

## **“Alternate Universe – No COVID-19”: Fanfiction and Cultural Trauma**

.....

**By Sarah Breyfogle**

### **ABSTRACT**

Using cultural trauma theory and literary trauma theory, this paper examines how fanfiction writers used ficwriting to explore pandemic trauma. It conducts a textual analysis of five fics that center their plot around some aspect of COVID-19 precautions and restrictions. This research finds that the authors demonstrate community care; that they self-disclose that they or others they know are struggling; and that actual infection, illness, or death are rarely presented within the fics.

*Keywords:* fanfiction, fan culture, COVID-19, Star Wars

## **“Universo Alterno – Sin COVID-19”: Fanfiction y Trauma Cultural**

### **RESUMEN**

Al utilizar la teoría del trauma cultural y la teoría del trauma literario, este artículo examina cómo los escritores de *fanfiction* utilizaron la escritura de ficción para explorar el trauma pandémico. Realiza un análisis textual de cinco ficciones que centran su trama en algún aspecto de las precauciones y restricciones del COVID-19. Esta investigación encuentra que los autores demuestran cuidado comunitario; que ellos mismos revelan que ellos u otros que conocen están luchando; y que la infección, la enfermedad o la muerte reales rara vez se presentan en las ficciones.

*Palabras clave:* *fanfiction*, cultura de fans, COVID-19, Star Wars

## “平行世界——没有COVID-19”：同人小说与文化创伤

摘要：本文运用文化创伤理论和文学创伤理论，分析了同人小说作家如何通过小说写作来探索大流行创伤。本文对五部小说进行了文本分析，这些小说的情节围绕2019冠状病毒病（COVID-19）预防和限制措施的某些方面展开。本研究发现，小说作者展示了社区关怀；他们自我披露称其或其认识的人正在苦苦挣扎；真实的感染、疾病或死亡很少出现在小说中。

关键词：同人小说，同人文化，2019冠状病毒病，《星球大战》

---

Beginning in March of 2020, people around the world experienced a profound disruption to their way of life, in many cases overnight, as COVID-19 lockdowns proliferated. To help cope with the uncertainty and fear of the pandemic, many people found themselves turning to media in an attempt to escape from or moderate that disruption. For fans, particularly those already invested in creative enterprises around fandom, media had already been a central part of their lives. While it is likely that some fan creators felt their desire to participate in their earlier fan activities diminish, many others, trapped at home with little else enjoyable to occupy their time, found an outlet to express their love of their particular texts as a response to the stress of the pandemic.

The link between the pandemic and transformative fan works is particularly apparent on the popular fanfiction hosting website and nonprofit Archive of Our Own (often abbrevi-

ated to Ao3). Ao3’s extensive searching and database functionality allows for the tagging of fanfiction’s wide variety of tropes that can be utilized to encourage the development of romantic—and, less frequently, platonic—relationships between characters in a practice called shipping. Popular tropes include being snowed in together; staying at an inn or hotel that only has one bed available; and one character taking care of another while they are sick. It is not surprising, then, that the altered life practices adopted during the pandemic offer fertile ground to the enterprising fanfiction writer. For the purposes of this paper, fanfiction, fanfic, and fic will be used interchangeably to refer to the same form of transformative fictional texts.

To easily identify conventions within fanfiction, a large fandom is necessary, and as such this analysis focuses on *Star Wars* fandom’s most popular ship; Kylo Ren and Rey, often abbreviated to Reylo. Within the body of fanfiction that has been written about the pairing, a meaningful number of fics have been written that place the two characters and their romantic development within the present-day COVID-19 pandemic. Exploring the conventions of these fics illuminates how fanfiction writers have used fanfiction to cope with their pandemic experiences.

Cultural and literary trauma theory provides an avenue to examine this phenomenon, using as texts five Reylo fanfics that center their plot around the changes to everyday life that occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following on previous scholars’ practices of close textual analysis of fan works (Kaplan; Leavenworth; Black et al.), these fics provide an avenue to examine how fanfiction expresses the strains and upheavals of the unprecedented pandemic and how the practice of sharing those experiences through publicly post-

ed fanfiction operates to express and alleviate the shared trauma of both authors and readers.

### UNDERSTANDING FANS AND FANFICTION

To write about fans, it becomes crucial to define what a fan is; however, such definitions are fraught. Duffet's 2013 definition provides a helpful starting point; that "media fandom is the recognition of a positive, personal, relatively deep, emotional connection with a mediated element of popular culture" (Duffet 2). However, what is crucially absent from this definition is that people form social connections because of their shared emotional connection to a piece of media, and that this shared communal connection creates vibrant communities. These communities discuss their chosen piece of media; they create fanfiction and fan art that reimagines the world of the story; they may even create and share physical items such as plushies or knitting patterns. Drawing a hard line between who is a fan and who is simply a casual enjoyer of a piece of media is unnecessary and unhelpful, but it is important to acknowledge that people experience fandom on a continuum, from a deep emotional connection so powerful that it motivates someone to get a tattoo related to their fandom to a quiet enjoyment found rewatching a comforting show.

Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the framing of this emotional connection shifted. Hoyeck notes that the narrative around binge-watching multiple episodes, seasons, or shows became much more positive and guilt-free; furthermore, she highlights that the social capital created by knowing a piece of media extremely well helps to stave off feelings of isolation (Hoyeck 36). The boundaries around who qualifies as "fan enough" have never been particularly

impermeable; however, the pandemic has undeniably made them even more porous. Therefore, this analysis is more concerned with how people enact fandom; specifically, through the writing and reading of fanfiction.

Henry Jenkins’ seminal work, *Textual Poachers*, situates fanfiction as a form “of cultural production characteristic of fandom” (Jenkins 159). By contrast, Coppa describes fanfiction as something experienced in a gendered way (Coppa xii). For Coppa, fanfiction is not just about the cultural object, but about the experience of consuming the object—and, in fact, consuming multiple instances of the object, similar to eating an entire sleeve of Oreos. Still, she does offer some definition of the fanfiction itself, arguing that fanfiction is a collection of fiction created outside the traditional publishing industry, which rewrites and transforms existing stories created by others while following the conventions of a particular fan community.

What is crucial is that these stories are shared within, indeed often used to create, a community. Jenkins describes a group of women getting together to write fanzines in one of their homes; De Kosnik argues in her critique of *Fifty Shades of Grey* that bodies of fanfiction work are archives of women’s culture. That this community is predominantly women is taken as the basis of analysis for many examinations of fanfiction, although people of all genders write fanfic. Furthermore, because fanfiction is typically derivative of copyrighted media, it usually cannot be legally bought or sold. The result is what Hellekson describes as a “gift economy, not a commercial one” (Hellekson 114). This process of exchange, as mediated by a series of conventions and names for practices that serve as an in-group-out-group boundary, reinforces the strength of the fanfiction writing community. Fan art, fan

edits, and other forms of fan creation also circulate within this community.

The fanfiction being exchanged can take many forms. Fanfiction can vary in length, ranging from 100-word drabbles to 500,000-word monoliths—and, in notable instances, even longer.<sup>1</sup> Some fanfics attempt to remain close to the original story, describing themselves as “canon compliant”—or, in some places, “canon complicit,” implying a connection to some nefarious event in canon such as the death of a beloved character or an unpopular narrative choice. Others take place in alternate universes, or AUs. Fanfics are also organized by tropes, ranging from the general, such as hurt/comfort, angst, or fluff, to the specific and sexually explicit, such as omegaverse or mpreg.<sup>2</sup> Fics can combine content from multiple sources into crossover fics or introduce extensive original characters (OCs). Importantly, these categories are coherent to the community of fans who read them. As Coppa notes, “fanfiction is written within and for particular communities that have highly specific expectations for fiction, which can be seen in their elaborate vocabulary and critical literature” (Coppa 9).

These fics have likewise been stored in a myriad of places. Jenkins discusses zines, “photocopied anthologies of short stories, poems, and artwork centering on one or more media ‘universes’ and written by multiple authors” (Jenkins 160). While zines are occasionally still produced, with the rise of the internet, fanfiction tended to move online to sites like LiveJournal and fanfiction.net. However, rules around internet pornography—particularly gay pornography—resulted in a series of shutdowns and deletions that alarmed and angered fans (Brennan). The call came for a platform where fans owned the servers and so in 2008 Archive of Our Own

was developed as an open-source, fan-built and coded non-profit.

### ARCHIVE OF OUR OWN AND THE PARATEXTS OF FANFICTION

Ao3 is notable for several reasons. First, it is “a community of mostly women, who are traditionally underrepresented in computer science and even more so in open-source development”; second, “they didn’t just build a platform; they also built a batch of fan-coders because, as the founders realized at the time: ‘we’re going to have to grow our own’” (Fiesler n.p.). However, even more interesting than its origin is the robust tagging system that has been developed, maintained by volunteers called “tag-wranglers” who “wrangle” the individual tags, ensuring that despite different permutations of the tag, a coherent set emerges. An example of this is when a ship is indicated with both a slash, such as Kirk/Spock, Spock/Kirk, and ship name Spirk. A tag wrangler ensures that all three permutations are considered the same by the site. A tag that has not had this process done to it is considered freeform; some freeform tags are later wrangled, while others remain freeform. A tag considered to be in the process of wrangling, or will be wrangled soon, is called an “unwrangled” tag. This tagging system is a form of “curated folksonomy” (Bullard) that combines self-expression through tags with an organizational system to rival library databases. Because of its robustness, it is extremely useful for examining specific types of fanfictions.

When scholars have attempted to analyze fanfiction writers, rather than what is presented in their fics, they often utilize these paratexts. Leavenworth analyzes author’s notes on one multi-chapter fic from a narrative perspective, examining

how the author develops a relationship with her readers and shares aspects of her personal life. Black et al. focus on communally shared identity, specifically the author's self-identification with the autistic community while writing fanfiction in which a character is reimaged as autistic. Both studies utilize such paratexts to determine significant things about the author; this study does the same. This allows at least tentative conclusions to be drawn about the writer without simply and often unfairly extrapolating from their works of fiction.

- Freeform: Covid 19 AU (1)
- Freeform: Covid 19 be like (1)
- Freeform: Covid 19 content (2)
- Freeform: Covid 19 doesn't exist (1)
- Freeform: covid 19 doesn't exist lol (1)
- Freeform: covid 19 fic (3)
- Freeform: covid 19 got me like (1)
- Freeform: COVID 19 implied (1)
- Freeform: COVID 19 Influenced (1)
- Freeform: COVID 19 IS A BITCH (1)
- Freeform: covid 19 is a thing in this fic btw lmao (1)
- Freeform: Covid 19 lockdown (1)
- Freeform: COVID 19 mention (2)
- Freeform: Covid 19 never happened (1)

*Fig. 1.* A selection of tags on fanfiction website Archive of Our Own relating to COVID-19.



One currently “unwrangled” tag is the COVID-19 tag (Fig. 1), which had 393 variations as of November 2021. Taken together, these tags read almost as a community-created poem where the impact of the pandemic is rejected, accepted, raged against, or used as a creative tool all at the same time (Fig. 1). However, because of this variance, the category had to be refined further to one pairing popular enough to ensure a wide selection of fics that included both the pairing and a COVID-19 element.

### REYLO FANFICTION

Specifically, this paper examines fics that explore the relationship between Rey and villain-turned-anti-hero Kylo Ren, as developed in the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy that began in 2015 with *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* and concluded with *Star Wars: Episode IX – The Rise of Skywalker* in 2019. The pairing, often abbreviated to “Reylo” in line with the fannish tradition of combining two characters’ names to give them a “ship name,” has been the source of much discussion online within academic and fan communities—and their overlap. Hoffman provides an in-depth analysis of the second film’s portrayal of Kylo Ren as a sympathetic yet ultimately blameworthy character, while Busse highlights the divisiveness of the pairing within fan discussions:

In *The Force Awakens* fandom, for example, there is a vocal contingent of anti-Reylo fans, that is, fans who hate Rey/Kylo, the pairing of the main female character and the main male villain in the latest *Star Wars* movie. Anti-Reylos read the pairing’s on-screen encounters as rape, and they point out the age difference and potential famil-

ial relationship. Often declaring themselves younger or even underage, with many self-defining as childhood abuse survivors, anti-Reylos not only hate the pairing but find its very existence triggering. Calling Reylo fans abusive and pedophiles, in turn, causes Reylo fans to become nasty, often each side spamming the other with their vitriol. (Busse n.p.).

This conflict is important to acknowledge as context for the COVID-19 fics, which do not represent the concerns presented by anti-fans of the pairing. In accordance with the traditional fandom practice of “not yucking another’s yum,” this pairing is examined, in this context, as a transformative reading distinct from what is portrayed on-screen. Certainly, the authors are not writing for the anti-fans; furthermore, all fics examined were tagged as “fluff,” which implies the avoidance of dark topics in favor of sweeter and more comforting content. The controversial nature of the pairing as it is presented on-screen, as well as fans’ legitimate responses to it, serve to highlight the truly transformative nature of these fics.

The controversial nature of the pairing provides a window into the dangers of extrapolating too heavily about fanfiction writers based solely on the nature of their writing. It would be inappropriate to argue that all Reylo shippers would see no issue with a real-world man acting as Kylo Ren does; it would be equally inappropriate to argue that the pairing is not reflective of patriarchal structures that privilege the forgiveness of white men in even egregious circumstances. Coker and Viars provide a thorough discussion of this issue, although their article must be qualified because it was completed before the Rey/Kylo Ren pairing was canonized in *The Rise of Skywalker*.

## CULTURAL TRAUMA THEORY AND LITERARY TRAUMA THEORY

These texts and paratexts are analyzed from the perspective of cultural trauma theory. Alexander (2004) succinctly defines cultural trauma as a situation in which “members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander 1). It is easy to argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a traumatic event that has impacted people collectively. However, what Alexander further elucidates is that traumatic events must be assigned meaning as traumatic by a collective to move into the realm of cultural trauma. The important element then becomes not the actual conditions of the trauma—in this case, the pandemic—but how meaning is created from those conditions and shared within a community.

Because this research is not concerned with all forms of meaning creation, literary trauma theory serves as a secondary theory; specifically, Pederson’s 2014 revision is used. Pederson argues that literary trauma theory must catch up to the science of trauma and recognize that people who have experienced traumatic events are not only capable of constructing coherent, reliable accounts of those events, but also that the re-construction of those events can be cathartic and healing (Pederson 338). This understanding of literary trauma theory is, however, concerned with the individual who has experienced trauma; cultural trauma theory provides a way of examining how trauma functions across a creative community. Taken together, these two theories provide a way of understanding how fanfiction writers make sense of their individual experiences of a collectively shared trauma,

within the context of established fandoms and ficwriter communities.

From this perspective, two research questions emerge: how do fanfic writers on Ao3 express their experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic, both creatively and factually? And, as a secondary question: how do fanfic writers engage in communal practices of trauma articulation and healing?

## METHOD

Fics were selected based on a combination of factors. The first is that they all share the same pairing—a romantic relationship between *Star Wars* characters Kylo Ren and Rey. This pairing was selected based on the size of the fandom and the popularity of the pairing, which resulted in a significant number of fics and allowed other factors to be held constant. Second, fics were short enough to be manageable. Third, the fics explored the everyday experiences of living through a pandemic, rather than placing the plot in a more dramatic setting that the author likely did not have personal experience with. Fourth, fics were selected based on quality, popularity, and completeness, with well-written and reviewed fics being preferred over fics with poorer writing or less engagement. Incomplete fics were not considered. Finally, while many fanfics include extensive sex scenes, all fics selected were rated M or lower to ensure that the focus remained on the impact of the pandemic on daily life, not on the possibilities it provided for erotic potential.<sup>3</sup>

Fics were examined through close textual analysis and its associated paratexts—title, author notes, and tags (see Fig. 2). Fics were read initially for appropriateness to the topic, then read again and annotated for preliminary coding. Fics were then re-read as needed to identify themes.

Rating: [Teen And Up Audiences](#)

**Archive Warning:** [Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings](#)

Category: [F/M](#)

Fandoms: [Star Wars – All Media Types](#), [Star Wars Sequel Trilogy](#)

Relationships: [Rey/Ben Solo | Kylo Ren](#), [Kylo Ren/Rey](#)

Additional Tags: [Alternate Universe – Modern Setting](#), [Alternate Universe – College/University](#), [Graduation](#), [Love in the Time of Covid-19](#), [TW: COVID-19](#), [TW: Spring 2020](#), [tw: quarantine](#), [Online Relationship](#), [bunch o' fluff](#), [Happy Ending](#)

Language: [English](#)

Series: [Part 1 of the Quarantine Fluff series](#) ● [Next Work](#) —

Stats: [Published: 2020-05-02](#) [Words: 4457](#) [Chapters: 1/1](#) [Comments: 88](#) [Kudos: 354](#) [Bookmarks: 52](#) [Hits: 2706](#)

*Fig. 2: The interface presented to a user at the top of each fanfic. This interface describes Fig 2, “Pomp Under the Circumstances.”*

## ABOUT THE FICS

All five fics were categorized as “fluff” or some variation and included the well-established tag “Alternate Universe – Modern Setting.” There were no attempts to place the pandemic within the *Star Wars* setting. Each fic included a tag about its COVID-19 material and three of them couched the tag in “warning” or “tw,” short for trigger warning, indicating an awareness of trauma responses around the subject. The fics were all published in 2020, between April and August of that year. Each author provided a brief author’s note; one indicated that the project was a collaboration and shared the authors’ Twitter handles, while the rest offered some commentary on the fic. Two author’s notes provided an additional trigger warning for COVID-19 content, while a third exhorted readers to “stay home as much as you can, cousins. It’s dangerous out there” (VR\_Trakowski). A fourth described the story as an “and they were zoommates” fic, in reference to the meme from now-defunct video sharing platform Vine, “and they were roommates”; the reference served as a playful way of indicating the premise of the fic. In addition, all fics referred to Ben Solo, the birth name of the son of Han Solo and Princess Leia, rather than Kylo Ren, the name that the character took on after falling to the Dark Side. This naming convention indicates an attachment to the potential of Ben Solo as a maladjusted but ultimately kind young man, rather than the neo-fascist persona of Kylo Ren.

Fics are analyzed below in order from shortest to longest in terms of word count. All titles retain their original capitalization, as non-normative capitalization strategies serve as stylistic indicators.

***Fic 1: “you are the best thing that’s ever been mine”***

The first fic, published in August of 2020, is the shortest. The author discloses through their author’s notes that they wrote the fic to help cope with being separated from their boyfriend of four years, and that some scenes in the fic are correspondingly autobiographical. The fic is organized through a series of flashbacks from Rey’s perspective. Rey is cast as a recent college grad waiting to see her boyfriend, Ben Solo, who has finally managed to book a flight to see her post-lockdown. Her impatience is highlighted by moving between brief scenes of her restlessness and chronological vignettes of their established relationship. When the pandemic interrupts these flashbacks, the scenes become memories of Zoom conversations rather than in-person ones.

***Fic 2: “Pomp Under the Circumstances”***

In this fic, Rey is cast as a former foster kid and college student preparing to graduate when the pandemic hits. Ben is a teaching assistant assigned to her course. During lockdown, they develop a friendship and then a relationship. Large portions of the fic take an epistollic form, detailing text conversations between the two. One other franchise character makes an appearance: Luke Skywalker as the provost of the university, who, at Ben’s request, holds a virtual graduation ceremony for Rey. The fic concludes with Rey getting a chance to walk at her graduation the following year once restrictions are lifted. The fic is dedicated to a friend “who deserves all the pomp and circumstance.” We may that the friend was in Rey’s situation, unable to walk at graduation, due to the pandemic and that the gift of the fic was intended to help alleviate the blow.

***Fic 3: "The New Normal"***

This fic explores the relationship that develops between Rey and her attractive next-door neighbor Ben during lockdown as they both work from home at their desks near opposite windows. Again, the fic takes on an epistollic form; the characters start by writing notes and holding them up to their respective windows, before progressing to phone and video conversations and occasional in-person, albeit appropriately distanced, dates. This fic is longer and rated M rather than T, which means that aspects of digital intimacy through text and video call are alluded to as well. As in the previous fics, the story ends with an in-person meeting as the restrictions lift.

***Fic 4: "the one I have been waiting for"***

This fic has the most elaborate premise; Rey is an author and Ben is the editor assigned to work with her during lockdown. The fic significantly incorporates other characters from the franchise; family relationships remain intact, with Leia serving as the owner of the publishing firm and Finn and Poe as Rey's friends. These other characters are, by and large, in happy relationships regardless of their canon status; Finn and Poe are implied to be in a relationship, while Ben's family is reimagined as a happy, if chaotic, one that has family dinners via Zoom, with Han and Leia still married and Chewbacca portrayed as an eccentric uncle. Ben and Rey's relationship develops within the context of this meddling family in multiple points. Like previous fics, emails and groupchats feature prominently. The eventual in-person meet-up does not conclude the fic; instead, the characters quarantine prior to meeting up. The conclusion, however, is the removal of restrictions; the characters are able to get ice cream, albeit with a reservation to ensure limited capacity at the ice cream parlor.



*Fic 5: “A House Turned Upside Down”*

This fic is the longest; Ben is cast as the somewhat estranged child of divorced parents Han and Leia. While grocery shopping on behalf of his parents out of concern for their health, he develops a crush on grocery store clerk Rey. This fic is also darker, while still warranting a fluff tag; Rey’s difficulties as an essential worker during the pandemic and Ben’s struggles to figure out how to handle his familial obligations are both crucial elements of the story. The fic hinges on a case of unknown identity; Ben cannot find Rey after she loses her job due to a non-COVID illness, until a chance encounter reunites them. Masks compound the issue, as neither of them know what the other looks like without a mask. This fic features the most in-person socialization, with the two conversing on Rey’s front porch and hugging at the end of their conversations. As time passes, the weather becomes a concern for socializing, and that combined with lowering cases move their conversations inside, where they progress to a full-fledged romantic relationship. This fic is unique in that it does not conclude with the lifting of restrictions, only their possibility, and that it infects a character with a disease that is, however briefly, believed by one character to be COVID-19.

**MAKING TRAUMA TANGIBLE**

Across the fics, paratexts acknowledge that the pandemic was a stressful and traumatic event. Within the fics, the pandemic is demonstrated through the inclusion of physical practices such as mask-wearing, Zoom calls, and ordering food to each other’s houses rather than going out to dinner. The longest fic, “A House Turned Upside Down,” begins with grocery shopping, which Ben recognizes the instability of: “Things appeared and disappeared in stores at what seemed like random. Getting the next carton of milk before the first was fin-

*Did you get it? I got a delivery notification.*

*A warning would have been nice. I tried to convince the DoorDash guy it wasn't mine, while he kept backing away like I was the COVID monster.*

*But thank you Ben :D*

*You told me Taco Bell is your favorite.*

*It sure is. But you could have asked me what I liked instead of buying like the whole menu*

*But at least now i know why you asked for my address, so I can stop worrying you'll murder me in my sleep*

*I was worried you'd tell me not to send it.*

*And I thought that if we were going to watch Galaxy Wars together tonight, it would be nice if we were eating together, too.*

*You got yourself Taco Bell too??*

*<Incoming FaceTime call from Ben Solo...>*

**Fig. 3:** An epistollic series of text messages between the two characters in “Pomp Under the Circumstances,” both representing and describing COVID-19 precautions.

ished was smart.” However, almost all the fics end with the conclusion of the pandemic, or at least the lifting of the current restrictions, which provides a sense of resolution to both the relationship and the characters’ struggles.

Many fics also utilize epistollic conventions, directly reproducing text conversations and emails into the fic; one even includes a subtle joke about the signatures that bookend each email. These texts and emails often increase the visceral feeling of isolation, with characters describing what they would do if they could only meet in person. Loneliness is a common theme, in the context of missing a partner but also in the context of the pandemic. In “the one I have been waiting for,” Rey finds herself early for a work meeting; “being early had never been one of her defining characteristics, but she also hadn’t had any real human interaction in days.”

Yearning is a classic romance trope that carries over into fanfiction; however, the yearning and loneliness depicted in the fics has a different dimension because of the overall uncertainty. In “A House Turned Upside Down,” it is not simply that Ben cannot find Rey; it is that her absence may be because she is dying from the virus. In “The New Normal,” it is not that Rey experiences a mild anxiety disorder and Ben cannot be physically there to reassure her; it is that the pandemic restrictions trigger a response that is undeniably familiar. Contemplating her ongoing self-isolation, Rey thinks that “She was one of the lucky ones. She was still employed. She was healthy. But she was becoming mentally exhausted”—hardly uncommon sentiments as lockdowns dragged on. From the perspective of literary trauma theory, the re-presentation of traumatic events through writing can have a healing effect. Furthermore, because the experiences can be assumed by the author to be familiar to their reader, this re-presentation be-

comes a communal sharing practice that allows its members to name and process the trauma of the pandemic.

### FANFIC AND HEALING

Within paratexts, authors express their own experiences with the pandemic or indicate that their writing is somewhat based on their own experiences. One author writes:

Since quarantine began I have been in a long-distance relationship with my boyfriend of four years and, well, I haven't been doing so hot because of it. So, one way I've been coping with being apart is writing, and I wanted to compose something with themes from my own relationship.

This author explicitly precedes her fic with the acknowledgment that her fic draws from her own experiences as well as what she imagines for the characters, and that she finds it therapeutic to re-present her own emotions and experiences onto these characters.

This re-presentation is of course of preexisting characters, removed from their canon context and devoid of their special status as Force users and galaxy leaders; what fans would call “comfort characters.” Little scholarship has formally defined the existence of a “comfort character,” or the fan practice of identifying with a character and magnifying their shared qualities.<sup>4</sup> Characters serve as a point of entry to texts (Gwenllian-Jones), but the process by which fans identify with characters—or, alternatively, find productive differences—remains unclear. The majority of work on fan identification looks at sports fandom, although some scholarship explores melodramatic identification in fiction media fandom.

Schmidt defines melodramatic identification as “a relationship to a continuous interweaving of texts—including both fan fiction and the narrative of the fan herself—into a greater text that the fan knows as ‘my show’” (Schmidt, n.p.). This relationship, while appropriate, is too broad to explain the specific identification with a character or a romantic pairing that is present in these fics. Genre conventions offer some insight.

### COVID-19 AND SICKFIC

The writers of these selected fics universally steered away from infecting characters in their fics with COVID-19. This is likely in part due to genre conventions; fluff typically deals with light-hearted matter. However, “sickfics,” or fics where one character is ill and another must take care of them, certainly can be classified as fluff. Furthermore, fics need not be exclusively one genre; some fics were tagged as “angst and fluff,” and a fluff tag may comfortably reside beside a “hurt/comfort” or “whump” tag. This is demonstrated in Fic 5, which is tagged as “angst and fluff” and includes a character fearing that another has COVID-19—although the character in reality has a common cold and the result is another of many misunderstandings in the fic.

The choice not to give characters COVID-19 must therefore be interpreted as a deliberate decision that goes beyond genre expectations. The analysis of character behaviors and, through author paratexts, writer behaviors indicate widespread caution and anxiety about the pandemic. Infecting a character with a life-threatening virus that remains somewhat mysterious—and at the time that these fics were written, was exceedingly so—could therefore be seen as going “too far” in a way that more familiar illnesses such as the flu or pneumonia would not. Unlike a common cold, which is unpleasant

but common and therefore can be turned into writing inspiration, actually contracting COVID-19—particularly in the summer of 2020, when little was known about the virus—would be too terrifying to recount within a few months of the experience. It remains possible that COVID-19 will become a sickfic convention now that vaccines and the loosening of restrictions have changed the narrative around the virus.

This analysis is complicated by the fact that a fluff tag was not a criterion of inclusion. Rather, the five fics selected based on the other, established, criteria were all tagged as fluff, indicating that fluff is a popular genre for COVID-19 fics; the preference for popular fics in the selection criteria is the best indicator of this assertion. It could also be explained by the restriction of fics to those rated M or lower, as lower-rated fics tend to deal with lighter topics. However, plenty of dark topics can be encompassed by an M tag; a lower rating does not necessarily indicate the type of fic. Overall, it seems likely that all fics were tagged as fluff because of the appeal of fluffy, comforting fics that still acknowledged the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### COMMUNITY CARE

It has long been established that fanfiction is a communal practice, where both pleasure in reading and understanding of what is being read comes from participation in a community (De Kosnik). From these fics, it is apparent that such community participation continues during traumatic events. Some authors even indicated that COVID-19 fics were a trend, implying that they had seen or read other fics like theirs before writing. Community participation was characterized by community care, as indicated by tags and author's notes that referenced trigger warnings as well as by less-standardized exhortations for safety in author's notes.

In the preview of “A House Turned Upside Down,” the author writes that “Ben really shouldn’t be going out every week, but speaking from my own experience, when you’re shopping for three people there’s always something someone needs. Stay home as much as you can, cousins. It’s dangerous out there” (VR\_Trakowski). The usage of “cousins” expresses more intimate care, but other authors express similar sentiments: “Hope very one[sic] is staying safe and healthy” or “Hope everyone is hanging in there!” (krossartist and SuchaPrettyPoison; dawninthemtn). VR\_Trakowski also expressed concern that their readers might drink and drive and wanted to reinforce Ben Solo’s actions as appropriate for his physical size, indicating that their community concern extended beyond COVID-related care.

The consistent care for the reader indicates an awareness of community; fanfics are written and shared on Ao3 with the assumption and arguably hope that someone will read them. Descriptors like “cousins” indicate the intimate nature of the community. Furthermore, almost all writers are themselves readers, and many readers end up writing. Therefore, while it is possible to speak of a dichotomy between writer and reader in the context of a single fanfic, such a dichotomy is unhelpful when considering the wider community. It is worth noting that this community was also indicated through the understanding on the part of some authors that many other authors were writing quarantine fics: “Everybody’s doing quarantine fics, seems like; who am I to resist the trend?”, as VR\_Trakowski writes. This reinforces the porousness of the boundaries between reader and writer.

## CONCLUSION

The findings presented here indicate that fans clearly enjoy reading and writing about a beloved character in an every-

day situation and derive comfort from imagining such shared experiences. Such identification may be personal or aspirational, where a writer may feel better able to handle their own experiences if they imagine a beloved and admired character going through the same things. It seems plausible that fics such as those with hurt-comfort or sickfic conventions provide ways of coping with more individualized traumas. A generalized assertion is outside the scope of this paper. Still, within the context of COVID-19 as cultural trauma, these fics demonstrate that the writers and to an extent the readers use fanfiction and identification with fictional characters as a coping mechanism to deal with the pandemic. Writers utilized trigger warnings, statements of compassion, and an awareness of other writers to express community care and desire for readers' safety. Finally, this paper finds support for the idea that quarantine fics are prevalent enough to have some coherent shared meaning amongst fic readers and writers, rather than simply being an anomaly.

The work presented here has some substantial limitations. This paper analyzed fanfictions that *did* explore COVID-19. An equally fruitful analysis could be undertaken of fics that actively expressed that they were *not* including COVID-19 in their modern AU, particularly in terms of what those paratexts expressed. Second, this paper only examined one pairing, and examined fics that were predominantly fluff; an examination of darker genres, such as angst, whump, or hurt/comfort, could reveal radically different conclusions. Finally, fics need not be tagged with any variation of COVID-19, pandemics, or quarantines to still express emotions about those things. Escapism is an equally plausible way of handling trauma, particularly ongoing trauma without a defined end. Identifying the full spectrum of ways that fans have used their fandom to process the trauma of COVID-19 is fasci-



nating and far beyond the scope of this paper. Furthermore, many fans found the stress of the pandemic to limit their ability to participate in fandom, which is its own form of fannish experience with the pandemic that warrants study.

In addition, the focus on modern AUs observed here indicates something about the nature of fan identification, not just with fandoms broadly speaking, but with specific characters within fandom. The ways that fan identification with a character functions may be intuitively familiar to those, like this author, who consider themselves aca-fans. However, more research is certainly needed to identify how such identification is formed; how it functions; and what its effects, both positive and negative, are. Of particular interest is how this identification functions in fics where the beloved character goes through challenging or even torturous experiences as part of the narrative, which can draw compelling connections with scholarship on hurt-comfort and whump fic genres.

The use of modern AUs also provides an interesting snapshot of everyday experiences during the pandemic. While the characters are fictional, the focus on the details of pandemic experiences provides a compelling portrait of what life was like when these fanfictions were written and released. It seems likely that as responses to the COVID-19 pandemic evolve, these fics will take on even more resonance as having been written in a specific time. It will be interesting to determine if pandemic AUs become a popular trope once the actual trauma of the event has receded, much like other historical events become AU settings. Certainly, fanfiction can approach dark subjects; however, pandemic fics written after the pandemic has concluded will necessarily be different than those written during the pandemic. The historicity of

this specific type of fic is therefore a productive avenue for future study.

Finally, it is worth considering that the way that fanfiction and fandom operate in this instance is very different from cynical interpretations of fandom as mindless corporate consumerism. Rather, the practice of telling stories about a commonly understood hero and heroine that reflect the experiences of the teller's and the audiences' everyday lives is more akin to traditional folkloric storytelling practices. Previous scholars have used folklore as a way to examine fanfiction (Falzone; Tosenberger), and Ao3's tagging system has been described as a folksonomy (Price); however, scholarship arguing that fanfiction is itself a modern form of folklore—and that recognizes the fruitful contradictions in such a description—is rare. The exceptions can be found in Bacon-Smith's 1992 book *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* and, albeit with less detail, in Coppa's 2017 *A Fanfiction Reader*. Myths remain an important way that humans make sense of their existence, and never more so than when traumas emerge. Further research is needed to determine how fandom connects to folkloric practices and what insights can be determined about how it functions in that context, particularly when participants experience individual or cultural traumas.

#### WORKS CITED

- Alexander, Jeffrey C., et al. "Towards a theory of cultural trauma." *Cultural trauma and collective identity*, Univ of California Press, 2004, pp. 1-30.
- Bacon-Smith, Camille. *Enterprising women: Television fandom and the creation of popular myth*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.

- Black, Rebecca, et al. “Representations of autism in online Harry Potter fanfiction.” *Journal of Literacy Research*, vol. 51.1, 2019, pp. 30-51.
- Brennan, Joseph. “‘Fandom is full of pearl clutching old ladies’: Nonnies in the online slash closet.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 17.4, 2014, pp. 363-380.
- Bullard, Julia. “Values and negotiation in classification work.” *Proceedings of the companion publication of the 17th ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative work & social computing*. 2014.
- Busse, Kristina. “Pon Farr, Mpreg, bonds, and the rise of the Omegaverse.” *Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World*, 2013, pp. 316-22.
- Busse, Kristina. “Afterword: fannish affect and its aftermath.” *Everybody hurts: Transitions, endings, and resurrections in fan cultures*, 2018, pp. 209-218.
- Coker, Cait, and Karen Viars. “Welcoming the Dark Side? Exploring Whitelash and Actual Space Nazis in TFA Fanfiction.” *NANO: New American Notes Online* vol. 12, 2017, p. 1E.
- De Kosnik, Abigail. “‘Fifty Shades’ and the Archive of Women’s Culture.” *Cinema Journal*, vol. 54.3, 2015, pp. 116-125.
- Duffett, Mark. *Understanding fandom: An introduction to the study of media fan culture*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2013.
- Falzone, Paul J. “The final frontier is queer: Aberrancy, archetype and audience generated folklore in K/S slashfiction.” *Western folklore*, vol. 64.3/4, 2005, pp. 243-261.

- Fiesler, Casey. "Owning the Servers: A Design Fiction Exploring the Transformation of Fandom into 'Our Own.'" *Transformative Works and Cultures* vol. 28, 2018.
- Fiesler, Casey, Shannon Morrison, and Amy S. Bruckman. "An archive of their own: A case study of feminist HCI and values in design." *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI conference on human factors in computing systems*, 2016.
- Gwenllian Jones, Sara. "The sex lives of cult television characters." *Screen* vol. 43.1, 2002, pp. 79-90.
- Hellekson, Karen. "A fannish field of value: Online fan gift culture." *Cinema journal* 48.4 (2009), pp. 113-118.
- Hoffman, Matthew. "'Enemies, but complicated enemies': Rey and Kylo Ren's relationship." *Unbound: A Journal of Digital Scholarship* 1.1, 2019.
- Holmes, Alyssandra. "Fanfiction as a Form with Merit." *DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska – Lincoln*, 2018.
- Horeck, Tanya. "'Netflix and Heal': The Shifting Meanings of Binge-Watching during the COVID-19 Crisis." *Film Quarterly* 75.1 (2021): 35-40.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. Routledge, 2012.
- Kaplan, Deborah. "Construction of fan fiction character through narrative." *Fan fiction and fan communities in the age of the internet*, 2006, pp. 134-152.
- Leavenworth, Maria Lindgren. "The paratext of fan fiction." *Narrative*, vol. 23.1, 2015, pp. 40-60.
- Pederson, Joshua. "Speak, trauma: toward a revised under-

standing of literary trauma theory.” *Narrative*, vol. 22.3, 2014, pp. 333-353.

Price, Ludovica. “Fandom, Folksonomies and Creativity: the case of the Archive of Our Own.” *The Human Position in an Artificial World: Creativity, Ethics and AI in Conocimiento Organization*, 2019, pp. 11-37.

Schmidt, Lisa. “Monstrous melodrama: Expanding the scope of melodramatic identification to interpret negative fan responses to Supernatural.” *Transformative works and cultures*, vol. 4, 2010.

Tosenberger, Catherine. “‘Kinda Like the Folklore of Its Day’: ‘Supernatural,’ Fairy Tales, and Ostension.” *Transformative works and cultures*, vol. 4.1, 2010.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The longest fanfiction on Archive of Our Own, as of February 2022, was 5,854,121 words long, or just over 1,500 chapters.
- 2 For those unfamiliar with the terms, mpreg is short for male pregnancy, while omegaverse encompasses a wide variety of fics that occur in a shared universe where characters have sexual roles based on a defined hierarchy drawn from the popular understanding of wolves as alphas, betas, and omegas – hence, omegaverse. For further reading, see Busse’s chapter in *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World* (Busse, 2013).
- 3 Fanfiction has long employed a rating system to ensure that people are not exposed to inappropriate content without consent, from early descriptions of fics as “lemon” or “lime” to indicate pornographic content to Archive of Our Own’s current rating system. When a fic is published, it must be tagged as G for general, T for Teen and Up, M for Mature, and E for Explicit. A creator can also opt out of this rating system, which

will indicate to the reader that the author has chosen to do so. In addition, Ao3 offers a separate option to warn for graphic violence, major character death, and underage or non-consensual sex.

- 4 Holmes references comfort characters in her argument for fanfiction's merit but does little to explore the concept.