the final checks for the paper. This is in good order. There are some minor things that will need 'fixing' but these can be left until we get to the copy-editing stage.

I think you save yourself the trouble of sending a printed copy.

Re copyright matters, it's good that you checked as the publishers will be stringent in case of any violations or matters that count as 'author misconduct'. (There is a case at the moment that is being looked into.) I have also checked with the publishers about including your paper in your dissertation. The answer was that this should be fine. I was also advised as follows:

T&F allows authors to retain the right to include their Author's Original Manuscript (AOM) or Accepted Manuscript (AM), depending on the embargo period, in their thesis or dissertation. The Version of Record cannot be used.

If it was the Version of Record or if the thesis was somehow for commercial use, T&F would need to be contacted for permission.

I hope this is helpful.

Once I have sent this message to you, the paper will be logged as accepted and join the queue of accepted papers, awaiting its turn for publication. There is a bit of wait, I'm afraid, given the list of papers.

However, JCR is now part of the Online First system, at least for a trial period. This means that papers will be published once they have gone through production. I am preparing papers for production on a continuous basis, in the order in which they would normally be published. Given the queue, it will take a bit for me to get to your paper.

Thus, unless we are in touch for other reasons, the next time you will hear from me is when the paper is copy-edited and corrections may be needed.

Best wishes,

Elisabeth

References

- Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large, Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bain-Selbo, Eric. 2008. "Ecstasy, Joy, and Sorrow: The Religious Experience of Southern College Football." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. 20: 1-12.
- Badone, Ellen. 1989. *The Appointed Hour, Death, Worldview, and Social Change in Brittany*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Bailey, Steve. 2005. *Media Audiences and Identity, Self-Construction in the Fan Experience*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Barrett, Frederick S, Grimm, Kevin J, Robins, Richard W, Wildschut, Tim, Sedikides, Constantine and Janata, Petr. 2010. "Music-Evoked Nostalgia, Affect, Memory and Personality." *Emotion*. 10(3): 390-403.
- Beaman, Lori G. 2017. "Living Well Together in a (non)Religious Future: Contributions from the Sociology of Religion." *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review*. 78(1): 9-32.
- Bennett, Lucy. 2017. "Resisting Technology in Music Fandom, Nostalgia, Authenticity, and Kate Bush's 'Before the Dawn'." In *Fandom Identities and Communities in a Mediated World, Second Edition*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, 127-42. New York: New York University Press.
- Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Bielby, Denise D. and C. Lee Harrington. 2017. "The Lives of Fandom." In *Fandom, Identities and Communities in a Mediated World, Second Edition*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, 205-21 New York: New York University Press.
- Bingaman, James. 2020. "'Dude I've Never Felt this Way Towards a Celebrity Death', Parasocial Grieving and the Collective Mourning of Kobe Bryant on Reddit." *Journal of Death and Dying*. 0(0): 1-18.

- Boorstin, Daniel. [1961] 1987. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Booth, Paul. 2013. "Augmenting Fan/Academic Dialogue: New Directions in Fan Research." *Journal of Fandom Studies*. 1(2): 119-37.
- Braudy, Leo. 1986. *The Frenzy of Renown*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Brown, William J. 2018. "Celebrity Involvement, Parasocial Interaction, Identification and Worship." In *Routledge Handbook of Celebrity Studies*, edited by Anthony Elliot, 255-70. London and New York: Routledge.
- Brown, William J. 2010. "Steve Irwin's Influence on Wildlife Conservation." *Journal of Communication*. 60(1): 73-93.
- Bruce. 2013. Skype interview, October 11.
- Caitlyn. 2013. Skype interview, November 18.
- Carolyn. 2019. Personal email, February 1.
- Carolyn. 2013. Skype interview, December 20.
- Cashmore, Ellis. 2006. *Celebrity/Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Caterine, Darryl V. 2015. "Between Two Worlds, Transformations of Spiritualism in Contemporary Lily Dale." In *Handbook of Spiritualism and Channeling*, edited by Cathy Guitierrez, 294-316. Boston: Brill.
- Cavicchi, Daniel. 1998. *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chadwick, Vernon. 1997. *In Search of Elvis: Music, Art, Race, Religion*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

- Chidester, David. 2005. *Authentic Fakes: Religion and Popular Culture in America*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Chris. 2014. Skype interview, May 17.
- Cohen, Jonathan. 2003. Parasocial Break-ups: Measuring Individual Differences in Response to the Dissolution of Parasocial Relationships. *Mass Communication & Society*. 6(2): 191-202.
- Coleman, Simon and Pauline von Hellermann, eds. 2011. *Multi-Site Ethnography, Problems and Possibilities in the Translocation of Research Methods*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Cowan, Douglas E. 2022. *The Forbidden Body: Sex, Horror, and the Religious Imagination*. New York: New York University Press.
- Cowan, Douglas E. 2018. *America's Dark Theologian: The Religious Imagination of Stephen King*. New York: New York University Press.
- Cowan, Douglas E. 2010. *Sacred Space: The Quest for Transcendence in Science Fiction Film and Television*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.
- Cowan, Douglas E. and Lorne Dawson. 2004. *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Crome, Andrew. 2014. "Reconsidering religion and fandom, Christian fan works in *My Little Pony* fandom." *Culture and Religion*. 15(4): 399-418.
- Crome, Andrew. 2015. "Religion and the Pathologization of Fandom, Religion, Reason, and Controversy in *My Little Pony Fandom*." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. 27(2): 130-47.
- Dale. 2014. Skype interview, June 9.
- Daniel. 2019. Telephone interview, February 10.

Daniel. 2014. Skype interview, April 18.

David. 2013. Skype interview, November 27.

DeCordova, Richard. 2001. *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Devin. 2014. Telephone interview, March 5.

Diane. 2014. Skype interview. May 30.

Doss, Erika. 2005. "Elvis Forever." In *Afterlife as Afterimage: Understanding Posthumous Fame*, edited by Steve Jones and Joli Jensen, 61-78. New York: Peter Lang.

Doss, Erika. 1999. *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Image*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press.

Driessen, Simone. 2019. "Celebrating Nostalgia or Critiquing Naivety: Reading Pop Music Reunions Through Discourses of the Fan Life Course." *Journal of Fandom Studies*. 7(2): 133-50.

Duffett, Mark. 2017. "I Scream Therefore I Fan? Music Audiences and Affective Citizenship." In *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World, Second Edition*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, 128-56. New York: New York University Press.

Duffett, Mark. 2015. "Elvis' Gospel Music: Between the Secular and the Spiritual?" *Religions*. 6(1): 182-203.

Duffett, Mark. 2014a. "Celebrity, the Return of the Repressed in Fan Studies?" In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Fan Cultures*, edited by Linda Dutis, Kwoos Zwaan and Stijn Reijnders, 163-80. London and New York: Routledge.

Duffett, Mark. 2014b. "Introduction." In *Popular Music Fandom: Identities, Roles, and Practices*, edited by Mark Duffett, 1-15. London and New York: Routledge.

- Duffett, Mark. 2013. *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Duffett, Mark. 2003. "False Faith or False Comparison? A Critique of the Religious Interpretation of Elvis Fan Culture." *Popular Music and Society*. 26(4): 513-22.
- Durkheim, Emile. [1912] 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated and edited by Karen E. Fields. New York: Free Press.
- Dyer, Richard. [2004] 2013. *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Dyer, Richard. [1979] 2009. *Stars*. London: British Film Institute.
- Ebert, John David. 2010. *Dead Celebrities, Living Icons: Tragedy and Fame in the Age of the Multimedia Superstar*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Edward. 2014. Telephone interview, March 5.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara, Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs. 1992. *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, edited by Lisa A. Lewis, 84-106. London and New York: Routledge.
- Elliott, Anthony. 2018. "The Death of Celebrity, Global Grief, Manufactured Mourning." In *The Routledge Handbook of Celebrity Studies*, edited by Anthony Elliot, 109-23. London and New York: Routledge.
- Elliott, Anthony. 1999. *The Mourning of John Lennon*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Elliott, Michael. 2021. "Fandom as Religion: A Social-Scientific Assessment." *Journal of Fandom Studies*." 9(2): 107-22.
- Falzon, Mark Anthony. 2009. *Multi-Site Ethnography, Theory, Practice and Locality in Contemporary Research*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Feldt, Laura. 2016. "Harry Potter and Contemporary Magic: Fantasy Literature, Popular Culture, and the Representation of Religion." *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 31(1): 101-114.

Fleming, Ann-Marie. 2019. "Because it's the Truth: Authenticating Chanel Through Celebrity Death and Fan Magazines." *Celebrity Studies*. 10(3): 320-31.

Ford, Sam. 2014. "Fan studies: Grappling with 'Undisciplined' Discipline." *Journal of Fandom Studies*. 2(1): 53-71.

Fraser, Benson P. and William J. Brown. 2002. "Media, Celebrities and Social Influence, Identification with Elvis Presley." *Mass Communication and Society*. 5(2): 183-206.

Frow, John. 1998. "Is Elvis a god? Cult, Culture, Questions of Method." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. 1(2): 197-210.

Gamson, Joshua. 1994. *Claims to fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.:

Giles, David C. 2002. "Parasocial Interaction, A Review of Literature and a Model for Future Research." *Media Psychology*. 4(3): 279-305.

Goldman, Albert. 1981. *Elvis*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

[The Doors - Interview Richard Goldstein 1969 \(French Subtitles Interview\) - YouTube](#) (accessed August 21, 2022).

Graves-Brown, Paul & Hilary Orange. 2017. "'The Stars Look Very Different Today': Celebrity Veneration, Grassroots Memorials and the Apotheosis of David Bowie." *Material Religion*. 1-5.

Grossberg, Lawrence. 1992. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Harrington, C. Lee and Denise D. Bielby. 2018. "Aging, fans and fandom." In *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, edited by Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott: 406-15. London and New York: Routledge
- Harrington, C. Lee and Denise D. Bielby. 2010a. "A Life Course Perspective on Fandom." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. 13(5): 429-50.
- Harrington, C. Lee and Denise D. Bielby. 2010b. "Autobiographical Reasoning in Long-Term Fandom." *Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures* [Online]. 5 <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/209/176>, Accessed February 20, 2022.
- Harrington, C. Lee and Denise D. Bielby. 1995. *Soap Fans, Pursuing Pleasure and Making Meaning in Everyday Life*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Harrison, Ted. 1992. *Elvis People: The Cult of the King*. London: Fount.
- Hills, Matt. 2019. "Introduction: Fandom From Cradle to Grave." *Journal of Fandom Studies*. 7(2): 87-92.
- Hills, Matt. 2014. "Returning to 'Becoming-a-Fan' Stories, Theorizing Transformational Objects and the Emergence/Extension of Fandom." In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Fan Cultures*, edited by L. Dutis, K. Zwaan, S. Reijnders. 9-21. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hills, Matt. 2013. "Sacralising Fandom? From the 'Loss Hypothesis' to Fans' Media Rituals." *Kinephanos* [Online], 4(1): <https://www.kinephanos.ca/2013/sacralising-fandom/>, Accessed February 21, 2022.
- Hills, Matt. 2002. *Fan Cultures*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hinerman, Stephen. 1992. "'I'll Be Here With You': Fans, Fantasy and the Figure of Elvis." In *The Adoring Audience, Fan Culture and Popular Media*, edited by Lisa A. Lewis, 107-34. London and New York: Routledge.

Horton, Donald & Wohl, R. Richard. 1956. "Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction, Observations of Intimacy at a Distance." *Psychiatry* 19: 215-29.

Inglis, Ian. 2005. "The Continuing Story of John Lennon." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 22(5): 451-55.

[It's 2022. Does Elvis Presley still matter? - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](#) (accessed February 17, 2023).

Jackuowska, Honorata, Dominik Antonowicz and Radoslaw Kossakowski. 2020. *Female Fans, Gender Relations and Football Fandom: Challenging the Brotherhood Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Jake. 2013. Skype interview, December 15.

James, William. [1912] 2002. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Garden City: NJ: Dover Publications.

Jenkins, Henry. [1992] 2013. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Jenkins, Henry. 2007. "Afterward: The Future of Fandom." In *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and C. Lee Harrington, 357-64. New York: New York University Press.

Jenkins, Henry (ed.). 2007. "Gender and Fan Culture (Round Fourteen, Part One), Francesca Coppa and Robert Kozinets." *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*. http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/09/gender_and_fan_culture_round_f_1.html (accessed February 21, 2022).

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

Jones, Steve. 2005. "Conclusion: Eco Homo." In *Afterlife as Afterimage: Understanding Posthumous Fame*, edited by Steve Jones and Joli Jensen, 269-76. New York: P. Lang.

- Jones, Steve and Joli Jensen, eds. 2005. *Afterlife as Afterimage: Understanding Posthumous Fame*. New York: P. Lang.
- Joseph. 2019. Telephone interview, January 10.
- Joyrich, Lynne. 1993. "Elvisophilia, Knowledge, Pleasure, and the Cult of Elvis," *Differences*. 5(1): 73-91.
- Kelly, William W. 2004. *Fanning the Flames: Fans and Consumer Culture in Contemporary Japan*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Klass, Dennis, Phyllis R. Silverman & Steven Nickman, eds. 1996. *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Laderman, Gary. 2020. *Don't Think About Death*. Athens, GA: Deeds Publishing.
- Laderman, Gary. 2009. *Sacred Matters: Celebrity Worship, Sexual Ecstasies, the Living Dead, and Other Signs of Religious Life in the United States*. New York: New Press.
- Leah. 2019. Telephone interview, February 21.
- Leigh. 2013. Skype interview. November 23.
- Leonard, Candy. 2021. "Beatles Fandom: A De Facto Religion." In *Fandom and The Beatles: The Act You've Known for All These Years*, edited by Kenneth Womack and Kit O'Toole, 19-54. London and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Leonard, Candy. 2016. *Beatleness: How the Beatles and their Fans Remade the World*. New York: Skyhorse.
- Löbert, Anja. 2012. "Fandom as a Religious Form: On the Reception of Pop Music by Cliff Richard fans in Liverpool." *Popular Music*. 31(1): 125-41.

- Löbert, Anja. 2008. "Cliff Richard's Self-Presentation as a Redeemer." *Popular Music*. 27(1): 77-97.
- Lofton, Kathryn. 2018. "Celebrity and Religion." In *Routledge Handbook of Celebrity Studies*, edited by Anthony Elliott, 93-106. London and New York: Routledge.
- Luhrmann, Tanya M. 1989. *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Martin. 2014. Telephone interview, April 25.
- Marcus, George. E. 1998. *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Marcus, Griel. 1991. *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession*. New York: DoubleDay.
- Margry, Peter Jan. 2008. *Shrines and Pilgrimages in the Modern World: New Itineraries in the Sacred*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Marsh, Clive & Vaughan S. Roberts. 2015. "Listening as Religious Practice (Part One), Exploring Quantitative Data from an Empirical Study of the Cultural Habits of Music Fans." *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 30(1): 125-137.
- Marshall, P. David. 1997. *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Martin. 2014. Skype interview, April 25.
- McCloud, Sean. 2003. "Popular Culture Fandoms, the Boundaries of Religious Studies, and the Project of the Self." *Culture and Religion*. 4(2): 187-206.
- McGuire, Meredith B. 2008. *Lived Religions: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. London and New York: Oxford University Press.

- McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore. 1967. *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Melvin. 2019. Telephone interview, January 3.
- Melvin. 2013. Skype Interview, December 15.
- Michelle. 2019. Telephone Interview, February 3.
- Michelle. 2014. Skype interview, March 9.
- Mike. 2019. Telephone interview, February 13.
- Miller, Matt. 2017. "Johnny Cash Always Fought Hatred. His Family Just Disavowed a Charlottesville Nazi." August 17. *Esquire*. Available, <http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/news/a57066/johnny-cash-charlottesville-nazi-shirt/> (accessed April 22, 2022).
- Miller, Vincent. 2005. *Consuming Religion, Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*. New York: Continuum.
- Mills, Richard. 2020. *The Beatles and Fandom: Sex, Death and Progressive Nostalgia*. London and New York: Bloomsbury
- Mills, Anthony R. 2013. "Buffyverse Fandom as Religion." In *Fan Phenomena: Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, edited by Jennifer Stuller, 134-43. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Morimoto, Lori Hitchcock and Bertha Chin. 2017. "Reimagining the Imagined Community, Online Media Fandoms in the Age of Global Convergence." In *Fandom, Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, 174-88. New York: New York University Press.

Morin, Edward. [1957] 2005. *Les Stars*. Translated and edited by Richard Howard. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Nicole. 2014. Skype interview, April 8.

Norman, Philip. 2009. *John Lennon, The Life*. New York: Ecco.

Orsi, Robert A. 2005. *Between Heaven and Earth: the Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Orsi, Robert A. 2002. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Palmer, Susan J. 2003. "From Healing to Protest, Conversion Patterns Among the Practitioners of Falun Gong." *Nova Religio, The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*. 6(2): 348-64.

Parkes, Colin Murray & Holly G. Prigerson. *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life*. New York: Penguin Books

Partridge, Christopher. 2015. *Mortality and Music, Popular Music and the Awareness of Death*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Peter. 2019. Telephone interview, March 3.

Phyllis. 2019. Telephone interview, January 22.

Proctor, William. 2018. "A New Breed of Fan?: Regimes of Truth, One Direction Fans, and Representations of Enfreakment." In *Seeing Fans, Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, edited by Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth, 67-77. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Prothero, Stephen. 2004. Ideas Boston.

Radford, Scott K. & Peter H. Bloch. 2012 ‘Grief, commiseration, and consumption following the death of a celebrity.’ *Journal of Consumer Culture* 12(2): 137-55.

Raymond. 2014. Telephone interview, June 12.

Renshaw, David. 2013. “Yoko Ono posts picture of John Lennon’s blood stained glasses on Twitter.” NME. March 23. [Yoko Ono posts picture of John Lennon's blood-stained glasses on Twitter | NME](#) (accessed February 21, 2022).

Riddell, Kathleen Ann. 2022. “The Celebrity Imprint: Fan-Celebrity Attachments and Religious Work Among Fans of John Lennon and Johnny Cash. *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. 34(2): 113-26.

Riddell, Kathleen Ann. 2021. “ ‘My Whole World Shifted’: Identity and Transformation in Becoming-a-Fan Narratives.” *Journal of Fandom Studies*. 9(3): 195-211.

Riddell, Kathleen Ann. 2008. *When the Music’s Over, Cancel My Subscription to the Resurrection: Why Doors Fans Won’t Let Jim Die*. Masters Thesis. McMaster University.

Robert. 2014. Skype interview, March 9.

Rodman, Gilbert B. 1996. *Elvis after Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend*. London and New York: Routledge.

Rojek, Chris. 2007. “Celebrity and Religion.” In *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, edited by Sean Redmond and Su Holmes, 171-80. London: Sage Publications

Rojek, Chris. 2001. *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books.

Ruth. 2018. Telephone interview, December 19.

Ruth. 2014. Skype interview, February 4.

Sam. 2013. Skype interview, December 12.

- Sandvoss, Cornel. 2005. *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Sarah. 2018. Telephone interview, December 5.
- Sarah. 2018. Personal email, February 28.
- Sarah. 2018. Personal email, March 7.
- Sarah. 2014. Skype interview, January 31.
- Schwartz, Margaret. 2015. *Dead Matter: The Meaning of Iconic Corpses*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sharon. 2019. Personal email, April 22.
- Silberman, Neil Asher. 1990. "Elvis, the Myth Lives On." *Archeology*. 23(4): 80.
- Smith, Jonathan. 1987. *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Spigel, Lynn. 1990. "Communicating With the Dead, Elvis as a Medium." *Camera Obscura*. 8(2): 176-205.
- Stacey, Jackie. 1994. *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Stephanie. 2019. Telephone interview, February 10.
- Stevenson, Nick. 2018. "Celebrity, Fans and Fandom." In *Routledge Handbook of Celebrity Studies*, edited by Anthony Elliot, 141-74. London and New York: Routledge
- Stevenson, Nick. 2009. "Talking to Bowie Fans, Masculinity, Ambivalence and Cultural Citizenship." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. 12(1), 79-98.

Strhan, Anna and Rachael Shillitoe. 2019. "The Stickiness of Non-Religion? Intergenerational Transmission and the Formation of Non-Religious Identities in Childhood." *Sociology*. 53(6): 1094-1110.

Sylvan, Robin. 2005. *Trance Formation, the Spiritual and Religious Dimension of Global Rave Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Sylvan, Robin. 2002. *Traces of the Spirit, The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music*. New York: New York University Press.

[The Business of Elvis Presley: Can the King Rise Again? – Rolling Stone](#) (accessed February 17, 2023).

Tillich, Paul. 1957. *Dynamics of Faith*. New York: Harper Collins.

Tomlinson, Kathryn. 2011. "The Anxieties of Engaging in Multi-Site Research." In *Multi-Site Ethnography, Problems and Possibilities in the Translocation of Research Methods*, edited by Simon Coleman and Pauline von Hellermann, 161-69. London and New York: Routledge.

Turner. [1969] 2017. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. London and New York: Routledge.

Tweed, Thomas A. 1997. *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tyler. 2019. Telephone interview, March 17.

Utriainen, Terhi. 2020. "Lived religion meets secular life: the dynamics of framing and the subjunctive power of ritual." *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 35(2): 195-212.

Van Maanen, John. 1975. "Police Socialization: A Longitudinal Examination of Job Attributes in an Urban Police Department." *Administrative Science Quarterly*. 20(2): 207-28.

Van Krieken, Robert. 2012. *Celebrity Society*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Vermorel, Fred. [1985] 2011. *Starlust: The Secret Fantasies of Fans*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Vikan, Gary. 1994. “Graceland as *Locus Sanctus*.” In *Elvis + Marilyn, 2x Immortal*, edited by Geri DePaoli. New York: Rizzoli.
- Walter. 2014. Skype interview, February 7.
- Wanda. 2014. Skype interview, April 12.
- Ward, Pete. 2020. *Celebrity Worship*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ward, Pete. 2011. *Gods Behaving Badly, Media, Religion, and Celebrity Culture*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.
- Weber, Max. [1947] 2012. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Translated by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing.
- Williams, Michael. 2013. *Film Stardom: Myth and Classicism, the Rise of Hollywood's gods*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Woo, Benjamin. 2017. “The Invisible Bag of Holding, Whiteness and Media Fandom.” In *Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, edited by Melissa A. Click & Suzanne Scott, 245-52. London and New York: Routledge.

Appendix I: Sample of Fans (John Lennon and Johnny Cash)

	John Lennon	Year of Birth	Marital Status	Occupation	HLE C	Johnny Cash	Year of Birth	Marital Status	Occupation	HLEC
1	Bruce	1962	S	Unemployed	HS	Devin	1947	S	Semi-retired/ (JCM)	
2	Caitlyn	1995	S	Student	HS	Robert	1959	M	Former assistant to JC/(writer, music historian and speaker)	
3	David	1949	M	Retired (elevator mechanic)/ (musician [JL])	HS	Nicole	1961		JCM/ (freelance musician)	
4	Leigh	1972	S	Unemployed	HS	Wanda	1980	S	Team Manager/ (Runs a JC website)	BA
5	Sam			Retired/ (musician)		Norman	1965	M	Teacher	BA
6	Melvin	1957		Unemployed		Daniel	1993	S	Student/part-time English instructor (helps Wanda with JC website)	HS
7	Jake	1994	S	Student at vocational school	HS	Martin	1957	M		
8	Paul					Edward	1951	M	JC Tribute Artist	
9	Carolyn	1953	M	Teacher	MA	Chris	1965	S	Video editor	HS
10	Glenn	1935	M	Advertising Director for law firm (former disc jockey)	BA	Diane	1943	M	Legal Secretary	BA
11	Sarah	1956	M	Freelance Writer/ (JL)	BA	Phyllis		M	Retired	
G	Ruth	1961	M	Runs Beatles tour company/ Homemaker	BA	Dale	1957	M		
13	Walter	1963		Producer of tribute band/ Playwright (JL) (formerly worked for Microsoft)	BA	Joseph	1940	D	Construction and demolition (Former friend of JC/writer)	HS
14	Michelle	1959	M	Writer (JL)	MA	Raymond	1959		Makes brake systems for Harley Davidson	HS
15	Chauncey	1941	W	Retired/ (Former Pro. Engineer; musician [JL])	BEng	Will	1961	M	Sports Director at local news station/ (musician)	College Diploma
16	Stephanie	1956		Author	PhD	Tyler	1979	S	Actor	BFA
17	Leah	1966	M	Author	College	Sharon			Musician	

18	Mike			Journalist						
19	Peter	1965	M	Author	A- Level s (UK)					
20	Simon									

Median year of birth, Lennon: 1959 (63 years [2022])

Median year of birth, Cash: 1959 (63 years [2022])

Colour Coding:

Light grey: These are fans I met at the field sites

Grey: These are fans to whom I was referred through snowball sampling

Dark grey: These are the new fans who comprised, in part, the second round of interviews

Appendix II: Interview Questions

Round 1:

Are you a fan of Lennon/Cash?

Is there a particular era of Lennon/Cash that you like? Albums? Songs?

How long have you been a fan of Lennon/Cash?

How did you become a fan of Lennon/Cash?

Do you remember the first time you heard the music of Lennon/Cash? If yes, where were you and when was it? How did it make you feel? If no, move on to other questions.

Were your parents/siblings/friends fans of Lennon/Cash?

How often do you listen to the music of Lennon/Cash?

Do you do anything else when you're listening to the music? If so, what?

Do you participate in Lennon/Cash fan events, such as fan gatherings, tribute concerts, “pilgrimage”? If yes, which ones?

What about online fan forums? Facebook? Twitter?

How long have you participated in fan events?

What kinds of fan activities do you do?

Why do you think you participate in the fandom?

What is your role in the fandom?

Do you remember when Lennon/Cash died? Where were you? How did it make you feel?

Have you visited the graves/memorials or places frequented by Lennon/Cash?

Do you collect Lennon/Cash merchandise or memorabilia, such as recordings, posters, or other kinds of merchandise?

How often do you purchase Lennon/Cash merchandise, such as recordings, posters, or other kinds of merchandise?

At home, do you display this merchandise, prominently? If yes, do you keep it in any special place? If no, what do you do to protect it?

Are there particular posters or photograph [image] of Lennon/Cash that you identify with? If yes, can you tell me why?

Do you listen to other kinds of music, other than Lennon/Cash? If yes, can you give me two to three examples?

Are you involved in other fandoms? Which ones?

Do you personally identify with Lennon/Cash? Why?

Generally speaking, has your family and/or friends told you that share a trait of Lennon/Cash (e.g., the way you smile, carry yourself, etc.)?

Were you raised in a religious tradition? If yes, which one?

Are you currently a member of a religious tradition? If yes, which one?

[If a US Citizen] Are you a registered voter? If registered, are you Republican or Democrat? Are you Independent, etc?

Can I follow-up with you?

Do you know of anyone else I can speak with?

Round 2:

Can you tell me about the nature of your connection with Johnny Cash? What are the origins? How did it develop? What does it look like now?

What is your religious background?

Are you a collector? If yes, do you display your collectables prominently in your home?

What do you do with all this? How does it make you feel?