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Constructing History and Reconstructing the Self in *The Night War* Series

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The paper presents a close reading of *The Night War*, an unfinished series of *Captain America* fanfiction, through the lens of Linda Hutcheon's discussions of historiographic metafiction. *The Night War* series presents an alternate version of the Marvel Cinematic Universe in which Captain America's best friend Bucky Barnes had kept a journal while he was a soldier in WWII, and the posthumously published diary became a literary classic. The paper examines the series' structural aspects, most notably the fact that it is written entirely in the form of a classic war memoir, with detailed footnotes for both (fan)fictional and actual historical events. Thus, *The Night War* continuously draws the readers out of a highly verisimilitudinous piece of writing and explicitly points to its own artificiality. The metafictional nature of the series comes to the fore in one of the series' sequels, in which the authors' growing thematic insistence on the unreliability of historical narratives is realized through an audio-sequel. Therefore, *The Night War* series also exemplifies a transmedia story, one in which an entire alternate universe is created to discuss the ideas of history, memory, the self – and the inherent instability of these very categories. The paper seeks to contextualize these narrative interventions by analysing *The Night War* both as a piece of fanfiction and as an example of historiographic metafiction.

KEYWORDS
historiographic metafiction, fanfiction, alternate history, Captain America, transmedia storytelling

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Introduction

The Night War is an unfinished series of *Captain America* fanworks written by praximeter (Zimario)[1] and performed by quietnight[2], published from June 2017 to May 2018 on *Archive of Our Own* ("The Night War"). The series imagines an alternate version of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) in which Captain America's best friend Bucky Barnes kept a journal throughout his time on the front, and his posthumously published diary shaped post-WWII America. Apart from the journal (which is presented to the readers as *The Night War: 60th Anniversary Edition*) the series also contains fabricated newspaper articles, a short story, and *The Night War: An Audio Companion*, an unfinished audio version of the journal which doubles as a sequel. All of the instalments in the series take place at different times in this fictionalized version of the MCU, thus providing not only a critical response to the source material, but also fleshing out a self-consciously constructed alternate history. The authors' dedication to painstaking historical verisimilitude is juxtaposed to the structural and thematic insistence on unreliability of the narratives and unknowability of the historicized self, thus enabling a reading of *The Night War* from the perspective of Linda Hutcheon's discussions on historiographic metafiction.

The paper will explore the metafictional aspects of the series through two segments. The first part, "Constructing History", will focus on the main text of the series and examine the impetus behind creating an alternative history, both from the point of view of postmodern criticism and that of transformative art. The second part, "Reconstructing the Self", will analyse *An Audio Companion's* treatment of the self, memory, and the (im)possibility of recreating a selfhood out of a narrative. Apart from the works contained in *The Night War* series, the analysis will also include the paratext – the tags and the comments section– as these extratextual components explicitly point to the themes and motifs crucial to the series.

Constructing history

In "Historiographic Metafiction" Linda Hutcheon writes,
[i]t is part of the postmodernist stand to confront the paradoxes *of fictive/historical representation, the particular/the general,* and t*he present/the past.* And this confrontation is itself contradictory, for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, yet it is more than willing to exploit both. (73, emphasis mine)

This explanation, aimed primarily at postmodernist historical novels, seems curiously apt for describing the artistic vision behind *The Night War* series. As a work of fanfiction based on the *Captain America* movie franchise, it is inherently rooted in "fictive representation", yet its defining feature is its historicity. As the author herself[3] reflects in the comments section to *The Night War: 60th Anniversary Edition*,

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> I set out to make something as "real" as I possibly could. I wanted it to feel so plausible and three-dimensional that it could slide in right next to other contemporaneous accounts and just fit, even if it's about Captain America and a bunch of comic book stuff that never happened. But what it said about the war, and how the war was fought, and about who fought and died in it -- I needed that part to feel gruesomely, completely, heartbreakingly real. (praximeter (Zimario) on Chapter 20)

The tension between its essential (fan)fictionality and emotional and historical authenticity is resolved through the presentation of an alternate history. Through it, the author provides the readers with what Matt Hills terms as hyperdiegesis – "a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension" (qtd. in Thomas 11). This is exemplified perhaps most clearly in the notes accompanying the main body of the text that serve to explain the aspects of this hyperdiegetic structure which could not have been stated in the diary entries themselves. Hutcheon emphasises how historiographic metafiction uses "the paratextual conventions of historiography (especially footnotes) to both inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations" ("Historiographic Metafiction" 91). In *The Night War*, this effect is threefold – for instance, Chapter 18 contains "Historical Notes" which expound on the operations and battles alluded to in the entries and contextualize them within the progression of WWII, "Chapter Notes", which explain the 1940s slang, literary and cultural references, and "Notes", in which the author clarifies which of the events in "Historical" and "Chapter Notes" actually happened.

The multi-layered framing of the text is in a way facilitated by the very layout of the website; and even though the fictional "Historical Notes" are embedded within the body of the text, the extradiegetic "Notes" are a regularly used feature of *Archive of Own*. This aspect of *The Night War* echoes Thomas's insistence on "the inappropriateness and impossibility of focusing solely on the fanfiction text, without taking into account how aspects of the interface and website design impact upon the reading experience" (20). Authors of fanfiction can expect a kind of direct communication with their audience (Barenblat 175), a relationship that is not immediately assumed in the context of traditional publishing. This is made explicit in the e-book version of *The Night War*, which contains a fake colophon but, significantly, not the "Notes" through which praximeter (Zimario) directly addressed the readers. While the overtly "fanfictional" original layout on *Archive of Our Own* leaned heavily on what Hutcheon had in another context called the "co-existing views of history as intertextual and as extratextual, which operate in tension" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 143), the version which aimed to imitate the appearance of a traditional publication had to lose an aspect of its metafictionality in order to preserve its hyperdiegetic structure.

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As Hutcheon notes, apart from the "fictive/historical", another dichoto-my characteristic of historiographic metafiction is that of "the particular/the general" ("Historiographic Metafiction" 73). Unlike the first paradox, which emerges through the very medium and structure of the narrative, the tension between the particular and the general is present in *The Night War* primarily on the thematic level. On the one hand, it generalizes a very particular story, as it transforms a "historical fantasy" (McHale 95) – the WWII heroics of a genetically enhanced, mor-ally impeccable super-soldier – into an ordinary man's terrible struggle. Where the source material pitted Captain America and his Howling Commandos against the monstrous, power-hungry Red Skull (Milford 621), *The Night War* situates the horror in the gradual unravelling of a guilt-stricken, shell-shocked soldier. The emotional impact of the narrative is thus in many ways predicated on seeing in Bucky Barnes the ghosts of millions of men who fought in the war. This is made explicit in his diary entries, especially through the *leitmotif* of horrible guilt and fear intertwined with longing for everyday domestic experiences:

> The thing is that I don't know how to get back from this. I just keep trying and trying (the only thing I know to do) and I somehow soldier on but there is this small ugly part of me that must be the most awful coward. I am so very tired of it all. I dreamed on the transport back of just braiding Curly's hair. Endlessly trying to be gentle not force a comb through it just using my fingers and she'd be sitting on the chair in the kitchen her legs swinging (she's perpetually maybe 5 years old—smallest little pipsqueak until she starting [sic] shooting up around when she turned 10) and humming or retelling me (using voices) a radio play she heard and me just braiding her hair combing it through braiding it again like a perfect calm Saturday afternoon when she came running in from playing and Ma said "Do something to fix that nest please, beloved." (August 25, 1944)

This deliberate reframing of the *Captain America* story into one which centres around the thoughts of an "ordinary" man is characteristic of fanfiction, which "uti-lizes the gaps and possibilities of canon and reality to reveal basic assumptions and the possibilities they exclude" (Fathallah 200). However, the "canon" praxime-ter (Zimario) is questioning is not limited to the *Captain America* movie franchise – it is history itself.

"History as intertext" (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 142) is at the heart of *The Night War*, as the author emphasises in response to a reader who is praising her depiction of the brutal Battle of Hürtgen Forest,

> [o]ne of the things I'm trying to achieve with this fic is to break down some of the mythology that Americans are taught about the war, and how the war was fought. It was a "good" war, inasmuch as it was justified, necessary, and essential to the survival of the world, but it *wasn't good for the men fighting it*. So I chose this battle because it was a loss and because it was every bit as awful and brutal as something from WWI, and it tends to be forgotten because it's not as "cool" a

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> battle as the campaign for Normandy or the Battle of the Bulge. So I'm really glad that the experience of the "average" soldier came through in a meaningful way. (praximeter (Zimario) on Chapter 17)

The decision to remodel a fantastical source material into something that relates the "experience of the 'average' soldier", however, does not simply exchange "the particular" for "the general" (Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction" 73). It also serves as a critique of the previous re-interpretations of this story. As Hutcheon emphasises in her discussion of intertextuality, "it is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 126). This is particularly true of fanfiction, where authors position themselves against/alongside not only the source material, or canon, but also the previous fan discourse and range of preferred representations, or fanon (Thomas 8-9). In response to a comment praising how the story "brings home the horror and madness of war", praximeter (Zimario) states that "[a] lot of WWII-era fic … tends to romanticize and rose-colored-glasses-ify the war, making it all buddies pallin' around getting up to hijinks in little French towns and it just wasn't like that at all" (on Chapter 14). The author's response confirms Fathallah's assertions about fanfiction readers (and writers) preferring writing which they perceive to be of high literary and cultural quality (26). However, it also points to the specific conditions of producing work in dialogue with other fans: by using the tags such as "World War II" and "Historical Accuracy", praximeter (Zimario) is not merely describing her story, but trying to assert her own interpretations of these terms over the existing *Captain America* fanon.

Another aspect of *The Night War* which negotiates with both canon and fanon is the use of its narrator, Bucky Barnes, as a way to produce "a problematized inscribing of subjectivity into history" (Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction" 85). In this respect, the representational conflict between "the particular" and "the general" veers decidedly towards the particular. While the *Captain America* movies give Bucky a relatively important role, he is definitely not the protagonist, as this role is occupied by Steve Rogers as Captain America, the quintessential superhero (Coogan 77). Although the fandom "recontextualizes and reimagines the source text" (Lamerichs 30) so as to accommodate for the character of Bucky Barnes, as praximeter (Zimario) remarks, it is often accomplished by casting Bucky as "Steve's-partner-in-codependency" (on Chapter 14). The predominance of fanfiction which centres on a strong emotional, romantic, and/or sexual relationship between Steve and Bucky is in line with fandom's long history of "same-sex erotica and/or relationship-focused stories" (Fathallah 27). Praximeter (Zimario), however, opts to marginalize the fandom's central romantic pairing in favour of constructing an entire alternate history around the cultural relevance of Bucky Barnes's private thoughts. In doing so, she centres the importance of subjectivity, the self *as it is recorded on page*. As Hutcheon points out, "[t]o elevate 'private experience to public consciousness' in postmodern historiographic metafiction is not really to expand the subjective; it is to render inextricable the public and

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historical and the private and biographical." (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 94). In one of his entries from September 1943, shocked after experiencing combat (but far from the truly traumatized prisoner of war he will become by the end of his journal), Bucky notes,

> *I keep thinking somehow if I put myself in this notebook then if I die I won't be gone completely.* The part of me that cannot breathe or stop screaming for all of this goes into the notebook and what's left of me—a man that can keep going is what stays on the outside. (September 15, 1943, emphasis mine)

Unbeknownst to Bucky, it is precisely this idea – of somehow preserving his "representable essence" (Currie 15) in written form – that will come back to haunt him in *The Night War's* sequels as he struggles to reconstruct the self that he "put in this notebook".

Reconstructing the self

Among the paradoxes Hutcheon lists as integral to historiographic metafiction, "the present/the past" ("Historiographic Metafiction" 73) is the one that looms most sinisterly throughout the series. Even while reading the abrupt and affective ending of Bucky's WWII narrative, the readers' thoughts are in the canonical "present". They, after all, know what *really* became of Bucky Barnes – owing to experiments conducted on him while he was a prisoner of war, he survived the fatal fall in March 1945 only to be captured, tortured, and turned into the depersonalized assassin known in the MCU as the Winter Soldier (*Captain America: The Winter Soldier*). This context, with which every reader enters the narrative, gives particular passages of Bucky's journal a chillingly prophetic quality.

> What the hell goes wrong in a man's head to make him turn on his own people. I cannot understand how somebody could do that. It doesn't matter how long you are a prisoner or how hungry you are or how afraid you are the enemy stays the enemy. (February 8, 1945, emphasis in the original)

The hyperdiegetic structure, however, cannot reflect on these parallels, for in the alternate universe that the author is presenting, the *60th Anniversary Edition* predates the discovery of Winter Soldier's true identity. Thus, the conflict between the past and the present is doubly asserted – even though the annotated edition of his journal is an attempt at "reliably capturing the experience of the human beings who really suffered and enacted history" (McHale 96), the reveal of the Winter Soldier's identity demonstrates the inherent tenuousness of such an effort.

The Night War series' overt exploration of the present self being haunted by its recorded past version is first established in "Find Me (Where the Lovelight

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Gleams)". The short story recounts the disjointed and desperate thoughts of Bucky, recently saved from his captivity as the Winter Soldier, as he visits his younger brother Teddy, now an old man, and fails to remember any of their shared history. Panicking and feeling that he cannot live up to his family's expectations, he runs away and steals a copy of *The Night War.* The short story establishes "language as a 'prisonhouse' from which the possibility of escape is remote" (Waugh 41-42), presenting the reader with a Bucky who is no longer able to identify with or even remember the man who wrote the famous *The Night War*, yet knows everyone is expecting him to somehow be that person again.

The idea of portraying a protagonist who is unable to know the past, even though he is "both a spectator and an actor in the historical process" (Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction" 90) is made even more explicit and urgent in *The Night War: An Audio Companion*. This sequel transforms the series into a "trans-media story" which "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (Jenkins 97-98). Even though *An Audio Companion* is sequentially the last instalment in the series, the listeners quickly learn that interdiegetically it was recorded before the events of the short story preceding it (quietnight on Chapter 4). This complex timeline corresponds to Schiller's assertion that transmedia stories "manifest themselves less as singular plots, and may seem to readers and viewers more like archi-tecturally narrative universes, inhabited by multiple characters, and articulating complex temporalities and contradictory perspectives." (102).

A "contradictory perspective" which emerges within the first few episodes of *An Audio Companion* is that of its listeners as "overhearers" (Tobin 189) – for the audience quickly learn that what they are listening to is not merely a podcast containing the audiobook of *The Night War*. They have been allowed access to another diegetic level, listening to someone *as they listen to the podcast*. Initial-ly unaware of who it is that they hear cursing, lighting cigarettes and erratically rewinding the episodes, the listeners are at once robbed of a sense of control and made aware of their position as overhearers. As a reader with the username ChangHenGe remarked in *An Audio Companion'*s comments section,

> We are readers and listeners of the text but also readers and listeners [o]f the readers and listeners, and crucially here a listener of The Listener.
>
> And I guessed a bit from hints that we could extrapolate about who The Listener was, but it's nothing like as gut wrenching and heart aching as hearing it and hearing what we do not hear, what we are stopped from hearing - the tape cut off giving us that tiny gap into which we can dive into imaginings. The unreliable narration of the text, where we are given spaces to work between the lines, becomes further developed into this knowledge of an ever present near silent listener, whose choices to stop and start are filled with increased significance. (ChangHenGe on Chapter 4)

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If the *Audio Companion* cultivates a self-aware and critical audience, it is exerting even more epistemological pressures on its Listener. "The unreliable narration of the text" ChangHanGe is referring to is, after all, just another interesting source of analysis for T*he Night War's* readers – the ways in which a WWII soldier might have been overemphasizing, downplaying, or repressing certain aspects of his personality is intriguing, but of no immediate significance to the average "in-universe" audience. The Listener is, however, soon revealed to be none other than Bucky Barnes. Having escaped the disastrous family gathering described in "Find Me (Where the Lovelight Gleams)", he has run away to visit his old war buddy Frank Castellano (a recurring character in his diary entries), all in order to listen to *The Night War* and try to become the person contained within. For him, any unreliability is catastrophic, for he considers the journal as the only possible way to learn how to *be* Bucky Barnes.

Writing on the difference between modern and postmodern treatment of subjectivity, Malpas establishes that

> [t]hrough memory, the modern subject is capable of constructing a personal narrative of identity, grasping the present and judging how to respond to the future. In essence, the modern subject is the product of its ability to recall and synthesise the events that make up its life: memory generates identity and allows each of us to become an individual and unique human being. (64)

As *An Audio Companion* progresses, the audience become increasingly aware of just how much Listener Bucky's view of himself depends on his (in)ability to "construct a personal narrative of identity" by consuming and internalizing *The Night War*. His efforts are, however, not particularly successful. In this regard, his journey from a prolific diarist to a distressed amnesiac serves to illustrate how "postmodernism establishes, differentiates, and then disperses stable narrative voices (and bodies) that use memory to try to make sense of the past" (Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction" 85).

Listener Bucky is therefore constituted as an essentially postmodern subject – one who battles the notions of truth, history and reliability of narratives, only to come out of the fight disenchanted and discouraged. His frustration is evident as he interacts with the podcast, but really comes to the fore when he attempts to explain his position to other people. A particularly interesting example can be found in Chapter 12. In it, the listeners are allowed to overhear Bucky's phone call with Steve (the only other person who can confirm his narrative), who gives him a different account of a particular event than the one told in the journal:

> BUCKY. Those aren't- Those aren't *the words*– In the book, what you said–
> STEVE. Buck, do you remember it at all, or–
> BUCKY. He wrote everything down! Those aren't– Why'd ya say different words, Steve??

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> STEVE. You didn't write everything down! Buck–
> BUCKY. Not every day, but–
> STEVE. Even in what you did write–
> BUCKY. It's got– It's got *everything* I don't remember, Steve, don't–
> STEVE. No, it doesn't! I mean, it's your thoughts, Buck, but you used to– You'd write and rewrite. I remember because you'd–
> BUCKY. *I* don't!
> STEVE. I know! I know Buck, but the book, it's not– It's not a skeleton key, Jesus H!
> …
> BUCKY. You said, before, how it didn't, what you remembered was– different. From the book.
> STEVE. Yeah.
> BUCKY. But, how? There's… it's so *full*, it's got–
> STEVE. It ain't you, Buck!
> BUCKY. I know that, because its fucking *him*!
> STEVE. It ain't him either! (00:06:16-00:12:56)

This conversation, halting and insecure, yet full of desperation and conviction, serves as a microcosm of not only Listener Bucky's existential and epistemological struggle, but of the entire *Audio Companion*. Bucky and Steve cannot reach a conclusion, and neither can the extradiegetic overhearers of *An Audio Companion*, as its unfinished status (fourteen episodes out of the planned twenty were ever produced) prevents any kind of closure. The central tensions running through the series – that of truth, memory and the (im)possibility of containing them within a written account – seem to support the notion "that there are only truths in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness per se, just others' truths" (Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction" 76). But rather than solely focusing on the depiction of "incompatible realities [that] flicker into existence and out of existence again, overwhelmed by the competing reality of language" (McHale 234), *The Night War* series is deliberately affective. By giving the audience access to Listener Bucky's desperate attempts to reconstruct the self, it compels them to feel his anguish at the hopelessness of anyone finding any stability or unassailable truths in a narrative.

Conclusion

In order to critically engage with the *Captain America* franchise and dominant fan interpretations, as well as historical representations of wwii, praximeter (Zimario) and quietnight created a multi-layered alternate universe centred around the fraught subjectivity of Bucky Barnes. By predicating an entire alternate universe on the cultural significance of a classic war memoir, the authors are thematically centring the power of narratives to shape history, thus situating their work in the postmodern discourse on historiographic metafiction. The temporal, diegetic and historiographic intricacies of the narrative(s) contained within *The*

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Night War series, however, do not serve to only to lay bare the authors' procedure, but to create a sense of emotional authenticity. *An Audio Companion*, the last, unfinished sequel, transforms written fiction into audio, making *The Night War* a transmedia story, one in which the listening experience rests on the existence of an interdiegetic Listener. The audience is thus allocated the position of overhearers, who are allowed access to The Listener's attempts to rebuild his identity on the supposed reliability and knowability of the self as it is contained in the journal. His inability to do so brings to the fore the series' structural and thematic preoccupation with metafictionality. Even more explicitly, its unfinished status robs the readers of a chance at "overhearing" an emotionally satisfying end to the narrative – and thus, just as Bucky, the readers are forced to confront the idea of a story not granting them, or the protagonist, any narrative stability to cling to.

End Notes

1   praximeter (Zimario) is the username of the author of *The Night War* series on the fanfiction website *Archive of Our Own*.

2   quietnight is the *Archive of Our Own* username of the author's main collaborator, who recorded the audio version.

3   The author's pronouns are stated on her Tumblr blog ("dreaming of 1940").

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