

• *Articles* •

## **The Feminist Strikes Back: Performative Mourning in the Twitter Response to Carrie Fisher's Death**

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**Abstract:** *This essay explores the feminist response to Carrie Fisher's death by analyzing the dialogic nature of tweets memorializing Fisher. In reaction to other fan's memorials, feminists offer commentary about not only Leia and Fisher, but also Star Wars fandom in general. These feminist tweets become a form of performative mourning in that they both highlight the Twitter users' identities and identification with Leia/Fisher and seek to further Fisher's social causes. I unpack how these memorials honor Fisher by not only illuminating the general divisions within the Star Wars fan community, but also taking up Fisher's activist legacy.*

On December 27, 2016, actress and writer Carrie Fisher died at the age of 60, days after suffering a heart attack on a Los Angeles-bound flight. The cause of death was later declared inconclusive—a mix of sleep apnea and “other conditions” including drug use (Winton and Dolan, 2017). Famous for her role as Princess and General Leia Organa in the *Star Wars* series, Fisher's death prompted an outpouring of public grief on social media. Twitter especially was alight with memorials and tributes from *Star Wars* fans. #MaytheForceBeWithYou trended on Twitter. Photos and fan art of Fisher in her iconic Leia side buns or wearing her *Star Wars* costumes began circling the web. Tony Morrison, citing Twitter analytics, tweeted that in less than 24 hours, more than 3.1 million tweets had been written about Fisher; at their peak on the day of her death, Morrison continued, 150 tweets about Fisher were posted every second.

In a fandom thought to be dominated by men and men's stories, Fisher and her character of Leia became the foothold for women fans. Though many female

characters exist in the Expanded Universes (both pre-Disney and post-Disney iterations)—characters with whom countless fans engage and appreciate—Princess Leia is by far the most prominently recognized and discussed. After Fisher's death, memorials on Twitter often equated Fisher with Leia, mourning the two interchangeably. These tweets are a particularly clear demonstration of the different understandings of Leia's character, but they also focus on how important Fisher, and her life's work as a writer and activist, were to her many fans. While some straight men mourned the loss of their first crush (sometimes even referencing the sexual awakening brought on by Leia's metal bikini), other men and women mourned a feminist and mental health activist, a "mouthy" woman who pushed back against the sexism of Hollywood, and a character who literally fought the patriarchy.

This paper explores the feminist response to Fisher's passing by examining a random selection of tweets from the first 24 hours after Fisher's death, and complicating the ways those tweets identify and/or identify with Fisher and Leia. I argue these tweets are performative, revealing both the fan's identity and his or her relationship with or understanding of Fisher and Leia. Through discourse and performance, feminists offer commentary not only about Leia and Fisher, but also *Star Wars* fandom in general. In the end, it is clear that through performative mourning, feminist fans demonstrate not only their respect for Fisher and Leia, but also their wish to carry both the actress's and the character's legacies forward.

This essay first contextualizes women's roles in *Star Wars* fandom. Then, by highlighting studies about mourning celebrities on Twitter, it explores how Twitter becomes a space to enact grief. Next, it defines and contextualizes performative mourning and its implications on understanding social media grief. Lastly, this essay describes, categorizes, and analyzes several randomly selected tweets in an effort to illuminate trends in the grief discourse and to draw conclusions about the role of feminist fans in *Star Wars* fandom at large.

### Women's Fandom and Feminist Messages

It is easy to say that *Star Wars* fandom has always been dominated by men. The story of *Star Wars* is clearly male-centric; in the original trilogy, there are only three named female characters: Leia, Beru, and Mon Mothma, and the latter two have very few lines (Wood 2016, 64). While the films' absence of female characters does not preclude women from liking the series, it does indicate the intended audience for the films—reflecting, perhaps, the way male audiences dominated science fiction fandom more generally at the time the original trilogy was released. However, even today box office demographics show that 58% of the opening-weekend audience for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* were men (Lang 2015). Analytics of the Twitter followers for the official Star Wars account (@StarWars) found that the average fan was a married-with-children, upper middle class, 46-year-old man (Valinsky 2015). For these reasons, merchandising for the series is largely male-oriented, as well (Travis 2013, 54). But over the years, women fans have asserted their presence in the fan community, inserting themselves into traditionally male fan spaces, and also creating fan spaces for themselves. Their presence might not be overt, but women have been fans of *Star Wars* since the beginning.

Annalise Ophelian, a filmmaker working on a documentary about women fans ("Looking for Leia," due out in 2018) suggests that *Star Wars* fandom has a perception problem more than a problem with exclusion: "The perception of male dominance in fandom is, I think, accurate, and a reflection of how sexism functions in the world...I think women's fandom is in many ways a reflection of how women have always navigated that sexism" (qtd. in Liptak 2017). In this case, women are managing the sexism in fandom by both creating feminist counter-narratives that challenge male dominance head-on, and creating separate fan spaces that are solely for women. Therefore, the fandom often becomes gender-segregated rather than gender-exclusionary.

The Internet has, thus, been a haven for women fans; though men have

traditionally operated the majority of *Star Wars* communities online, women staff and moderators are becoming more common (Travis 2013, 52). Similarly, women *Star Wars* fans have begun to create their own online spaces to discuss the fandom in ways that matters to them. Several “geek girl” websites have formed to host these conversations (53). Will Brooker (2002) utilizes interviews with the women who run these *Star Wars*-centric geek girl websites to examine women’s use of online spaces for fan discussions. Brooker’s most prevalent example is the website *Star Wars Chicks*.

*Star Wars Chicks* was “dedicated to all of the little girls who wanted to pilot an X-Wing when they grew up” (qtd. in Brooker 2002, 205). Brooker describes the site as addressing stereotypically male fandom, like role-playing games and collecting, as well as more stereotypically “feminine” forms of fandom like cooking and fashion (205). The site also hosted an archive of fan fiction, divided into general fiction and the “SithChicks” section for over-18 content, which also offers its own mailing list (205). Brooker’s discussion with one of the “SithChicks” mailing list moderators, Becky, reveals a great deal about how *Star Wars Chicks* created a positive space for women *Star Wars* fans. “It adds validation, as in, I’m not alone, I’m not a freak,” Becky says (qtd. in Brooker 2002, 217). While many of the sites Brooker looked at have changed or gone defunct since he was writing in 2002, these examples illustrate the thrust of women-centric fan spaces and the purposes they serve. New websites are constantly supplanting those that go defunct or disappear, growing with the fan community’s needs and abilities.

One of the most prominent discussions among fans in these webs spaces is how they view the representation of women in the core films and Expanded Universes. The lack of women in prominent roles throughout the series is considered sexism. George Lucas was famously influenced by Akira Kurosawa’s samurai films, and utilized Joseph Campbell’s monomyth—both of which presented a patriarchal story frame through which a male character comes of age. Some, thus, see the most prominent female character, Leia, as the epitome of patriarchal

fantasy—she is a princess who must be rescued by two men. Kathleen Ellis (2002) describes Leia's agency in the face of her initial capture by Darth Vader, and how Leia is able to stand up to Vader, seemingly overcoming the patriarchal nature of her role (135). However, "as soon as Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) and Han Solo (Harrison Ford) become involved, this is quickly forgotten. She is thereafter the traditional damsel in distress and it would appear that her 'femaleness' is what prevents her from saving herself" (135). In Ellis' view, Leia never recovers her agency in later scenes—she is stuck as a female trope, the damsel in distress. Ellis ties this return to the patriarchy to American and Hollywood culture at the time, pointing out that the "underlying assumptions of the world depicted in *Star Wars* are very similar to the norms and values of twentieth century planet Earth, particularly in terms of gender representation" (135). Leia's return to the trope of damsel in distress is thus in line with not only the frameworks on which Lucas based his story, but also American cultural values.

On the other hand, Diana Dominguez (2007) directly counters Ellis's concerns, suggesting that Leia does not become a typical damsel in distress but rather exists as a feminist counterbalance to Lucas' more patriarchal story tropes. She demonstrates how Leia subverts that damsel in distress role by making fun of her rescuers and helping to break herself out. "From the 'rescue' scene onward, however, Leia becomes a full-out rebel: outspoken, unapologetic, sarcastic, even bossy, and shooting and killing without hesitation with the same skill as all the tough guys around her; in other words, she doesn't act at all like a damsel and, certainly, not one in helpless distress" (113). This much more feminist interpretation focuses on how Leia disrupts stereotypes: "she is a princess, but not a damsel in distress; she is a warrior, but does not live solely by the sword or gun; she is a sister and, eventually, a wife and mother, but she never stops being a rebel; and, she exemplifies both traditional and feminist qualities of the hero, fighting dragons (or storm troopers) bravely and treating others equally" (Dominguez 2007, 121). Dominguez's reading of Leia is now quite commonplace in several fan communities,



especially amongst feminists. This Leia appeals to a feminist of understanding of women's capabilities and roles. Leia is, by this interpretation, more complicated than she seems.

The most important debate over Leia's agency and power, however, surrounds her scenes in the slave costume during *Return of the Jedi*. The slave outfit itself is an oft-debated litmus test for a fan's understanding of Leia as a character, and her potential as a feminist character. "Like feminism itself," Wood argues, interpretation of the bikini "is subjective, depending on the personal opinion and experience of the individual" fan (2016, 68). Dominguez argues that the bikini scene "although it is rife with titillation for the primarily young male audience of the films" can be seen as "a moment of great empowerment for the females in the audience" (2007, 117). As Leia uses her chains to strangle Jabba the Hut, she is using "the very elements of [her] enslavement to kill a captor that understood too late that he dangerously underestimated his prey" (117). While Leia (and concurrently Fisher) is objectified in this scene, overcoming her enslavement is a power reversal; it demonstrates once again the agency Leia has to save herself.

For women fans, Leia became a feminist role model (Dominguez 2007, Travis 2013), who helped engage women in an otherwise male-dominated series. Erika Travis (2013) suggests that "female *Star Wars* fans generally hold Leia as the standard toward which all other female *Star Wars* characters must strive" (50). Women rally around Leia and are, consequently, very protective of her image and how other fans interpret her. For this and other reasons, *Star Wars* fandom is still a tense place, and the divisions are deep set. Travis says, "there are male fans who adhere to the 'boys club' idea, but there is a much larger community, made of male and female fans, that has put that myth behind them" (Travis 2013, 54). It should be noted that feminist understandings and expressions surrounding *Star Wars* are not limited to women fans—men can also express feminist interpretations of the series. Many men stand with feminist fans fighting for fuller representation in the *Star Wars* universe. As a result, men and women often stand together "to remind the

media, merchandisers, and the occasional message board or playground bully that *Star Wars* fandom is big enough for everyone” (Travis 2013, 55).

Despite this apparent opening of the fan community to gender equality, women’s spaces for expressing fandom are fading. *Star Wars Chicks*, for instance, hasn’t been updated since 2010—instead, the website points viewers to join them on Facebook. More and more, social media sites are replacing dedicated fan communities as the central place for communicating about fandom. This is, in part, due to social media’s accessibility—it is easier to keep all threads of one’s life and interests in one place. However, this is also due to the nature of interaction on social media—how it brings together not only fans, but media creators such as the films’ actors, producers, and directors themselves. This mediated interaction through social media also make social media the perfect place to mourn and celebrate the death of a beloved celebrity, just as fans did with Fisher.

### **The Characteristics of Celebrity Twitter Memorials: Parasocial Interaction and Bonding**

Twitter, founded in 2006, is a microblogging platform that allows users to “tweet” posts to their audience of “followers.” Though these posts used to be limited to 140-characters per post, Twitter doubled the maximum to 280-characters in November 2017. Hashtags, a type of metadata tag that populates a list of other posts using the same tag, help link posts between individuals, launching tweets out beyond their followers’ feed to connect to other users tweeting on similar topics. These topics sometimes “trend,” indicating their popularity at a given moment. Together, these various methods of organizing tweets allow Twitter users to reach a worldwide audience. Every user has an @username, which is their key identifying tag. Every user also has a display name, which show up alongside one’s @username and can be changed on the user’s whim; some users have their full name as their display name, while their @username is a handle. Others replace their display name with a nickname or something entirely different as a way to anonymize their

account. Twitter users can reply to specific users by tweeting that user's @username. These responses are "@-replies" Similarly, users can "@-reply" themselves, creating a thread of individual tweets. This is how users express complex ideas that may not fit into their limited characters. Finally, tweets can be "retweeted" or tweeted out to a different users' followers with credit to the original poster, and "liked" by clicking a heart icon. Both these measures demonstrate a tweet's range and engagement of an audience.

In its everyday use, Twitter posts can contain everything from flippant thoughts about one's breakfast to rallying cries for social justice. Each individual invariably cultivates an online persona through their posts, and uses their Twitter for a variety of purposes. For many, Twitter is a means to connect to various media figures and celebrities. Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011) suggest that celebrity social media profiles are performances of celebrity. The individuals behind celebrity media profiles, whether the celebrity him/herself or an employee tasked with maintaining the account, purposely craft a view of the celebrity that appears "authentic" and "provides the illusion" of a glimpse into the celebrity's personal life (140). These accounts are useful for celebrities in that they allow immediate access to fans for marketing and extending their platform and appeal. For fans, the appeal behind Twitter, Marwick and Boyd suggest, is "the perception of direct access to a famous person" especially in the way Twitter can provide "'insider' information" about that celebrity's life (142). Fans, thus, feel connected to the celebrity—Twitter creates an intimacy that would be impossible on any other platform.

This results in what Jimmy Sanderson and Pauline Hope Cheong (2010) describe as parasocial interaction. Parasocial interaction "describes how media users relate to and develop relationships with media personae...these bonds facilitated audience members to engage media personalities in ways that resembled interpersonal social interaction, yet these displays were one-sided and mediated" (Sanderson and Cheong 2010, 329). Twitter users, despite the mediated nature of the fan-celebrity relationship, feel closer to their celebrity obsessions in part



because social media humanizes them, and brings them into direct contact with the fan.

Sanderson and Cheong use the idea of parasocial interaction to examine the role Twitter plays in grieving the death of Michael Jackson. Their study collected, categorized, and analyzed several tweets over the weeks after Jackson's death, and determined how those tweets demonstrated fans processing through the five stages of grief (Sanderson and Cheong 2010, 330). They found, first and foremost, that "online environments possess valuable utility for those who are parasocially grieving" (Sanderson and Cheong 2010, 328). By engaging in mourning on Twitter, fans are able to "prolong their attachment with the deceased" and mourn in ways that are "individually meaningful, rather than socially acceptable" (Sanderson and Cheong 2010, 330).

Sanderson and Cheong came to four conclusions in the end of their study: First and foremost, social media allowed fans to not only "publicly disclose their feelings" but also linked fans "across time and space" (Sanderson and Cheong 2010, 337). Twitter facilitates community building, "which enables public expressions [of grief] to be interwoven into the fabric of everyday life" (337). Second, this community created a diverse network across geographic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, allowing an expansive community to support one another and engage Jackson's legacy (337). Third, Sanderson and Cheong described social media's ability to empower individual's grief in ways that went beyond physical grieving and were more meaningful for the mourner (337). Finally, Twitter gave fans a "platform to enact ritual practices that, when performed, contribute to a celebrity's legacy within public memory," citing, as an example, "Michael Mondays," which allowed fans to continue engaging their memories of Jackson in a ritualized and more formalized practice (337). In summation, Sanderson and Cheong demonstrate that on Twitter, the climate is ripe for meaningful mourning. Its globalized network, ability to reach across barriers, and its means of enacting personalized and ritualized mourning meaningful to the mourner made Twitter an effective space for online

memorialization.

Elizabeth Cohen and Cynthia Hoffner (2016) further Cheong and Sanderson's conclusions by demonstrating how social media memorials can also bring attention to social causes—either those important to the celebrity deceased, or those relating to the celebrity's death. Their analysis examines posts on social media in response to the death of Robin Williams, who committed suicide after discovering he had Parkinson's disease. Cohen and Hoffner found that "individuals who felt more parasocially attached to Williams' expressed the greatest amount of grief in response to his passing, and this grief, in turn, motivated them to share information about his health struggles on [social networking sites], including information about depression, suicide prevention, drug and alcohol addiction, and Parkinson's disease" (Cohen and Huffier 2016, 648). These posts served not only as memorials of Williams' life, but also reached out for social change.

Cohen and Hoffner describe this impulse to share health information as a means of engaging "in meaning making as a way of coping" (649). By posting on social media about health issues, fans worked proactively in an effort to advance a social cause in Williams' honor. The mourners are engaging in what Jack Santino (2004) calls "performative commemoratives": they are performing grief in a way that it advances a social cause. While this goal is significant when considering feminist Twitter memorials to Carrie Fisher, I believe these tweets are more than just "performative commemoratives"—while they achieve a goal of social change, they also reveal something about the individual mourner's sense of self.

### **"Performative Mourning" Redefined: Making the Personal Public**

How individuals perform grief online has been in contention for years, in part because newer methods of mourning have become more public than private. In March of 2014, Hannah Seligson from *The New York Times* published an article describing the new mourning practices of the "first generation of digital natives." She described how traditional means of mourning, such as funerals, wakes, and

other formalized and vernacular practices, have become augmented by the presence of new technology and social media; in fact, digital spaces have become more comfortable for grieving among this generation. Millennials are more likely to post memories on someone's Facebook wall or to text friends in mourning than to attend funerals and memorial services in person. While these practices might seem outlandish to some—something Seligson emphasizes in her article—Seligson's various interviewees describe the incredible success they have had finding communities for grieving through the Internet and how other means of technological communication enhance their ability to confront their losses.

Previous studies on online grief have emphasized the dually public and private aspects of mourning in these spaces. Robert Dobler (2009), in his article about mourning on MySpace profiles, situates his mourners as grieving "alone, together" (179). Their posts on deceased MySpace friends' profiles are individually centered and personal, expressing "feelings of loneliness and abandonment in the absence of the departed" (179). However, for some "a feeling of being part of a group becomes especially important to these posters, both in the sense that they experienced the loss of the deceased on a community level...and in the sense that the act of expressing sorrow on a public page joins them to the supposed community of grievers" (180). The intersection of the communal and the personal opposes typical forms of grief that often take place in more private spaces—or at least in spaces that are designated for mourning. On MySpace and other social media platforms, which have become everyday backdrops for other conversations, mourning interrupts the status quo.

Spontaneous shrines—the memorials constructed, for instance, at the roadside where a motorist died or on the fence of a building after a shooting or other tragedy—have a similar function in the folklore of mourning. Jack Santino (2004) emphasizes how these shrines are public and informal—hence the use of "spontaneous"—while they are also operating as more than memorials—they connect the living and dead in a particular place, making them "shrines" (369). Like

online mourning on social media, spontaneous shrines interrupt the everyday and bring private mourning into the public landscape. Santino compares these shrines to more typical forms of mourning, suggesting “in a sense, death has always been publicly memorialized. Think of the procession of hearse and cars down the street or the rituals held in houses of worship and in cemeteries. In these and other cases, though, participation in the ritual activities is restricted to a particular group—family and friends, for instance” (364). Spontaneous shrines, on the other hand, do not restrict mourning to a group of specified individuals—they are meant to be engaged with by those private mourners, and an audience of strangers alike.

It is this that takes the shrines from being private spaces of mourning to public spaces of mourning: spontaneous shrines “invite participation, unlike the funeral procession one happens to run across. They also invite interpretation. Once set out before an undifferentiated public, the polysemy inherent in these assemblages allows for a broad range of readings and associations of passers-by, regardless of the initial intentions of the originators” (Santino 2004, 368). This interpretive function of spontaneous shrines allows them to go beyond memorializing—for Santino, these shrines and their engagement of the public makes them performative, which he describes as evoking social change: “the duality [of shrines] is expressly that they both commemorate deceased individuals and simultaneously suggest an attitude toward a related public issue” (Santino 2004, 367). When one sees, for instance, a roadside cross marking the death of a motorist, it reminds the driver to slow down. Or, when one passes a shrine to a victim of gun violence, the shrine may inspire thoughts about gun control. By bridging the private and the public, these shrines invoke this performativity: “With most deaths, private mourning and flowers at the grave are sufficient,” but with spontaneous shrines, this added level of engagement renders them political, and therefore performative (Santino 2010, 367). Interestingly, this performativity can translate into online spaces—though the general public describes the “performative” nature of such memorials as much less appropriate.

Several news articles were published throughout 2016 about the outpouring of public grief over celebrities on websites like Twitter. In each article, the writer refers to a “performative” grief that reads as fake or insincere—posts grieving celebrities on social media are called “self-indulgent” (Garber 2016), “more performative than personal” (Friedman 2016), and “self-centered and performative” (O’Keeffe 2016). In this case, “performative” is meant to signify “just a performance,” meaning the individual is not engaged in genuine grief, but is pretending. Anyone who has studied performance theory would know that this definition is not the same as that used by scholars. However, its use reveals the contested nature of publicly performing grief, and hints at the mediation of self that is present in any public Internet posting.

First and foremost, the pejorative use of “performative” reveals discomfort with making grief public. Megan Garber (2016), writing for *The Atlantic*, suggests that pushback against these performances of grief is largely due to the nature of mourning throughout history. Citing anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, she argues that after the first World War, grief became a “highly personal phenomenon” that must be kept, in Gorer’s words, “under complete control by strength of will and character, so that it need to be given no public expression” (Garber 2016). Grief, Garber surmises, is meant to be “borne as silently and stoically as possible.” Thus, performing grief online is seen as insincere because it violates these norms of grief being private (Garber 2016). Garber, however, defends these social media posts that grieve celebrities as “evidence of people doing what they always will: using the tools available to express themselves and share their feelings with other people. They were forming a community of grief.”

The ability of online mourners to form a “community of grief” is important. As Sanderson and Cheong described, Twitter brings together a diverse yet connected group of mourners who would otherwise be separated by various factors. In grieving a celebrity, this diverse network allows an individual to find support from strangers. New folk groups can form through this shared interest, and deeper



mourning and reflection can occur together.

Gabriel Roth (2016), writing for *Slate*, describes exactly this sort of deeper mourning occurring in online spaces. He states first and foremost, “complaints about narcissism and performative grieving are wrong: celebrity-death Twitter (and Facebook and Instagram) are changing the way we memorialize artistic figures, for the better.” In the past, Roth suggests, media memorialization oversimplified the memory of the artist or celebrity being remembered: “It’s a process that reduces an artist to a few familiar images and greatest hits, constructing a cardboard cutout and presenting it to posterity for consideration.” Internet mourning, however, is more personal. He says, “Within a few days of Prince’s death, I read the first thoughts and associations and memories that he inspired in hundreds of people.” Hearing these personal stories—which are personal grief brought into the public realm—the reader and the poster connect on a more interpersonal level.

Ironically, this public expression makes it more accessible to people who will connect to the personal nature of the post—making it, in fact, more intimate than if it were shared in private. In the end, Roth agrees that this is a type of performance: “Are they performing? Sure, inasmuch as almost everything we do is done with consideration for how it will appear to others.... Social media is conversation, and like other forms of conversation it’s a better way to understand your feelings than solitary contemplation.” This sense of performing—as the inherent way individuals mediate their behavior in any self-presentation—is neither false nor insincere.

Roth’s description of his mourners as inherent performers is actually much closer to the typical academic definition of “performative.” Performativity rose to prominence in terms of the performative utterance (Austin [1962] 1975). J. L. Austin suggested that some phrases are actually performances that *do* the thing they say. For instance, “I do” in a marriage ceremony is both the utterance and the action of marrying—it has the actionable item attached (Austin [1962] 1975, 5). Judith Butler is responsible for applying performativity to gender and identity. She posits that gender does not preexist the performance of gender, but rather “the body becomes

its gender though a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated though time" (Butler 1988, 523). She goes on to suggest that "gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (Butler 2006 [1990], 34). The constitutive nature of gender—a gender that is performed into being—is inherently shrouded in the performance of that gender within socially bound structures. Thus, gender performativity is the signifying act through which the gender identity is performed and reified over time.

Calling something "performative," then, should evoke these two contexts and uses—both of which connect to the way an individual constitutes him or herself or manifests action through signification, like speech or performance. Twitter mourning, I contest, is inherently performative in this academic definition—it constitutes a signification of identity. Ann Friedman (2016), writing in *The Los Angeles Times*, suggests that all public grieving of celebrities is a celebration of ourselves. She cites one Twitter user who expresses this quite keenly: "'Thinking about how we mourn artists we've never met,' tweeted one woman after David Bowie died, 'We don't cry because we knew them, we cry because they helped us know ourselves.'" Reframed in this context—how celebrities helped individuals know themselves—these memorial tweets and posts help readers understand how the fan identifies and identifies with the celebrity in question. That identification can then, if viewed as performative, reflect back on the fan him or herself and reveal aspects of their identity to the world.

Santino's use of performativity in connection to social change is a means of making the communal expression present in a shrine fit this understanding of performativity—working together to build a shrine through individual acts or performances of memorialization reveals a commonly identified goal. This goal is a community value. Since many individuals contribute to the shrine, it can be viewed as an expression of community identity. Similarly, it can be seen as a gestalt of individual performatives, which work together to evoke the communal whole.

Regardless, Santino's exploration of the "social change" function embedded in spontaneous shrines is appealing when examining the online memorials of feminist *Star Wars* fans. Many of these tweets become feminist not only because their authors are expressing certain views of Leia as a character and Fisher as a person, but also because they are utilizing performativity so that their grief furthers a social agenda. They are, in fact, using their tweets as a means of carrying forward Fisher's legacy of activism—and they do so by challenging patriarchal means of mourning, and reintroducing Fisher's activist leanings through their tweets. In this sense, they engage in a performative goal—both as individuals performing themselves and as a collective performing a community value. It is through these performatives that divisions in the fan community are revealed and negotiated.

### **The Tweets: Identifying Leia and Fisher and Performative Grief**

To examine the different performatives at play in Twitter memorials for Carrie Fisher, I randomly selected several illustrative tweets that demonstrate different means of identifying Leia and Fisher. Some, for instance, mourned Leia the Princess, while others mourned Leia the General. Some male fans shared that Fisher/Leia was their first crush, or commented on her beauty or sexiness without acknowledging her other talents. Others mourned Fisher as more than just Leia—as an actress, a writer, and an advocate for addiction and mental health awareness. Finally, many tweeted about ways to uphold Leia's legacy. These tweets were all in dialogue with one another. It is this dialogue that reveals not only how mourning for Fisher occurs on Twitter, but also how fans see tension in *Star Wars* fandom.

Before illuminating the differences in these memorial tweets, it is important to note that there were several similarities. Leia and Fisher are used interchangeably in many tweets, indicating the deep association fans have with Fisher as Leia. Fisher predicted this ongoing association, writing in her last memoir, published just months before her death, "I liked being Princess Leia. Or Princess Leia's being me. Over time I thought that we'd melded into one. I don't think you

could think of Leia without my lurking in that thought somewhere...So Princess Leia are us" (Fisher 2016, 5). It is certainly true that Fisher is rarely separated from Leia, and vice versa. In mourning Fisher, posts sometimes didn't even name Fisher at all, which serves to oversimplify Fisher's contributions to society.

Mention of the Force was also a common feature of most tweets. Often this appeared in the form of the hashtag #MaytheForceBeWithYou. Many referenced how Fisher was now "at one with the Force." Some posts also included photos of Fisher at many stages of her life; most commonly, Fisher was featured in her Leia costumes in promotional shots or movie stills from the original trilogy. Occasionally, Fisher's older incarnation of Leia, General Organa from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* appeared, though the majority of the tweets feature young Leia.

Many other posts included fan art, clips of appearances Fisher gave on talk shows, or even selections from her memoirs. One common memorial tweet was "Carrie Fisher: drowned in moonlight, strangled by her own bra." This trend began from one of Fisher's own books. She tells the story of George Lucas telling her she could not wear a bra under Leia's iconic white gown because "there's no underwear in space" (Fisher 2008, 88). Lucas goes on to describe how your body expands in space, but your bra does not, so you get strangled by your own bra (88). Fisher comments, "I think that this would make for a fantastic obit—so I tell my younger friends that no matter how I go, I want it reported that I drowned in moonlight, strangled by my own bra" (88). Many fans honored Fisher's wish, and their only memorial for her was to repeat that message—drowned in moonlight, strangled by her own bra.

### **Distasteful Performatives: Objectification in Memorial Tweets**

For the most part, these commonly used tropes in memorial tweets about Fisher demonstrate limited engagement with Fisher's memory. The monotony of "RIP Princess Leia" posts or "RIP Carrie Fisher! #MaytheForceBeWithYou" could indicate superficial efforts to engage in the newest trend of public mourning—

performances in line with the criticisms found in news media's discussion of "performative" grief. The variations, however, demonstrate a more personalized engagement—even if the tweet itself presents a superficial or distasteful thought, these tweets tend to be more performative than the boilerplate "RIP Princess" tweets. Take, for instance, the following selection of tweets: (all users will be addressed below by their display names; usernames can be found in the References list)

"RIP Carrie Fisher... you gave me my first boner." ("Silly Willy" 2016)

"R.I.P. to my first crush, she awakened my force" (accompanied by a picture of Fisher in the metal bikini) ("McCrae" @ 2016)

"I'm pretty sure #CarrieFisher was responsible for my 1<sup>st</sup> boner in that bikini scene. RIP" ("Hanging Chad" 2016).

These tweets are only a handful of the many "boner" tweets posted by men in the hours after Fisher's death. Some "boner" tweets even encouraged active participation: user Skinny Triple H (2016) tweeted "RT [retweet] if slave Leia was your first boner." He got three retweets and four likes. While these tweets seem crass and disrespectful—objectifying Fisher and Leia through their sexual nature—they are also performances of manhood. By describing their sexual awakening at the sight of Fisher's bikini-clad body, these men are asserting their heterosexuality—perhaps even bonding with the "boys club" fandom still present in the *Star Wars* fan community.

These tweets, of course, were immediately put into dialogue. Feminist mourners, seeing numerous "boner" tweets, responded with vitriol: "If I see one more tweet about Carrie Fisher giving any man his first boner I'm going to Lorena



Bobbitt all you mofo's" (Emily 2016). Emily's response references Lorena Bobbitt, a woman who cut off her abusive husband's penis. This implies both a judgment and a threat. Emily believes this form of mourning is inappropriate and disrespectful. By evoking Bobbitt, she implies that if men don't find other ways to mourn Fisher, there will be consequences. User Julie S. Lalonde doesn't threaten other posters, but does discuss the tweet's disrespect: "Carrie Fisher meant SO much to people I love who struggle with mental health concerns. She was so much more than your Leia nerd boner." (Lalonde 2016). Here Lalonde makes two moves. The first is to separate Fisher's actions from Leia's sexualized body. Fisher, who advocated for mental health issues, especially in relation to bipolar disorder, which she suffered from, is separated from the oversimplified "Leia nerd boner." The distinction between Fisher as an activist and Leia as a sex object stresses Fisher's humanity and the character as fantasy. Second, Lalonde expresses how individual mourning affects the community—by oversimplifying Fisher as a sexual object, these men are underwriting other people's more meaningful grief. For mourners seeking a safe space to process their sadness, objectifying tweets are disruptions.

These "boner" tweets and their response demonstrate this male/female split still prevalent in *Star Wars* fandom. The men see their tweets as perfectly acceptable expressions of the appreciation for Fisher. The women see the men's tweets as disrespectful of a woman and character. In performing these understandings of the fandom, the men and women illustrate the underlying tension. Meanwhile, the women's tweets also further a social agenda—by speaking out against sexist, objectifying tweets, they are reformatting the discourse in a more feminist direction. They portray Fisher as a multifaceted woman whose actions have more value than her sexualized body.

Subtle methods of objectification are present across countless other tweets. Another common trope is the "RIP my first crush" tweet, which suffered a similar response from female fans. But one notable example cannot be overlooked. Following Fisher's death, comedian and actor Steve Martin, who knew Fisher in real

life, tweeted (a tweet he has since deleted): “When I was a young man, Carrie Fisher she was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. She turned out to be witty and bright as well” (qtd. in Sieczkowski 2016). Martin’s mistake here is syntactical—“She turned out to be witty and bright as well” relegates her brains and wit to an afterthought. *New York Magazine* tweeted their article about the controversy surrounding Martin’s tweet with the commentary, “Remember Carrie Fisher for her talent, her feminism, her commentary on mental health — not for the way she looked” (New York Magazine 2016). This response falls in line with feminist critiques—Fisher is much more than a pretty face.

### **Performing Power: Leia the General, Leia the Warrior**

Many of the feminist memorials following Carrie Fisher’s death are responses to other’s identification of Fisher or Leia. While many responses to objectification are about how one identifies with Fisher, a significant portion of feminist-oriented posts identify with Leia. Writer Anne Thériault posted a long thread that went viral, discussing how she wished to remember Leia not as a young Princess, but instead as a General. In the 2015 release of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, Fisher appeared as a middle-aged Leia, now General Organa, leading the rebellion. Thériault, who saw countless posts with photos of young Leia, begins her thread by saying the image of Leia most important to her is of General Organa. She includes a still from *The Force Awakens*. The thread turns into a commentary on Leia as a character, her feminist and revolutionary sides, and how little we see of her ascension to General. But that photo, for Thériault, is a representation of Leia at her best (slashes here indicate breaks between @-replies):

She’s not young. Not wearing a gold bikini or robe. She’s dressed to do what she’s been training her whole life to do: lead the rebellion. / This is the Leia that has lost everything: her world, her parents, her son to the dark side, her brother to who knows where, her lover / This is the

Leia that could easily have broken down or given up. But she was stronger than literally every man in her life. She kept going. / [...] When I see Fisher as General Organa, I see a woman who has put up with so much shit from so many men and yet keeps showing up for them / [...] Princess Leia was great, but General Organa was Fisher's real gift to us. And she's who I'm going to be looking to in dark times. / May we all be able to get up every day and, in spite of our pain and loss and fear, put on our boots and vest and plan to destroy the empire / [...] General Organa taught me that [you] don't have to be special or chosen to be a leader. You just have to show up and learn and do the work. (Thériault 2016)

This long thread identifies General Organa, first, in response to the overtly sexualized version of Leia seen throughout the trilogy. The more mature, more practically dressed General is not as stereotypically sexy as she was as a Princess; instead, her clothes are suited to her position. Thériault then identifies Leia as perseverant; she is a warrior who is "literally stronger than every man in her life." Thériault's comparison to the men in the series is significant—Leia has surpassed the men, in Thériault's eyes, and is a woman who succeeds despite the interference of the men around her, not because of it. This demonstrates Leia's agency, and her power—she has chosen to continue to fight. Despite having to "put up with so much shit from so many men" she "keeps showing up for them." This mixes both Leia the nurturer—who cares for her people and her family—with Leia the leader—who shows up despite the challenges.

The end of Thériault's thread presents the opportunity to understand the performative nature of her tweets, and how they mourn the character and Fisher. First, she asserts that General Organa is "Fisher's real gift to us"—whereas the thread has largely been about identifying Leia, here Leia is positioned as Fisher's creation for the fandom, her gift to them. This memorial becomes a tribute to one of

the things Fisher has given the world: a character who inspires. Furthermore, Thériault brings the model of General Organa into her life: “may we all be able to get up every day and, in spite of our pain and loss and fear, put on our boots and vest and plan to destroy the empire.” This is a call to arms, though the cause is purposefully unspecified. Considering the political climate and Thériault’s demonstrative feminist leanings, it could be a call to enact political or social change. Regardless, it asks readers to perform like General Organa, and embody her spirit. Thériault is asking readers to enact this in memory of Fisher. In the end, Thériault’s thread shares a view of Leia that becomes an identity to take on. By encouraging readers to act like Leia, she is inviting them to participate in Leia’s legacy in the real world beyond the films.

Thériault’s thread is inherently a response to other fans, carrying a particular idea of how the fandom can and should function. In that sense, it reveals one interpretation of Leia and Fisher’s role that goes beyond what many other fans see. Without specifying exactly where the fractures are coming from, Thériault demonstrates a difference of opinion within the fandom that celebrates the young, beautiful, and often-objectified young Leia, while pushing General Organa into the corner. As Thériault demonstrates, feminist fans will not allow this to happen; instead, they, too, will become Generals, and fight until their cause succeeds.

### **Building Legacy: Enacting Feminist Social Change**

Whereas Thériault’s thread about General Organa invited readers to engage in Leia’s legacy, many other tweets sought to define and urge participation in Fisher’s legacy. Halsey, a musician, tweeted: “Carrie Fisher dedicated her platform to mental health awareness & female empowerment. She is a reason + reminder to keep up your fight. RIP” (Halsey 2016). Halsey’s memorial tweet is interesting because it is purely a reminder—she doesn’t suggest how fans should respond to Fisher’s legacy, other than keeping up their fight. In a way, Halsey leaves room for interpretation—fans can fight toward Fisher’s legacy however they wish to apply it.

Anna Christine, on the other hand, offers a much more directive way to engage with Fisher's legacy: "Make 2017 a better year by being more like Carrie Fisher. Take no shit. Fight against the injustices of the world. Be a light" (Anna Christine 2016). Fisher's nature as someone who "takes no shit" is well established in her public appearances. On talk shows she is sarcastic, dry, and very direct. Fisher's activism is meant to fight injustice. But it is Anna Christine's last condition that personalizes this memorial: "Be a light," is a lovely personal tribute to Fisher that demonstrates the role Fisher has played in Anna Christine's life—Fisher appears to have been a figure of positivity, humor, and hope for Anna Christine. Inviting her readers to become a similar source of goodness is a beautiful way to honor Fisher's memory.

Finally, Isaac Breen offers another means to honor Fisher, specifically focusing on the things he believes will bring her honor. He tweets:

"honor carrie fisher:

- normalize mental illness and its treatments
- take life a little less seriously
- destroy a fascist regime" (Breen 2016)

The first two conditions, again, engage with Fisher role as an activist for mental health awareness, and her sense of humor. The last appears to be an almost tongue-and-cheek reference to Leia, for Fisher certainly never destroyed a fascist regime in real life. This last tweet brings home the beauty of fans attributing Leia's accomplishments to Fisher: it becomes an expression of the intimacy fans have with Leia, and how that intimacy transfers to Fisher herself. In a way, this is a compliment to Fisher, who both performed the Leia they love, and, in the minds of fans, embodies her key traits. Fisher as herself and as Leia deserves credit for her inspiration and empowerment.

In outlining Fisher's legacy, fans present the most clear-sighted



understanding of the role of *Star Wars* fandom. Here, the fractures between different fan attitudes are irrelevant—enacting Fisher’s legacy will, undoubtedly, do some good in the world. Fans who take this extra step in their memorials demonstrate the depth of their intimacy with Fisher, and their dedication to enacting what both she and Leia have taught them. In this fandom, there is the most meaningful grief. In this fandom, there is also a pathway for healing.

That, perhaps, is what Twitter mourning should do—it should provide fans with a space to productively mourn the celebrities they love. For Fisher, this mourning attracted feminist performances in droves, and gave women ample opportunity to protect and further her legacy. The tweets themselves serve as performative engagement with Fisher’s memory—they further feminist causes by merely existing. In this sense, engaging with Fisher’s legacy allows Fisher herself to stick around a little longer, reminding fans over and over again to stand up, fight, and “take no shit.”

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