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Whump, A+ Parenting and Fantasy Racism: Trauma Narratives in Marvel Fanfiction

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

Intro
Hi y'all, let's talk about the stories we tell about trauma.

Trauma is a bit of a buzzword. For the purposes of this project, it's any event or type of event that negatively and massively disrupts a person's wellbeing and/or sense of safety.

Trauma can include assault, genocide, the suicide attempt of a loved one, emotional domestic violence, living as the target of racism, homelessness, growing up hungry, torture, sexual assault etc., etc., etc. (If you hadn't noticed yet, we're going to get into a lot of heavy stuff here.)

Proceed at your own risk to discuss how fanfiction both reflects and shapes our understanding of trauma. We'll also break down topics like whump, savior narratives, fanfic's love affair with emotionally broken men, and what to do with all of that.

My Focus
In writing this, I am coming from the perspective of a white, queer, woman from the U.S. who has had minimal personal experience with trauma. Most of my expertise in the areas I discuss is purely academic.

My ideas have been shaped by which fandoms I have been exposed to. I have observed all of these patterns cross-fandom, but I can't say they’re universal because I haven’t spent serious time with more than sixteen of the thousands of fandoms out there.

Though this project is about trauma narratives in fanfiction as a whole, I decided to focus on analyzing fanfiction on An Archive of Our Own (AO3) using examples from fanfics about the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Occasionally, I pull in examples from other fandoms. When this happens it is for one of two reasons: 1) MCU canon doesn't lend itself to stories that fit the pattern I’m talking about, or 2) I found a particularly perfect example while reading in a different fandom.

When I started this project in 2020, Marvel was the main fandom I was reading fics from. Since then, I’ve drifted through a lot of other fandoms before returning to the MCU in 2022 while working on the second phase of this project. Because of this, I’m behind on fics inspired by Phase 4 movies and shows.
Methods

My Blind Spots
I have little to no exposure to fanfiction outside of AO3 and Fanfiction.net, so I'm not going to include features of fanfiction spaces from Wattpad, Tumblr, etc. in these analyses.

My ideas have also been shaped by my personal reading biases. I don't read fics where y/n is a character and I have to trust an author before I'm willing to read anything with an original character as an important character — especially if the original character is in a relationship with a canon character. I tend to also avoid fics tagged “main character death” (unless I know that death is temporary, a la Jason Todd in Batman fics) or “hurt no comfort.” While working on this project, I didn’t go out of my way to survey any of these blind spots.

Also, there have been many times where I’ve clicked on a fic and quickly backtracked because the writing is meh at best or the tropes are problematic right off the bat. Because I don't read these works or add them to my catalog in the same way I do good ones, they don't stick in my brain as well. I’m sure this has led me to underestimate how many not-very-good fics exist.

My Methods
My work on this project relies on the principles of qualitative research. According to Miles and Huberman’s 1994 book, doing qualitative research means:

- Observing a situation through “intense and/or prolonged contact” with it
- Thinking holistically about the situation being studied, instead of breaking things down into countable or testable pieces
- Drawing conclusions from themes or patterns identified in what you’re studying instead of going into the research with a hypothesis and detailed plan of study

There are other features of qualitative research, but those are the most pertinent to my study.

More specifically, the method of this project is an informal narrative analysis. The extremely basic explanation of that is that I’m analyzing the full text of works to find patterns, called narratives (Brennen, 2013).

To be clear, this is not a traditionally rigorous narrative analysis for a couple of reasons. First, I started working on it in November 2020, before I knew narrative analysis existed or how to do one. Second, the traditional narrative analysis is limiting. I would have had to choose a narrower domain and question to explore.

I considered doing some quantitative analysis alongside my qualitative research. I thought it would be interesting to know what percentage of MCU fics fit into each of my narrative
categories. However, I ultimately decided against this because it would have been a non-literal mountain of work.

To count how many fics fit into a particular narrative, I would have had to read hundreds or thousands of fics all the way through, even if I only sampled a percentage of the fics that talk about trauma. I have read hundreds of fics already, but I would have had to re-read them and read even more. After discarding that idea as waaaaay too much work, I considered using tags to get an extremely rough numerical picture of patterns. But, as anyone who spends time on AO3 knows, you can get a pretty good idea of what genre a fic fits by reading the tags, but the tags don’t usually tell you a lot about narrative patterns and plot elements. Also, the endless creativity in tagging makes it nearly impossible to find and count all tags that are about a particular thing. In the end, I discarded that idea as well.

The one place I did incorporate quantitative analysis is when I discuss sexually explicit and self-insert fics. To discover how many fics were explicit, I went to the search results for all fics tagged “Marvel Cinematic Universe.” After excluding crossovers, I noted how many fics there were. Then I looked at the side panel to see how many fics were in each content rating category. To discover how many fics are self-insert fics, I excluded fics that used the “Reader,” “Original Character(s),” and “Original Character” tags. Comparing the number of fics before and after excluding those tags gave me a rough result for what percentage of fics are self-insert fics. However, this method is kinda flawed, as it excluded all fics where the author used the original character tags. That means fics where the original characters are well-formed people in their own right or minor characters (like Kate Bishop’s landlady) were also excluded.

I am also using genre analysis to identify patterns within fanfiction as a genre as a whole, as well as specific genres within fanfiction, like whump and darkfics. For about genre analysis looks like in this context, check out my discussion on fanfiction and its genre features.

**Why fanfiction?**

Fanfiction is often dismissed, but it is created and consumed by millions of people and the narratives within both reflect and shape ideas about trauma.

Like all storytelling forms, fanfiction communicates messages and information. Fic readers will learn from these messages, internalize some of them, use some of the information, and generally have their lives changed by what stories they encounter.

Analyzing fanfiction is useful because it can show how many people think about topics like trauma, but this area of study is mostly neglected by traditional academia and media criticism.
What is fanfiction?

fanfiction: stories featuring mostly non-original characters and worlds, typically non-commercial written works posted on the internet -- fanfic, fic

** Check out the [Trauma & Tags](#) page for more definitions of fic vocab.

Fanfiction as a media has a reputation that isn’t unearned per say, but is outdated, pejorative, and by no means represents the majority of works I’ve read. Visit [The Reputation of Fanfic](#) for a discussion about that.

Fanfiction is primarily a written storytelling medium but thinking about the works as traditional novels or short stories is an oversimplification. Fanfiction is a medium, like television, books or video games, but it also functions somewhat like a genre, as it has medium-wide trends. A tenant of media analysis is that the medium a story is in affects how that story is told and interpreted. For example, visual mediums, like film and comics communicate a lot of meaning through visual symbols.

Red Skull’s character design after the mask comes off in the comics and in Captain America: The First Avenger is an example the [Bald of Evil](#) trope, which uses baldness to signify evilness.

In the case of fanfiction, the non-commercial nature of the medium affects how and what stories are told. Fic writers don’t have to bow to studios or what sells (Tesoro, 2017), so often the stories are more transgressive, progressive or transformational than mainstream stories. The accessibility of “publishing” fanfiction also affects what stories get told and by whom.

“As conversations about representation and diversity grow louder, each new book, television show, or movie franchise that centers sound anyone other than a cisgender white person feels like a gift rather than a given. … While white people are still by and large the gatekeepers of the stories produced in Hollywood and the literary world, anyone can be an author on Archive of Our Own …” (Tesoro, 2017, para. 6).

All mediums have tendencies like this that are based on format, but fanfiction’s patterns go deeper and farther than this. Fanfiction has a particular culture, trends and terminology, all of which have to be taken into account to really analyze what’s going on. Because of this, I am using genre analysis as a theoretical model to discuss fanfiction.

Branston (2006) explains that doing genre analysis means looking at clusters of works that have shared features and assessing how individual works do or don’t fit the pattern. It also means looking at the messages conveyed by the genre as a whole.
“Popular genres can be seen as revealing underlying preoccupations and conflicts in a social order. Studying genre may reveal how the media offer mythical solutions to these preoccupations” (Branston, 2006, p. 45)

I think this is a particularly interesting idea when discussing trauma narratives.

I am also using genre analysis to look at fanfiction genres that focus on trauma.

There are many genres within fanfiction. Some are your standard entertainment genres like romance, historical fiction, or humor. Others are more fanfiction-specific, like hurt/comfort, darkfics, case fics, fix-its, and crackfics. These aren’t all exclusive to fanfiction, but they are more common and specific within that space than outside it.

In my years reading fanfiction, I’ve noticed that fics often:

- Transgress or transform mainstream narratives, especially about gender roles, relationships, and representation (to a lesser degree)
- Embrace plurality and alternate explanations/endings/headcanons, and disregard claims that a single interpretation is “correct” (even the author’s interpretation)
- Have a high level of awareness of and focus on sexual and traumatic content
- Focus on how characters interact with each other or how they feel internally more than plot or worldbuilding

Analyzing fanfiction in a rigorous and meaningful way requires engaging with fanfiction’s unique patterns, instead of just shaking your head because a lot of it transgresses normality and often presents in ways that are hard to understand at first glance.

While looking at scholarly work about fanfiction, one of the few moments it felt like a scholar really got it was when I saw this quote from The Democratic Genre: Fanfiction in a Literary Context (2005):

Notes:

I have realized that I have come to view the MCU as just someone else writing their own fanfics, and theirs just happens to be the one that was put on screen for everyone to see. As such, when I don't like a fact in there or how that story has played out, I disregard "canon" in the same way I disregard bits of fics that I find on here. So, everything that happened in Endgame? Unacceptable. I don't believe it happened. I choose to believe in the happy worlds that the rest of us writers like to create here as actual canon. No one can convince me otherwise.

Now enjoy my world that has angst, but also has the promise of a happy ending. :)

Trigger warning: suicidal thoughts, not of someone considering it but remembering how it feels to think like that and worrying that someone else might be going through the same thing. Not said in explicit detail, but be careful with yourselves, lovelies!
“The analysis of these stories supports the claim that many fan stories are not really about action scenes, or plot development, but about what goes on in the interstices, in the downtime between adventures” (Cicioni 1998, 159; as cited in Pugh 2005, pp. 20–21)

I’ve rarely seen this observation discussed, but I think it’s really useful to see this when talking about trauma narratives in fics. The focus on in-betweens, aftermaths, and characters, really lends itself to stories about interpersonal relationships, healing (or lack thereof), traumatic backstories, etc.

Visit these pages for additional information about fanfic genre features that are pertinent to discussing trauma. Check out Trauma & Tags in particular for fic vocab.

Linked below: The Reputation of Fanfic: Self-Insert and Porn, Trauma & Tags, Fanfic / Broken Men

Image caption: An author’s note showing some common fanfiction community attitudes, including ownership over characters and worlds and trauma awareness.

Reputation of Fanfic

Traditional academia, cultural criticism, and general society tends to tread fanfic as a barely understandable phenomenon at best and something trashy and immoral at worst.

Attitudes toward fanfic are slowly shifting, but academic work on fics still primarily falls into one of these categories:

- What the heck is this shit?
- Is it trash or not?
- Is it a copyright problem?
- Why is it so freaking queer?

Even many articles and videos defending fanfiction tend to be apologetic, and the people involved cringe and waffle about admitting they read, or worse write, fanfiction.

When most people first think of fanfiction, they tend to first thing of it being a terribly written, cringy self-insert by a 12-year-old girl, or porn. Or both.

(Thanks, My Immortal.)

Since that’s what people think fanfic is, let’s talk about it.
**Self-insert**

Self-insert fanfiction, where either an idealized version of the author or a blank that the reader can fill in with themselves is a main character in the story. Usually, the self-insert has a close relationship with one or more canon characters who dote on them, have lots of sex with them (if the relationships aren't platonic), and/or comforts them after they are traumatized.

**I’m not as familiar with this part of the fanfiction space because I tend to avoid these stories.**

To deny that this sort of fanfiction exists would be a lie. However, it’s not actually very common. Out of all 413,609 MCU fics on AO3 as of June 7, 2022, 88% of them had no original characters or reader inserts. Extrapolating, that means LESS than 12% of fics are self-insert fics, since the search method I used to figure out these percentages excluded fics with original characters.

Simple including original characters doesn’t make a story a self-insert story. Some are well-formed people in their own right or minor characters (like Kate Bishop’s landlady).

The **SHIELD Therapy series** by Eustacia Vye (eustaciavye) heavily features the POV of an original female character, a forensic therapist SHIELD brings in to work with Loki. Other original characters fill out the therapist’s life, like a roommate, boyfriend, parents, supervisors and colleagues.

Additionally, if being a self-insert piece disqualifies a work from being literature, then Dante’s Inferno needs to go.

** see the post that made that popular knowledge or the article “**11 Classics That Are Secretly Fanfiction**”

A more small-time version of self-insert can even be positive, when what is being inserted is something like an author’s experience with anxiety or a sexual/gender orientation that is lacking representation elsewhere.

The moral of this chapter? **DO NOT TRY TO PUSH YOURSELF INTO A SITUATION YOU’RE NOT READY FOR. Recovery takes time. To take back control, you WILL have to do some shit that’s very outside of your comfort zone. However, it’s super important that you push yourself only when you’re in a good mindset. When you’re drained like Peter was, you won’t be doing anything productive. It’ll just be harmful.**

The technique for stopping a panic attack that Tony describes is the exact way I do it. It doesn’t work for everyone, but it’s a good place to start.

**An example of this sort of positive small-time self-insert. This author used their personal experience with anxiety to inject grounding strategies and wisdom from their experiences into the story and author’s notes. Screen Shot 2021-01-09 at 23.32.52.png**
Porn

Okay, admittedly there are a lot more fanfics that show sex than self-insert ones. Out of the MCU fics on AO3, here’s the breakdown by rating:

![MCU Fics by Rating](image)

Adding together the explicit and mature sections, about 29% of fics are likely to discuss sex in some way. However, I posit that this is actually a good thing, especially when discussing the topic of trauma.

Fanfiction being a very sex-positive space opens the door for stories about sexual assault, consent, queer relationships, and all manner of other important sexual topics that don’t get much space in more mainstream media.

This view is shared by another Western student, Alisan Keesee, who wrote an article in 2019 titled “Fan fiction teaches your kids about sex, and that’s a good thing.” In that article, Keesee writes she’s learned more about sex from fanfiction and finding reliable sex education resources online than she did in sex ed class. Which, same.

Keesee, and I, have read fics that talk about consent, condom use, sexual assault and harassment, red flags of abuse, LGBTQ+ relationships, STIs and more. What’s more, Keesee said fanfiction gave her a space to safely explore her own sexual preferences. (2019).

In *What Are You Comfortable With?* By Writer_Lethogica, Sam Wilson (the Falcon/Captain America) and Bucky Barnes (the Winter Soldier) go through worksheets
to better figure out their sexual interests and boundaries and to address the “lackluster at best” sex ed Bucky received growing up in the 1940s. The fic also lightly touches on the trauma of experiencing historical homophobia.

Fanfiction shouldn’t necessarily be a person’s source to accurately learn the mechanics of sex, but it is excellent for showing and normalizing different relationship dynamics, such as being anxious about what to do in relationships or being in a happy queer relationship (Tesoro, 2017).

Showing happy queer relationships is especially subversive, as much of mainstream media either erases queerness or kills off one of the characters in a homosexual couple, which is called the Bury Your Gays trope (Tesoro, 2017). Fanfiction provides a space that counters the consistent message that queer relationships are doomed to end in tragedy” and “provides a place to heal — and often, a supportive community along with it” (Tesoro, 2017, para. 11).

There are many of fanfics with heterosexual pairings or without romantic relationships at all, but the most popular ships (short for relationships) in fandom spaces tend to be between two male characters, called slash relationships.

Most often the two characters being shipped have only been in straight relationships in canon, but in fics they end up together instead.

** Why male characters? See Fanfic / Broken Men.

Scholarly work on the phenomenon has tried to explain, and explain away, queerness and slash relationships in fanfiction through a number of hypotheses, including one of the male characters being female-coded, objectification of male bodies, and others. Most of these hypotheses boil down to these queer stories actually, secretly, being heterosexual. (de Montrouge, 2019).

However, more recent scholarly analysis disagrees, because the previous analysis relied on the assumption that fanfic is a phenomenon created by cis, white, heterosexual women. It’s true that fanfiction is uniquely not dominated by male-identifying people, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s dominated by cis women either, which is supported by AO3 user Centrumlumina’s 2013 survey of AO3 participants* and my own experience in fanfiction communities.

“A more accurate description [of fanfiction spaces] would be to say that they are queer, female and trans/non-binary dominated spaces, where gender is often understood as fluid” (Duchastel de Montrouge, 2019, p. 22).

** For more discussion of rationales behind slash relationships, see Fanfic / Broken Men.
Now, fanfiction isn’t perfect by any means. It’s undeniable that some fanfiction romanticizes unhealthy sex or relationships, but as Keesee points out, readers often go into these fics knowing that the dynamics shown are unhealthy and either “criticize it or enjoy it understanding the cognitive dissonance” (2019, para. 10).

I’d add that authors are also often aware that their story portrays unhealthy dynamics and label such works with tags like “dark,” “unhealthy relationship,” and “unrealistic sex.”

Overall, fanfiction’s habit of queering canon stories and relationships (literally and figuratively) makes it a currently unparalleled way to explore relationships that are neglected by mainstream storytelling. Like, I literally sought out fics with polyamorous triads on AO3 a couple of years ago because I knew they were a thing, but I’d never seen them represented in media or real life and just wanted to know how a relationship like that would … work. Y’know?

For a kind of meta example, I wait for you and you come around (we'll make heaven a place on earth) by questionsthemmsemles is an adorable fic where Mantis doesn’t really know how to be in a relationship or have sex other than what she’s read in romance novels, with but she wants to do it right with her girlfriend Nebula.

Circling back to trauma, fanfiction is also unparalleled in the way it doesn’t shy away from telling stories of sexual assault and harassment. Arguably, fanfiction’s focus on sexual trauma can tip into trauma porn and can focus on some stories at the expense of others, but still, fanfiction normalizes and addresses sexual trauma and healing in a way I’ve never seen elsewhere.

** for more about trauma porn, see Extreme Trauma, slide 6

Dialogue from right before this story’s version of Natasha Romanov and Clint Barton have sex consensual sex with someone they like for the first time. Slow Growth Investment by arsenicarcher (Arsenic) has some questionable narratives, but it also has moments like this one. Screen Shot 2020-07-10 at 22.31.25.png

She had loosened her grip, but he stayed where he was. "I’ve never had sex not for money or, y’know, to keep someone happy with me.”

She didn’t look surprised, but then, this was Natasha. Flying pigs could erupt out of Fury’s ass and she’d murmur, “Saw that coming.”

She said, “I’ve never had sex by choice.”

He smiled up at her, and he knew it gave away his nerves, but he also knew she wouldn’t use it against him. It was an odd feeling, warm and filling and terrifying. "How ‘bout… Wanna pretend neither of us has modifiers?"

It took a second, but she smiled, slowly. She tried out, “I’ve never had sex.”

Clint nodded. "Yeah, me neither."
Before diving into examining how trauma is handled in stories themselves, it is also worthwhile to examine how the overall fanfiction community relates to trauma.

On the whole, fanfiction is a very content-aware space, which is good because it handles a lot of sensitive content, from mental health ideation to sexual content.

It is very rare to stumble across trauma you weren’t warned about. This gives readers a chance to knowingly consent to what they are getting into and avoid anything that might be retraumatizing for them.

Many authors take special note of any potential troubling content in their author’s notes or tell readers there’s a list in the endnotes to avoid spoilers.

“Other content warnings for canon-level violence and injuries, vomiting, teenagers in peril, and the implied Winter Soldier trauma umbrella.”

(Part of an author’s note by galwednesday)

An Archive of Our Own has formalized this community norm, by implementing mandatory Rating and Archive Warning tags.

Ratings are similar to movie ratings, and range from General Audiences (Gen) to Explicit.

Archive Warnings require a little more explanation.

AO3 requires creators to warn for a short list of types of content: Graphic Depictions of Violence, Major Character Death, Rape/Non-Con, and Underage.

** Underage refers to on-page, usually detailed, depictions of sexual activity involving one or more characters younger than 18. Applies to a wide range of content, ranging from two 17-year-olds getting frisky to childhood sexual assault.

Creators may also choose to not warn for those, but they must then choose either “Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings,” which means some of the warnings may apply but they don’t want to use them (usually to avoid spoilers), or “No Archive Warnings Apply,” which is what it says on the tin.

Either way, readers are always aware of at least the potential of that particular list of traumas.

A playlist highlighting the fun side of AO3 tagging.

This system isn’t just for show either, if a work isn’t tagged with the correct rating and warnings, it can be reported to the Policy and Abuse Committee.
Beyond the mandatory tags, many creators also tag their works with other tags to describe the mood and content of the fic.

A helpful thing about the tag system is that you can use them to find or avoid certain content.

If you want to read stories about recovering or living with PTSD, there are tags like “Bucky Barnes Has PTSD” (or any of the 22 variations on that theme that link back to it).

If you’re wanting to avoid fics that handle child abuse, you can choose to exclude works with tags like “Implied/Referenced Child Abuse” from your search results.

Below, I’ve laid out a chart of sorts to connect different sorts of trauma to the tags that are often used to describe it.

** To make tags make more sense, I've used "Peter" (Peter Parker) every time a character’s name would be in the tag (with some exceptions to better reflect the tags actually used)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRAUMA</th>
<th>TAGS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Trauma</strong></td>
<td>These tags can cover/refer to any type of trauma or multiple types of trauma in one story. Most specific content tags can be modified by adding &quot;Past,&quot; &quot;Canonical,&quot; and/or &quot;Implied/Referenced&quot; at the beginning. When content is implied/referenced, the content: a) doesn't happen on-screen, and/or b) isn't discussed in detail.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Examples: implied/referenced eating issues, past canonical child abuse | • **Angst** - emotional pain  
• **Fluff and Angst** - combines soft/comforting/cute scenes with emotional pain  
• **Hurt/Comfort, h/c** - a genre of fic where Character A is hurt physically/emotionally/any way possible and other characters provide comfort and/or support - doesn't always have to be traumatic hurt, fics where characters get the flu and another character makes them soup can count too  
• **Hurt No Comfort**  
• **Whump** - version of hurt/comfort that is heavier on the hurt, often piling on pain and traumas until your heart hurts too; some whump fics focus on just the hurt and omit the comfort part  
• **Dark** - genre of fic that offers a bleak, dark, and/or sadistic version of characters, canonical events, or the canonical world in general; fics with this tag typically go beyond making stories more mature or realistic and venture into dubious morality and heavy trauma  
  ○ **Dead Dove: Do Not Eat** - literally just means that the fic includes the content and themes listed in the other tags, but it typically serves as an extra heads-up that the fic is particularly dark or problematic  
• **Peter Feels**  
• **Sad Peter Parker**  
• **Peter Needs a Hug, Peter Gets a Hug, Everyone Needs a Hug, Everyone Gets a Hug**  
• **Hurt Peter Parker**  
• **Kilgrave Is His Own Warning** - points out a character is a horrible person who does bad things whenever they are in a story, and the reader should expect them to do their typical horrible-person things to other characters in the story; very occasionally the tag is used to warn for content typical to a character (such as murder or prostitution) who isn't necessarily a horrible person  
• **Trauma Recovery**  
• **Coercion**  
• **Character Death, Child Death**  
• **Danger to Children**  
• **Counseling, Therapy** |
**Interpersonal trauma**

In addition to these general tags indicating unhealthy relationships, some authors will tag the specifics of the situation.

**Example:** gaslighting

I listed those sorts of tags under the following Physical, Sexual or Emotional Trauma sections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abuse</th>
<th>• Abuse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>○ Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>- (see sexual trauma for more)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Physical Abuse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Emotional Abuse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Verbal Abuse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Abusive Language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relationship Abuse / Abusive Relationships, Spousal Abuse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Domestic Violence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dysfunctional Families, Dysfunctional Relationship, Family Issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child Abuse</td>
<td>- add &quot;Child&quot; in front of physical/emotional/etc. from above</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- ○ **Thanos's A+ Parenting** - sarcastic, the parent in question is an abusive asshole; can swap out "Thanos" with the name of any other potentially abusive or neglectful parent
- ○ **Howard Stark's B+ Parenting** - better parenting than A+ but still usually neglectful or verbally abusive
- ○ **Frigga's C+ Parenting** - nearing actually decent parenting, they really are trying even if they fail or are careless at times
- ○ **Tony Stark is a Good Parent / Good Parent Tony Stark, Tony Stark is a Bad Parent / Bad Parent Tony Stark** - typically used when a particular parent figure does an iffy job in canon and the fic author want to make it clear which version of the character will be showing up in their story; sometimes both are tagged on one story if the character does a similarly iffy job or goes from one to the other over the span of the story
  - ○ **Tony Stark Has Bad Parents**
  - ○ **Child Neglect**
  - ○ **Abusive Howard Stark, Howard Stark's Bad Parenting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical/Minority Trauma</th>
<th>• Hate crimes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Slurs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Racism, Xenophobia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ <strong>Fantasy Racism / Fantastic Racism</strong> - racism towards aliens/werewolves/elves/cyborgs/etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Slavery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sexism, Misogyny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Homophobia, Transphobia, Biphobia, Acephobia, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: period-typical sexism</td>
<td>o Dysphoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like the Abuse section, many authors will add tags from other sections of this list to give the specifics of a story.</td>
<td>Homelessness, Homeless Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ableism</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medical trauma</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example: In a story about homelessness, &quot;starvation&quot; may be tagged. In a story with a disabled character, &quot;ableism&quot; and &quot;chronic pain&quot; might be tagged</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Trauma</td>
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<tr>
<td>In addition to the modifiers listed under General Trauma, tags in this section can be modified by adding &quot;Graphic,&quot; &quot;Non-graphic,&quot; and/or &quot;Threats of.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Example: threats of dismemberment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Hurt Peter Parker</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Violence, Excessive Violence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Blood and Gore, Blood and Injury, Dismemberment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Injury, Injury Recovery, Permanent Injury,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Illness, Vomiting, Fever</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Imprisonment, Captivity, Kidnapping, Slavery</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Torture, Aftermath of Torture</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Force-feeding</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Medical Trauma</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Physical Therapy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Chronic Illness, Chronic Pain, Medical Conditions, Headaches and Migraines</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Exhaustion</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Non-consensual Body Modification - anything from having your head shaved against your will to being turned into a demon-human hybrid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Body Horror - anything from graphic description of the sensation of an injury to being turned into a demon-human hybrid</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>o HYDRA Trash Party - MCU specific tag, takes the trauma suffered by Bucky Barnes (the Winter Soldier) to the extreme; when you consider the fact that he canonically suffered brainwashing, electroshock torture, depersonalization, non-consensual body modification and more, you realize exactly how dark these stories get; nearly always includes extreme sexual trauma in addition to extreme psychological torture/body horror/etc. on top of canonical Winter Soldier trauma</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Starvation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Drug Use, Non-consensual Drug Use</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual Trauma</td>
<td>Emotional / Psychological Trauma</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tags can include any level of sexual activity or even non-sexual physical touch.</td>
<td>Includes tags for the aftereffects of trauma or mental health struggles not related to trauma.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional modifiers include &quot;Underage,&quot; &quot;Threats of,&quot; &quot;Dub-con,&quot; &quot;Non-con,&quot; and &quot;Forced.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples: dub-con hugging, implied/referenced underage prostitution</td>
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<tr>
<td>In fics with explicit sexual content, many authors will also tag what sexual activities happen in the story, so readers make choices based on their own interest or safety.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Touch-starved / Touch Starvation, Touch-aversion</td>
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<td>• Physical Abuse</td>
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<td>• Character Death, Child Death, Danger to Children</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Rape/Non-con - (Archive Warning) non-con is short for non-consensual sexual activity</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Dub-con - short for dubious consent, used when the activity isn’t straight-up non-consensual but there are factors that put character’s ability or willingness to consent in question (like alcohol/drug use, poorly negotiated BDSM, power imbalance, mind control, sex pollen); 90% of dub-con situations would be non-consensual in real life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Underage - (Archive Warning) on-page, usually detailed, depictions of sexual activity involving one or more characters younger than 18; applies to a wide range of content, ranging from two 17-year-olds getting frisky to childhood sexual assault</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sexual Abuse / Sexual Assault</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Mutual non-con - where neither character is willingly participating but have been forced into the situation by some outside force</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Kissing, Touching, etc.</td>
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<td>• Prostitution</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• CSA / Childhood Sexual Assault</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Rape Recovery, Rape Aftermath / Aftermath of Rape/Non-con</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• HYDRA Trash Party - MCU specific tag, takes the trauma suffered by Bucky Barnes (The Winter Soldier) to the extreme; when you consider the fact that he canonically suffered brainwashing, electroshock torture, depersonalization, non-consensual body modification and more, you realize exactly how dark these stories get; nearly always includes extreme sexual trauma in addition to extreme psychological torture/body horror/etc. on top of canonical Winter Soldier trauma</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Human Trafficking, Sexual Slavery</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Angst - emotional pain</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Emotional Hurt/comfort</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Peter Parker Needs a Hug</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Peter Feels</td>
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<td>• Hurt Peter Parker</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Peter Parker Has Issues</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
- Peter Parker Has Nightmares, Peter Parker's Anxiety, Depressed Peter Parker, PTSD - can replace nightmares/anxiety/depression/PTSD with any number of other mental health situations
- Stress, Overworking
- Flashbacks, Panic Attacks
- Self-harm
- Disordered Eating
- Suicidal Thoughts, Suicidal Ideation
- Self-hatred, Insecurity / Insecure Peter Parker
- Selective Mutism
- Depersonalization, Dehumanization
- Emotional Abuse
  - Gaslighting
  - Emotional Manipulation
  - Mind Manipulation - typically used when preternatural means are used to affect someone's internal thoughts, memories or feelings
  - Psychological Torture
  - Brainwashing
- Grief/mourning
- Recovery, Healing

That was probably more than you signed on for. Oops.

(On the off chance you're not overwhelmed with new terminology, you can check out these videos by ColeyDoesThings on YouTube for a simplified but solid explanation of fandom terms, some trauma-related and some not.

popular fandom terminology and popular fandom terminology (part 2)

Fanfic/Broken Men

"There's nothing fandom loves more than emotionally broken men"
(some fic writer on AO3 or Tumblr that I didn’t think to write down the name of because past-me wasn't expecting to cite them in anything other than my journal and now I can't find again even after hours of looking)

There's any number of reasons for fanfiction's love for broken men but the simplest one is that there are more male main characters and people get most attached to the characters they know the most about.
A Tik Tok pointing out the lack of female character-centric stories in fanfiction (9:09-9:19)

When you know more about a character, you are also more likely to know about their goals, their relationships, and their trauma.

This isn't a hard and fast rule, and there are other factors, but a good first way to predict which characters will get the most time in fics is to see how much screen/page time they get in the original canon.

In the MCU this is especially true. Fan-favorite Tony Stark (Iron Man) is a main character in nine movies, three about just him. Steve Rogers (Captain America) is a main character in seven (with at least an appearance in nine). Peter Parker (Spider-Man) is a main character in five.

Conversely, Natasha Romanov (Black Widow) is a part of the main cast in four and appears in eight. She is the has the most screen time of any female character in the MCU so far.

Before 2021, there were three works in the MCU (out of 34) with a female lead: Jessica Jones, Agent Carter and Captain Marvel. When Endgame came out, Agent Carter got sacrificed as an in-universe work for the sake of the controversial happy-ever-after of Steve Rogers.

Post 2021, the MCU added two (or three) more works with a woman as the main character: WandaVision, Black Widow and Hawkeye (kinda). I'm including Hawkeye because the main character status seems pretty evenly split between Clint Barton (Hawkeye) and Kate Bishop (who also uses the alias Hawkeye). Black Widow was successful, but fans weren't happy that Natasha Romanov only got a movie after she was dead.

To be fair to Marvel, the diversity of characters in the comics increased with time, which is a progression the MCU is also following. Phase four of the MCU has a much more even split between male and female leads, so we’ll have to see how that changes which characters star in fanfics.

** current as of April 10, 2022

I could go on theorizing as to why male characters get more fics written about them, but what really matters in these conversations is that they do.

** check out "on 'fetishizing' gay men" and "Why Do Queer Women Ship Gay Men (So Damn Hard)?" (post 1, post 2) for other opinions on why so much of fanfiction is about male characters (these specifically talk about the prevalence of m/m relationships and sex, but since
shipping and fanfiction are so intertwined, I think many of the same ideas can apply to the broader topic).

This isn't an entirely positive or negative thing, but it does shape the stories about trauma told in fics.

Also, because of this, most of the examples I point to will feature male characters.

**TRAUMA NARRATIVES**
What stories fanfiction tells about trauma, which it doesn't, and why it matters

**Fanfic Trauma Narratives →**
Fanfiction often recognizes that canonical events have the potential to be traumatizing. In adventure fiction (particularly superhero stories) this is especially true.

*Trauma has been part of the MCU from the beginning*
In Iron Man 1, Tony Stark is captured, undergoes non-consensual body modification, open chest surgery (likely without proper anesthetic) and is waterboarded. It's not a reach to think he might struggle to deal with these experiences and/or have a hard time with water near his face for a while afterward.

Tony Stark then escapes that situation only to discover that the person responsible for his kidnapping and for selling weapons that Tony designed to terrorists, is his last living father-figure, Obadiah Stane.

When he realizes that Tony knows, Obadiah paralyzes Tony and pulls the device keeping his heart viable out of his chest while he’s watching, unable to do anything about it. Among other things, fanfiction notices that Tony’s heart is a weak spot and gives him heart problems from the three times in this film alone he goes into cardiac arrest.

This is just in Iron Man 1. Just looking at the character of Tony Stark, there are another eight movies worth of potential trauma to unpack.

*Trauma Narratives*
With all this material and fanfic’s special liking for exploring the trauma of characters, there are a number of narratives about trauma that crop up in fanfiction. Some of these narratives are much more common in fics than other media, but none are exclusive to fanfiction as a genre. Click through the slides below to explore these narratives and their implications, as well as examples.

Naturally, there is a lot of topical overlap from one narrative to the next. Instead of repeating myself, I have linked to the narrative where I talk about a particular situation in more depth.
Note: If you click on the titles to read the work, please heed the tags for traumatic and sexual content to make an informed decision about whether you want to read it or not.

Also: I tried to link mostly well-written stories, regardless of potentially problematic content or narratives. However, me linking a fic doesn’t necessarily mean I like it.

You Should Get Therapy
Bucky sits in silence for a few moments, then finally says “I think this is a bunch of crap.”

Beardo tilts his head. “How so?”

“It’s stupid to think that coming in here and just talking is going to do any good.”

Beardo nods. “If you were to come here and just talk, yeah, I don’t think that would do a lot of good.”

“And I don’t want medication.”

“Well, that’s good, because I don’t have a license to prescribe meds. Even if I did, I couldn’t make you take anything. Nor would I want to.”

Bucky’s confusion is apparent on his face. “What else is there?”

“The therapy I tend to use with people is very skills-based,” Beardo says. “We usually think about skills in a practical sense, like learning to ride a motorcycle or play piano. But we can improve our quality of life by learning new ways to think about ourselves, others, and the world. Just like building a practical skill.”

The Crucible by Dreadnought, ch. 2

Again, lots of the experiences of fictional characters, especially superheroes, can be traumatic. To help characters deal with that reality, they get therapy. The therapy shown can take many forms, though 90% of the time it is one-on-one talk therapy. These fics give characters (and readers) access to therapeutic metaphors, exercises and coping strategies (either made-up, from research, or based on the author’s personal experience with therapy).

A sub-version of this narrative is where characters are told they should get therapy, either by other characters or through narration, but don’t.

Example Therapy Cooking by GingerLocks

After the Winter Soldier remembers he is Bucky Barnes, Bucky attends a cooking class for people dealing with PTSD and it helps him get to know himself again, connect with new people, adapt to having just one arm, and learn how to cook.
This narrative gives readers access to therapeutic thinking and methods (to varying extents and levels of accuracy) and champions the positive difference it can have on a person’s coping skills and thought processes. This narrative shows the good that therapy can do, and make it a positive and more normal concept for people. Unfortunately, there are some complications.

Generally, medicalizing mental health puts the focus on what is “wrong” with someone. There’s value to helping people process and attain a healthier psychological state, but focusing on damage is problematic.

**See Deficit Narrative for more about the implications of deficit framing**

A second problem is that therapy fics nearly always diagnose characters who have experienced trauma with PTSD.

“Inscribing Trauma in Culture, Brain, and Body” explains the issue with that, saying: “PTSD only covers a small part of the complex response to trauma and excessive focus on PTSD medicalizes social problems and predicaments that demand a more comprehensive social and political response.” (Kirmayer, 2007)

In MCU fanfiction, a fair amount of the trauma isn’t caused by social failings because it is from being a superhero, like being kidnapped by their enemies or having a building fall on them while trying to save people during an earthquake.

However, there are fics where characters experience the trauma of homelessness, a terrible foster home, sexual assault, or other traumas that are rooted in social problems.

Therapy can give survivors strategies to cope better, but these problems can’t be fixed by therapy or keep people safe from future trauma of the same sort. That requires social and political change. Positioning therapy as the solution also places the onus to do the work on individuals who have been harmed rather than the people and systems that hurt them.

Another issue is that the type of therapy shown in these stories isn’t the only way to recover from trauma.

One-on-one talk therapy is a Western construct, and positioning it as the best or only way to heal post-trauma can be the opposite of healing, especially for people from other cultures. (Craps, 2015)

Additionally, this narrative can spiral into “everyone needs therapy,” where the author of the work implies that all the characters would be better off and relationships would be less dysfunctional if they all got therapy.
This implication isn't inherently wrong, as most MCU characters probably would benefit from productively processing their trauma, but it can minimize the coping skills that the characters do possess and posit therapy as a cure-all for personal and relational issues.

**example: SHIELD Therapy** (series) by Eustacia Vye (eustaciavye)

After the **Battle of New York**, a therapist is assigned to work with **Loki** with the intention of understanding and optimistically rehabilitating him. By the most recent book nearly all the Avengers have received some therapeutic perspective.

This example avoids most of the problematic parts of this sub-narrative.

**further examples and info**

**examples listed**
- **The Crucible** by Dreadnought
- **Therapy Cooking** by GingerLocks
- **SHIELD Therapy Series** by Eustacia Vye (eustaciavye)

**further examples**
- **Motion Training** by Nonymos

**sources**

**Deficit**

*Because, see, nobody loved Clint. Not . . . Not like that. Not ever. It just wasn’t something that happened. Sure, he knew he was attractive, and he could turn on the charm whenever he wanted, but any infatuation people felt for him only lasted a short time, until they discovered what a fuckup he was.*

... Yeah. Clint uncurled his fists and flexed his fingers. Yeah. That’s what would happen. Coulson would get over it. He’d see that Clint didn’t deserve his . . . regard. He didn’t really deserve anyone’s, least of all Coulson’s. Coulson was far too good for pretty much anyone, let alone an idiot like Clint.

**Moving In or Moving On: The Hawkeye Remix** by desert_neon (sproutgirl)

This narrative ties the experience of trauma to being damaged or broken somehow afterwards.

There are fics that clearly tie a character’s psychological (and physical) struggles back to trauma but there are also many that fit this narrative without ever mentioning a character’s trauma. How?
Unlike some of the other narratives in this list, seeing the extent of this narrative requires reading more than a couple fics. After spending enough time in the fanfic space, you notice that certain characters are more likely to:

- be portrayed as insecure
- have a poor understanding of other people’s emotions
- lash out at others
- and/or deal with panic attacks and other mental health issues.

Those characters virtually always have more trauma in their backstory than others.

The story that the example quote for this narrative came from doesn’t ever directly tie Clint Barton’s (Hawkeye) low self-esteem to any particular trauma. However, he is one of the characters chronically portrayed with deficits that are usually tied back to his abusive childhood.

Some other characters often framed this way include: Tony Stark (Iron Man), Peter Parker (Spider-Man), Nebula, Loki, and Bruce Banner (Hulk)

** Admittedly, there are also fics where these characters are complete badasses, which sometimes even occurs concurrently with addressing their trauma. Yay :)

example
Hold On To Me as We Go by GLWilliams97

Tony Stark (Iron Man) discovers that Peter Parker (Spider-Man) is his biological son.

The deficit narrative isn't the main point of this story, but Tony has two panic attacks in the first two chapters because he wholeheartedly believes he would ruin any kid of his in the same way that his father damaged him.

“[Tony]’d be like his father, like Howard. It’s inevitable. If he were to have a kid, he’d end up like Howard, and no kid should have to have a father like that.”

He also catastrophizes, thinking that Peter’s Aunt May won’t want him anywhere near Peter anymore, and draws false connections based on the logic that things had gone badly for him in the past, so they will go wrong here also.

Characters with a more traumatic canonical story more often display cognitive distortions like catastrophizing and fortune telling, which are inaccurate patterns of thinking that reinforce negative thinking or emotions. (Grohol)
Caveats for this particular situation:

- Most people would be a bit panicked if they suddenly realized they have a 15-year-old son
- Cognitive distortions are also common under stress

Trauma does affect people in negative ways, but the underlying implication shouldn’t be that a person is broken or unusual in a bad way because of their reaction to those traumas.

Being psychologically shaken after experiencing trauma is actually a natural reaction to adverse experiences (Kirmayer, 2014). Increased watchfulness, shifted priorities and other psychological effects of experiencing trauma can also be valuable survival mechanisms.

Tying experiences of trauma to deficit is a major issue for the school system, with ACE (adverse childhood experiences) screenings contributing to systems that label poor and minorities as deficit and frame trauma as an individual situation rather than a social issue. (Winninghoff; Khasnabis and Goldin)

**For more discussion of the issues of individualizing trauma, see the Therapy Narrative, side 6.

Also, in recognizing that the traumatic things that occur in stories can and do have negative effects on people, fanfic often overlooks the possibility of not just recovery from trauma, but of growth because of trauma.

Having your life shaken up can also lead to post-traumatic growth, where a person gains a better understanding of their priorities and self, among other things.

The larger deficit narrative in fanfic ties past experiences of trauma to poor emotional intelligence.

Counter to that, some work on children who have lived in situations of domestic violence shows that they actually have a stronger understanding of emotional nuance, especially in the area of social injustice. (Pyscher)

Additionally, the characters who are often characterized by emotional struggles because of the larger deficit narrative are actually examples of post-traumatic growth. Using the trauma of their origin story, they transform themselves into heroes and generally better people.

For example, Peter Parker becomes Spider-Man after his Uncle Ben’s murder to help prevent that tragedy for other families.

**Further examples and info

**Examples listed**

Moving In or Moving On: The Hawkeye Remix by desert_neon (sproutgirl)
Savior

"On a scale of one to ten, how hungry would you say you usually are on most days, Peter?" Bruce questioned.

Peter tensed, fingers of the hand holding onto the pencil digging in tight as he danced the line between lying and telling the truth. "Um...like an eight and a half?"

Tony's face darkened even more.

"Extra portions at dinner not an option?" Tony asked, folding his arms.

"We, uh..." Peter dropped the pencil and twisted his fingers into the thin paper sheet on the gurney, "we don't have much money, so, um, I guess I just...don't eat as much? So the food lasts longer."

Peter glanced up at the two men in front of him. Bruce's face was sad, brown eyes wide with concern. Tony, however, looked appalled and Peter shrank back, feeling sick with guilt and shame again.

"So correct me if I'm wrong," Tony said slowly, "which we all know I'm not, but that means you're not even consuming a quarter of what your body needs to function properly on a daily basis?.... I'm here to help, yeah? That's the whole point to all of this mentoring, the internship, all of that," Tony turned so that they were fully facing each other again, "and that means I'm gonna fix this."

And in the middle of the flood I felt my worth by frostysunflowers
Character A is suffering from trauma or its aftereffects, whether it be torture or an abusive relationship.

Frequently, when the story spans a longer amount of time, they have people in their life (a parent, mentor, friend, or even just unnamed teachers at school) that would help but they don’t reach out for help for various reasons (insecurity, past betrayal of trust, not wanting to be a burden, embarrassment, literally having no way to safely reach out).

At the end of the story, often after a lot of pain, one or more other characters become aware of the situation or manages to rescue them from their captor, and swoop in to save or comfort them.

The irony in this narrative is that in MCU fanfiction, nearly everyone is technically a hero. This common narrative is very troubling at first glance (and second glance) but isn’t wholly negative.

**example**

*Happy and Safe* by respoftw

Pietro Maximoff (Quicksilver) is doing superhero training with a SHIELD agent who bullies him under the guise of preparing him for being captured, the situation escalates to threatened sexual assault.

After that Pietro goes to the other Avengers, but not for his own sake. His sister, Wanda, is also training and he pleads with them for her to not be trained like that.

This story includes the savior characters going after the person who hurt the victim character in protective anger, which is a common sub-narrative for the savior narrative.

This is one of the more common narratives in fanfiction, particularly hurt/comfort and whump fics. This narrative often strips people of their agency, leaving them to suffer until another character becomes aware that something is wrong. This narrative is not unique to fanfiction, but it is more common than in other media.

Plenty of fics with counter-narratives exist, but the pervasiveness of unthinkingly framing people who have experienced trauma as victims is troubling.

This narrative is often paired with stories about abusive relationships and child abuse, which perpetuates narratives of abuse survivors being trapped because they believe their abusers, aren’t strong enough to just leave, or are ashamed to tell someone.

Those can be real dynamics in abusive situations, but they’re not the only reasons. This is an example of how fanfic often overlooks both practical concerns and intersectional ones.
Kimberlé Crenshaw spends several pages in “Mapping the Margins” examining other reasons that women stay in physically abusive relationships, such as immigration status, unavailability of other housing, lack of job skills, or other vulnerable parties (such as children). The answer to why fanfic doesn’t address these is much larger than just the savior narrative, but it contributes to the erasure of these realities.

This narrative is less problematic in stories when the character needs to be physically rescued after being kidnapped or injured, but even then these characters are superheroes and there are similar stories that end with them rescuing themselves.

Also, certain characters get cast as the victim far more frequently than others, usually ones who are younger or have a history of trauma. Characters with no or less past trauma are much less likely to be cast as victims, which shows the implicit assumption that experiencing trauma makes a person more fragile.

** See slide 2 of Deficit Narratives for more discussion of this pattern

Admittedly, there are reasons unrelated to that assumption that cause this to happen:

1. more fanfics are written about characters with trauma, and
2. hurt/comfort is a really popular fic format, so
3. lots of characters with past trauma star in fics where they are hurt

The positive side of this narrative is that showing that even heroes need saving sometimes can show that there’s nothing wrong about needing support when you’re struggling.

Also, the "swoop in and save or comfort" part of this narrative can show the importance of social support when dealing with trauma.

“Bonds of social support, reconnection with loved ones, and communal solidarity are crucial to recovery from ruptures created by trauma.” (Kirmayer, 2007)

This narrative can also encourage people to see the importance of reaching out for help, as many times the character suffering considers it several times before the situation is discovered by the savior character, and if they would have the suffering would have ended sooner.

** further examples and info
examples listed
And in the middle of the flood I felt my worth by frostysunflowers
Happy and Safe by respoftw
further examples
These Scars Haunt Me by awesome_goddess_of_mischief
the locker room by searchingforstars

sources

Extreme Trauma
warning: quotes include descriptions of pain and neglectful/abusive parenting; stories linked include graphic injury, violence, assault, abuse, physical/psychological/sexual torture, and the emotional repercussions of all of the above

Standing with Steve outside the Medbay window, Bruce watches as the soldier’s eyes drift to Peter. The kid is lying on a hospital bed, sweating and panting as his severely fractured spine slowly knits itself back together. May sits in a chair to the side, eyes wet with unshed tears as she holds Peter’s hand. Tony is sitting on the other side of the bed, hunched forward with his elbows propped on his knees, holding his head in his hands.

“How long has he been like this?” Steve asks grimly.

“How long has he been like this?” Steve asks grimly.

“Three days,” Bruce replies, keeping his voice low. “Tony pulled up the footage from the Spider-Man suit to show me and”—his voice breaks a bit—“God, Steve, if you’d heard the ‘crack’ when that asshole blasted him into the wall…”

Steve’s jaw is set in an expression of forced calm. “Do the doctors think there’ll be permanent damage?”
Bruce shakes his head. “With Peter’s healing factor, they’re hopeful. The scans are showing that the spinal damage is repairing itself—should only be two or three more days until he’s healed—but we have no way to sedate him and nothing that comes even close to managing the pain. He burns through morphine so fast it’s basically useless.”

Steve sighs, rubbing a hand through his hair. “I know the feeling.”

“The surgeons had to put screws in to stabilize his spine,” Bruce goes on. “They tried to put him out, but the anesthesia didn’t last. He woke up mid-procedure and…” he trails off, his voice failing him.

“God…” Steve runs a hand over his face, visibly shaken.

Super Duper Side Effects by awesomesockes, whumphoarder
The trauma portrayed in fanfiction is commonly intense. Often it also compounds, with new trauma from what happens in the story added to trauma from canon.

Additionally, the trauma with physical components can be extreme to the point that it would be impossible to survive in real life, either because the characters have special abilities or because of medical inaccuracies.

Fanfiction also tends to incorporate every possible trauma in a character’s life into their backstory.

Example: In the comics, Bruce Banner’s father was physically abusive and killed his mother in front of him. That isn’t true in the movies; however, that version of Bruce tried to commit suicide after becoming the Hulk. In fanfiction, often both of those are true.

Fanfic also commonly increases the trauma or emotional effect of situations compared to canon.

Example: Steve Rogers (Captain America) woke up 70 years into the future and everyone he knew was dead. In fanfiction that addresses that, it isn’t uncommon for him to be seriously grieving, depressed, or passively suicidal. One work compared his experiences to those of a refugee.

This pattern can be problematic, or simply treat canonical events more realistically.

Milder versions of this narrative make it clear that there are emotional consequences for things that happen in stories, like waking up after everyone and everything you knew are gone.

Included these screenshots from the Ain’t No Grave series by spitandvinegar:

Sometimes when people find out that Cap’s all buddy-buddy with a VA counselor they have this lightbulb moment, like "oh, right, maybe stars-and-stripes has a little speck of the ol’ PTSD!" But really, Steve’s issues aren’t familiar from the VA so much as they are from some research Sam did a few years back about trauma in refugee populations.
Mild versions of this narrative can be benign, or even positive. However, extreme versions aren't. That's because extreme versions of this narrative aren't representative of actual trauma. This matters because:

He's tried to explain this a couple of times to a few of his buddies after about five beers. Like listen, listen. Imagine you live in this country, right? And there's a brutal war, and you witness and maybe participate in a horrific amount of violence, and you lose absolutely everyone you care about. Then you end up in this other country, where the culture and ways of doing things are completely foreign to you, and random assholes make fun of you for how you dress and act and talk while you're still coming to grips with the fact that everyone you love is gone and you can never go home again. Meanwhile, everyone around you is like "smile, motherfucker, you're in the Land of Plenty now, where there's a Starbucks on every corner and 500 channels on TV. You should be grateful! Why aren't you acting more grateful?" So you have to pretend to be grateful while you're dying inside. Sound like an traumatized, orphaned refugee? Also sounds like Steve fucking Rogers, Captain Goddamn America. Except that most refugees were part of a community of other people who were going through the same thing. Steve is all alone, the last damn unicorn, if the last unicorn had horrible screaming nightmares about the time when it helped to liberate Buchenwald.

Usually this explanation yields a "huh." People don't want Sad Refugee Steve: they want Captain America, Indestructible Defender of Freedom. But that doesn't mean that Sam isn't right, because he is right, goddamnit. So yeah, Sam's a little protective of Steve.
• Real people who have experienced trauma may not feel represented or valid in their reaction to that trauma, when what they experienced wasn’t near as drastic
• People who deal with mental health problems without having trauma to tie it back to can feel invalidated (my sister’s point)
• It misshapes the societal perception of what is traumatizing and what is a proportionate response to trauma
• Overexposure to trauma can desensitize us and make us less sympathetic, especially to the less extreme levels of trauma (Meley)

example

*Straight On 'Til Morning* by arsenicarcher (Arsenic)

*Thor* and *Jane Foster* have a daughter and Tony Stark (*Iron Man*) is afraid that he will mess her up, because his parents were neglectful and emotionally abusive.

There is little to no canonical reason to see Tony Stark's parents as abusive. However, this sort of extrapolation of trauma that is hinted at in canon (or at the very least not incompatible with canon) is a common part of this narrative.

"The first thing I really created that I can remember, that mattered, was this little tech-based...pet, I guess. Almost like those Tamagachi things, but about twenty years before they were even a twinkle in Japan’s eye. I think I was five or six at the time, memories from then get a little mixed up ... I got excited. I wanted to show my dad, make him see that I was useful, I could help ... He told me he had more important things to be doing than looking at some kid’s toy. Those were actually his exact words. Can’t remember anything sharply except 'some kid,' like I wasn’t even his son, just some five-year-old who had wandered in off the street."

It also ties back to emphasizing physical or sexual violence over psychological.

**See Focus on Concrete Violence for why that matters.**

Sub-versions of the narrative also have an issue with exaggerating trauma for the sake of sensationalism.

"Whipping and abuse are like laudanum; you have to double the dose as the sensibilities decline." –Uncle Tom’s Cabin

*(quote originally seen in an author’s note after a fic by casspeach)*

This narrative can amount to varying levels of trauma porn, where trauma is put on display for entertainment. Trauma porn is characterized by being exploitive and insensitive to the possibility of re-traumatizing people.
Trauma porn outside of fanfic often is especially problematic, as it focuses on the trauma of minority communities and shapes narratives about them. (Meley)

Fortunately, **AO3's tag system** helps trauma porn in fanfics be less likely to be re-traumatizing. If fics don't provide accurate Archive Warning tags, they can be reported to the Policy and Abuse Committee.

*** see Archive FAQs > Tags > What are the Different Types of Tags > Archive Warnings

Some of the fics that fit this narrative are also extremely dark and disturbing and incorporate the most problematic versions of the **Savior Narrative.**

Fortunately, few people are likely to have their ideas shaped by dark fics, as they are clearly exaggerated, even compared to the surrounding trauma in fics.

Also, the authors of many of the fics where the trauma is most extreme are aware that the situations portrayed are very far from reality and give warnings in the tags and authors’ notes at the beginning:

"hey guys this is slavefic and it's pretty messed up if you try to map it to real life relationships! There's a lot of badness-adjacent stuff in here, proceed with care and feel free to ask me if you need to know anything specific about what you're getting into"

(from an author's note by Dira Sudis)

Additional examples and info

**examples listed**

Super Duper Side Effects by awesomesockes, whumphoarder
Straight On 'Til Morning by arsenicarcher (Arsenic)
Ain't No Grave series by spitandvinegar

**additional examples**

Cheap Tricks by Fluencca
The Goat's Back by arsenicarcher (Arsenic)
Fractures Emanating by harcourt
All these Burning Hearts in Hell (series) by Dira Sudis ***
Downward Facing Dog by EndlessStairway ***
And Nowhere to Go by Nonymsos ***

*this one is a non-problematic example of this narrative and fucking hilarious to boot

*** These are well written but are indisputably dark fics. Read at your own risk. They include torture-rape, dehumanization, slavery, etc. Also include problematic versions of the **Savior Narrative.**
sources

Recovery
"...this isn't a monolithic project you must complete all at once of abandon forever. Think of it as a million little tasks."

"That's not encouraging."

"Isn't it? What if someone advised you to eat all the food you'll ever eat in one sitting? You know, just so you can get that repetitive task out of the way. It keeps you alive day to day, so doing it all at once couldn't possibly be harmful ... Recovery's the same. You only have to do exactly what you can stand every day. What you need every day. Never anything more."

Motion Training by Nonymos, ch. 23

This narrative shows a character dealing with the aftermath of trauma in an improvement-focused direction. Often includes characters getting therapy but not always, and doesn't usually center around it or include multiple scenes in therapeutic settings like therapy fics do. At the end of the stories, characters are still living post-trauma, and have good days, bad days, and days that are both.

element
Fractures Emanating by harcourt

Clint Barton (Hawkeye) is kidnapped and tortured while on a mission for SHIELD.

After he is rescued by the rest of the Avengers, the second half of the story details him dealing with frustration, injuries and new embodied trauma, while the team deals with second-hand trauma, guilt, and Clint's bad days and mood.

After fifteen thousand-some words, it's not all better but most of the rough edges are smoothed out.

This narrative shows that recovery takes time, effort, and often, support, but it is possible to regain equilibrium, even after experiencing superhero-level trauma.

There are many, many recovery fics, which allows for a diversity of ways for recovery to be facilitated, multitudes of coping mechanisms (healthy and not), and emotional reactions to be explored.

Further examples and info
examples listed

Motion Training by Nonymos
Fractures Emanating by harcourt

*** The works in this series are well written but are indisputably dark fics. Read at your own risk. They include torture-rape, dehumanization, slavery, etc. Also include problematic versions of the Savior Narrative.

further examples

Hard Wired by arsenicarcher (Arsenic)
Not About Superheroes (A Private Little War) by AnnaFugazzi

Living with Trauma

Steve moves restlessly on the couch and Bucky thinks about whether to wake him, but he's still uncertain what Steve hears or sees in Bucky in his first moments of consciousness. For all that Bucky can peer into Steve’s mind, the nightmares could be about Bucky.

He's still considering his options when Sylvie gets up from where she's been dozing by his side, and rises up on her back paws, propping the front ones on Steve's chest and letting out a soft but insistent bark. Steve startles at the sound, his eyes opening, muscles tensing. Then he smiles a little and brings a hand up to skritch at one of her ears. "Hey there, pretty girl."

She barks again, not loudly, but like a question. He laughs. "You got it in time."

Hard Wired by arsenicarcher (Arsenic)

This narrative acknowledges that a character’s trauma still exists, and it still can be majorly impactful from time to time, but it doesn’t define the character or their main story arc.

This narrative can apply to any characters in a story. The intro quote is from a Recovery Narrative story but this quote shows how a side character in the story is at the point where they are just living with their trauma.

example

who needs a happy new year when you can have a happy forever? by searching for stars

Both Peter Parker (Spider-Man) and Tony Stark (Iron Man) don’t do so well with fireworks after various traumas. Because of this, their New Year’s Eve plans have to change, and they celebrate on the couch with hot cocoa instead.
“Next year, next July Fourth, next New Years, next anything that vaguely sounds like it involves anything explosive, no bullshitting each other, okay? We’re both done with that shit.”

*Peter nods again and they sit side by side for a little while, sipping at their hot drinks and reveling in the peacefulness and silence. All of the tremors have finally stopped, and Tony is completely still.*

“I am more than what happened to me, I’m not just my trauma.”

This quote comes from an anecdote told in Shawn Ginwright’s article “The Future of Healing: Shifting From Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement,” where a young man named Marcus at a group meeting objected to just discussing how trauma had affected their brains.

This narrative makes that idea accessible, showing us through the lives of characters that trauma shapes people, but isn’t all there is to their story.

This narrative also shows trauma and healing as life-long experiences. It’s not the same as post-traumatic growth, but it doesn’t let the continued negative effects trauma can have on a person’s life overshadow the ability to live a good life after and with those effects.

**Further examples and info**

**Examples listed**

*Hard Wired* by arsenicarcher (Arsenic)

*who needs a happy new year when you can have a happy forever?* by searching for stars

**Sources**


*Focus of Concrete Violence*

“Your new... your foster parents,” he says. “Are they being nice to you?”

*Peter laughs bitterly, shakes his head.*

“I deserve it though,” he says. “If it wasn’t for me Ben never would have been out that night. If I hadn’t...”

“Peter.”

*Peter looks up. Ned looks aghast.*
“You do not—Peter, that was so not your fault. And even if it was, which it wasn’t, if they’re not being... if they’re not treating you right, that isn’t cool. It’s not okay. You need to tell someone, Peter, you need to—to—”

“Who am I supposed to tell, Ned? My social worker just says things are ‘adequate’ when she comes. And—and they are adequate, I guess. I mean, they feed me, and I go to school, and—”

“Do they hit you?”

Peter flinches.

“Peter!”

*The Third Option* by *Uncertainty_Principle*

Fanfiction has a tendency to focus on concrete physical or sexual violence. Often it is framed as worse than emotional or psychological violence, as if adding a concrete dimension takes the violence up a metaphorical level (or two levels if the concrete violence is sexual).

This narrative occurs most in stories with abuse. At times, fics will even add further concrete dimensions to canonically abusive or neglectful situations to up the ante.

This is a common pattern, but there’s not really a character who is a good example of this pattern from the MCU. A non-MCU example is how fics handle Harry Potter’s treatment by the Dursleys. Canonically, the Dursleys are emotionally abusive, neglectful, and make Harry do all the chores. In fics, they often starve or hit him too.

This narrative often interacts with the *Deficit* and *Extreme Trauma Narratives*.

**example**

*Bruises on My Skin* by *pherryt*

In this story, *soulmates* experience each other’s pain, leaving visible bruises on them from where their soulmate is hurt. Clint Barton (*Hawkeye*) and Bucky Barnes (*the Winter Soldier*) are soulmates and both of them experience a great deal of pain through child abuse/a violent career and torture respectively.

Clint is also hard of hearing, first losing hearing due to the child abuse and then experiencing it worsen from periodic head trauma as an adult.

This particular story is just one of many fanfics where Clint Barton is deaf or hard of hearing. This has been common in fics for over a decade despite it not being canon in the MCU until 2021 *Hawkeye* tv show.
This is another place where this narrative is more a reflection of popular understanding than a unique issue. It is extremely uncommon for characters in canon (MCU or otherwise) to be disabled without it coming from a traumatic plot point and that carries over to fanfic. Interacting with the Extreme Trauma Narrative, this causes disabilities often to be attributed to the seemingly most traumatic option. It also connects to the Deficit Narrative, where characters are shown as permanently damaged because of trauma.

There are actually three ways Clint went deaf according to comic book canon and yet another one in the MCU. In the earliest version, a sonic arrow went off near his head. In the second, a villain stabbed him in the ears. The most recent comic reason is him being beaten as a child. The MCU version is cumulative ear/head injury from his physically dangerous job. (Guess which one fanfiction likes best.)

Focusing on concrete physical or sexual abuse de-emphasizes emotional and psychological trauma. Portraying concrete violence as worse makes people wrongly think that it’s more traumatizing.

This can lead to survivors of less concrete abuse being less likely to speak up during or after (even more than typical), make others less likely to be looking for signs, and make people less likely to give support to survivors. All of these factors also can make it less likely that survivors will receive concrete help or validation.

This narrative is not unique to fics or even more common in fics than other media unlike some on this list. It is more a reflection of popular attitudes, showing the value of fanfic as a space to learn what the general public thinks about trauma.

There are explanations for why this narrative exists in society. One explanation for emphasizing concrete violence more is that it can be an immediate, existential threat. Being constantly told they’re a waste of space isn’t going to kill an elementary school kid, whereas a shove down the stairs can.

Concrete trauma is also easier to spot and prove. Being able to prove that violence occurred is essential to persecuting people who hurt others in our legal system and being believed and supported in situations of abuse. With child abuse specifically, concrete abuse or neglect is far easier to spot.

In contrast to this, invisible violence is can seem like it is just a threat to a person’s quality of life.

However, an emotionally or psychologically traumatic life can seriously affect a person’s mental health, and mental health issues are correlated with a shorter life expectancy. Some
ways this can happen are through the increased strain on a person’s body from high levels of stress, not having the emotional well-being to exercise, or suicide.

**This conversation now spins off into a discussion about the benefits and downsides of recognizing the negative effects of trauma, see Deficit Narrative for more.

** further examples and info
examples listed
The Third Option by Uncertainty_Principle
Bruises on My Skin by pherryt

** further examples
These Scars Haunt Me by awesome_goddess_of_mischief
Of Panthers and Humans by awesome_goddess_of_mischief
Dear Dad, Fuck You! by Stachmou77

Trauma and Identity
Fanfiction spends more time with trauma than many other forms of media, but it still neglects some types of trauma and often misses the bigger patterns.

Fanfic's media-wide representation issues mean certain types of trauma are overlooked.

Note: If you click on the titles to read the work, please heed the tags for traumatic and sexual content to make an informed decision about whether you want to read it or not.

** Sexual Trauma
Fanfiction does address sexual assault more head-on and with greater frequency than a lot of other media. However, the stories told about it are very different from the normal discourse around this type of trauma, because fanfiction spends the most time on male characters.

This can be both a positive and negative thing.

** throughout this section, when I say female sexual assault, “female” is inclusive of anyone who appears traditionally or nontraditionally female/femme/feminine, regardless of gender identity (if anyone knows a better term, I’d love to hear it)

**POSITIVES
The biggest upside to how fanfiction writes about sexual trauma is that it almost completely breaks down gendered assumptions about who can hurt and be hurt in certain ways.

“Come on Einstein, let's conduct a little experiment of our own!”
There are a lot of stories about Peter Parker (Spider-Man) being assaulted varying times and ways by an older boy/man named Skip Wescott, inspired by an old Spider-Man comic written in 1984 as a sort of PSA about child predators.

Example fics: The Third Option by Uncertainty_Principle and Pictures by deancasdracohar.

A fic that is particularly excellent about breaking down gendered expectations about sexual assault and relationship abuse is It Also Happens To Alphas by KaliopeShipslt. This fic isn’t an MCU story but has one of the best portrayals of what being in an abusive relationship could look like as a straight man that I’ve read to date. (Heads up: This is an ABO story, but don’t worry if that’s not your cup of tea, it is a really simple, mild version of an ABO story.)

The most popular relationships in fanfiction have typically been m/m relationships. This, and the general culture of fandom, leads to a lot of stories featuring different narratives about queer relationships and individuals.

For a number of reasons, there is a reluctance to show LGBTQ+ relationships as anything other than sunshine and rainbows. Reasons for not addressing intersectional issues described by Kimberlé Crenshaw in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” include a blindness to seeing them outside of their “normal” contexts and willfully ignoring issues in marginalized spaces to not cast minorities in a bad light.

However, abuse can and does happen in those relationships and that is important to recognize.

Fanics showing men as survivors of sexual assault in LGBTQ+ relationships (and outside) help shake dominant narratives across the board and raises awareness of sexual assault as a trauma that could happen to anyone.

** For statistics and analysis of abuse in LGBTQ+ relationships and how that interacts with gendered assumptions and with the legal system see Queer (In)Justice by Joey Mogul, Andrea Ritchie and Kay Whitlock

NEGATIVES
On the flip side, people who appear feminine (cis and trans women, femme-appearing non-binary people) are much more likely to experience sexual assault in real life, and fanfic can often ignore that. Across the board, fanfic focuses more on male characters and their trauma, which results in the stories of the femme-appearing people being de-emphasized and the representation of sexual assault in fanfic being nowhere accurate to real-life statistics.
Tag: Kilgrave is his own warning

One of the few sections of MCU fanfic that seriously addresses female sexual assault is fanfic about Jessica Jones. In canon, she was forced to be in a relationship with a man with mind-control powers. Fics about Jessica often examine how bad being in a “relationship” like that could be, and her canonical PTSD afterwards.

Example fics: AKA Seventy Seven Days by orphan_account

However, Jessica is an outlier. In the bigger pattern, female sexual assault is often treated as something to be expected or an unfortunate footnote in their story. In contrast, male sexual assault is often portrayed as a particularly horrific and shocking violation.

The generous interpretation of that is the male characters are typically the POV characters, and the POV characters tend to get more space, sympathy, and details in the story. This is still problematic, but mostly a symptom of the endemic neglect of canonically female characters in fics.

The less generous, more problematic, interpretation takes into account the biases built into ideas of trauma. The rough criteria for whether something is traumatic or not is whether it disrupts a person’s normal life and sense of safety.

Historically, healthy, well-off, white men defined what is traumatic (Craps, 2015). I’m extrapolating here, but from that perspective and at earlier times in history, sexual assault was a “normal” threat for femme-appearing people and thereby hypothetically caused less trauma for them. However, for men, being assaulted sexually would have been a terrible betrayal of expectations.

Culturally, sexual assault is framed as a threat to femme-appearing people, not men, especially straight cis men. Being a straight cis man means safety from sexual assault. That’s not to say that straight cis men can’t be sexually assaulted, but it is significantly less common, so the fear and trauma of sexual assault is less of a reality for straight cis men. Even in fics, queer men are more likely to be sexually assaulted than straight men, though that is at least partially because nearly every character is a queer character in fics.

Circling back to why sexual assault of male characters is often treated as worse, sexual assault could disrupt a man’s sense of safety more severely and be more traumatizing (hypothetically speaking).

Still, even if femme-appearing people (and queer men) are more constantly aware of the threat of sexual assault and thereby less shocked by it when it happens, that doesn’t make it less terrible to experience and to have their sense of safety shattered.
There are fics that give female sexual assault the space it needs, but those are less common than those that sideline it in order to focus more on the main male characters’ trauma.

A somewhat common pattern in fics where Bucky Barnes is dealing with sexual trauma from his time as the Winter Soldier is Natasha Romanov empathizing or understanding him because of sexual trauma from her time with the Red Room and assassin. That’s fine enough, but the problem is that she rarely gets time and space in these stories or other ones for her trauma. Her trauma is used as a prop in a male character’s healing and rarely explored beyond that.

One of the few counterexamples where Nat’s trauma is given space is the Ghosts That We Knew series by eternaleponine. This series is a high school AU that primarily follows Clint Barton and Natasha Romanov. Clint is the POV character, but the story gives a lot of time and space to Nat, who was brought to the U.S. from Russia as part of a sex trafficking ring. Out of fics I’ve read, this series has one of the more nuanced portrayals of the emotional and relational effects of ongoing sexual assault and healing afterward.

**Trauma Experienced by Minority Groups**

In addition to a lack of time spent with female characters, fanfiction doesn’t spend much time with characters who belong to minority groups.

A rich source of personal trauma that fanfiction has yet to mine very thoroughly is the “impact of everyday racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ableism and other forms of structural oppression” (Craps, 2015). Some of these are covered better than others, but very little of fanfiction digs in and really examines the impact the long-term experience of these -isms can have on a person’s mental health.

“Traumatization can result insidiously from cumulative microaggressions: each one is too small to be a traumatic stressor but together they can build to create an immense traumatic impact.”

- Stef Craps, "The Empire of Trauma"

Additionally, there’s the trauma of watching your communities and individuals like you continually suffering and/or being hurt or killed.

**RACE**

Again, a large reason racial trauma isn’t often addressed is the canon fanfiction is based on.

The MCU has more characters of color than some other fandoms, but they are virtually all secondary characters or from the isolated futuristic wonderland of Wakanda.
Race is also pretty much the one thing people aren’t comfortable with changing about a character.

**Orientation, experience of domestic violence and general backstory all get changed frequently. Disability and gender get changed less often but do still change frequently enough to be explored.**

Fanfics will acknowledge racism and microaggressions, but it is usually in a passing comment.

For example, a fic will note that they sent Steve Rogers (Captain America), who is blue-eyed and blonde, to deal with the police at an incident rather than Sam Wilson (Falcon/Captain America), who is Black.

Even fics where a POC character is a main character, the focus of the work doesn’t usually dive into race issues.

In Falcon and the Winter Soldier, Sam is a main character and race is a major theme of the show. However, in fics inspired by the show, racial trauma often is sidelined for the sake of focusing on Sam’s war trauma (like in War, Scene by TinyWinterSnake), interpersonal relationships, or Bucky’s trauma from his time as the Winter Soldier.

I looked through the most 34 most recent pages of fics under Falcon and the Winter Soldier (out of 467 pages), and only found a couple that discussed race in more than passing mentions of what happened in the show. The only one where racial trauma was a main theme was the Captain America, The White Wolf, and the Winter Soldier series by Writer_ Lethogica.

With fanfiction, fantasy racism is also a topic.

In the MCU this is usually about Loki. Lots of fics address the fact that Loki is actually Jötnar, not Asgardian like he was raised to believe. The Jötnar are considered monsters by most other races, so Loki often deals with internalized racism in addition to racism from others.

"I intimated at this earlier when I spoke about the Jötunn race, although this is true of master sorcerers too. I possess a, as it were, magical core that is intertwined with my very soul. I do not merely wield magic... I am magic. Of course, most living things in the universe have some degree of magic twined with their soul, but with the Jötnar, it is much more than that. They are biologically magic; it's the one thing those monsters have going for them."

The disdain for his own race wasn't lost on Coulson, though he saved his questions on the matter for another time.
To Guard the Light by Amaya_Ramiel

It kinda says something about how unwilling we are to really address racial trauma when fantasy racism gets more space than the effects of the real-life racism that more people from canon could be dealing with.

LGBTQ+

The one minority group whose stories get told in a fairly comprehensive way is the LGBTQ+ community.

Fanfiction explores the trauma of being on the receiving end of hate for your orientation, as well as internalized homophobia/biphobia/transphobia and the trauma of being part of a community that is attacked and marginalized.

Example fic: Falling from a Pedestal to Land on Even Ground by Ralkana

** There are one thousand MCU fics with the “internalized homophobia” tag as of December 2020.

Especially for MCU characters from earlier-than-modern times (Captain America, the Winter Soldier, Peggy Carter, etc.), fanfiction can show people having to work through internalized homophobia/biphobia etc. or the trauma of living in a time period when being anything other than straight and cis was life-threatening. (Even more than it still is anyway.)

Example fics: Beignet De La Terre by Glacial_guillotine and Get with the Times (series) by ThePeak

Compared to the absolute plethora of fics featuring gay, bi and/or pan relationships there aren’t as many for trans people and other gender identities or less well-known sexual identities like aromanticism. But it is still very possible to find good fics that give space to those identity’s struggles. There’s more good representation in fanfic for queer identities than in other forms of mass media for sure.

Example fics:

War, Children by Nonymos - In an alternate universe where they aren’t superheroes, Steve Rogers is trans and homeless. Probably the most comprehensive handling of the intersection of trauma and minority I’ve read. (This is also an excellent Recovery fic for a modern-day veteran Bucky Barnes.)
Aces Trumps Kings by miniongrin - Imagine playboy Tony Stark (Iron Man) as an asexual person who only had sex because of social expectations and because he didn't know asexuality was a possibility.

ABILITY
Like the trauma experienced by LGBTQ+ people, the effects of ableism get a little more space than other traumas experienced by minorities.

Disability representation isn’t very comprehensive and some of the narratives connecting disability and trauma aren’t great, but it’s there at least.

The MCU is better than other fandoms with disability representation since there are canon disabled characters to work with.

Examples: Clint Barton (Hawkeye) is Deaf, Matt Murdock (Daredevil) is blind, pre-Captain America Steve Rogers had a plethora of chronic health issues

** visit Chronically Ill Steve Rogers and Pre-Serum Steve’s Medical Forms if you want to go down a really interesting rabbit hole about 1930’s medicine, eugenics, and disability

Still, I’ve never read a fic that goes very far beyond “ableist people suck and kinda makes me feel bad about myself once in a while” and dig into how it intersects with traumas like homelessness or get into more complicated narratives about disability.

Also, there is a lack of representation of disabilities beyond physical disabilities.

** Combining fanfic's representation issues with its intense focus on individuals, it also overlooks many of the larger stories to be told about trauma.**

The stories that fanfic typically tells are about individuals or relationships between a small group of people, so stories about communities and systems get neglected. That's a large part of why fanfiction doesn't link many traumas (homelessness, sexual assault, racism) back to structural social issues.

** See slide 6 from Therapy Narrative for more

In addition to that, there are some bigger picture types of trauma that fanfic doesn’t touch at all.

These aren’t really discussed outside of academia, so this is another example of fanfiction reflecting popular understanding.
INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Briefly, for people who don’t know what I’m referring to, here’s a run-down based on Kirmayer et al.’s 2014 work:

- The original trauma occurred in the past, to a person’s ancestors
- That trauma usually affected an entire group or culture
- The effects of that trauma hypothetically pass down from generation to generation, through mechanisms like epigenetics, problems caused by the disruption of family and culture, the trauma of growing up with traumatized parents, pain from the idea that your people were hurt so badly in the past, etc.

Some examples of groups that may experience intergenerational trauma are the descendants of Holocaust survivors, modern-day Native Americans, and African Americans.

There’s also a concept called historical trauma. According to Tracey Pyscher, the professor I worked with on this project, the difference between historical trauma and intergenerational trauma is that historical trauma refers to the trauma of a specific moment in a group’s history and intergenerational trauma refers to “the continuance of the traumatic experience through family blood lines or generations.”

So, being forced to attend culture-eradicating, abusive boarding school would be an example of historical trauma, and the overall trauma Indigenous communities have experienced because of the boarding schools, from the first generation that attended them and down throughout following generations would be an example of intergenerational trauma.

There’s really no mention or representation of intergenerational trauma in MCU fics. However, “I Shook a Witcher and Intergenerational Trauma Fell Out (The Witcher)” is an unusually common tag in that fandom, with 199 tagged works. Most of those don’t name intergenerational trauma directly in the story, but if you know the history of witchers, the authors aren’t using the label incorrectly.

Intergenerational trauma is a big thing in academic circles. There is also ongoing debate about how much of the present-day suffering of people in marginalized groups is because of intergenerational trauma or because of ongoing structural violence (Kirmayer et al., 2014). It’s interesting stuff.

However, since fanfiction is missing a lot of minority representation and isn’t big on systems, clearly this isn’t something that fanfic usually tackles.
What Now?

Now that we've looked at the stories that fanfiction tells (and doesn't) about trauma, where should we go from here?

Really, we've already noted what is problematic, so here is just a distillation of some action items to improve fanfic's handling of trauma.

Note: I'm not saying to stop writing h/c or savior or other potentially problematic narratives anymore, just do what fanfiction loves best: remix tropes, write stories that are subversions/deconstructions, and/or think about the deeper implications :)

AGENCY

Give characters more agency in response to their trauma.

Complicate savior narratives by letting the hurt character reach out for help once in a while instead of just suffering in silence until someone else notices.

Or, give them back agency after they are saved from a bad situation by letting them take charge of parts of their recovery process.

I was also going to advise letting characters rescue themselves sometimes, but then I thought about it more and realized that fanfic is actually really good at that.

(Those stories where Tony (Iron Man) gets kidnapped and his idiot kidnappers let him near their tech and he explodes their entire base to escape are beautiful.)

Example fic: Four (Or Five) Reasons for Kidnapping Tony Stark by scifigrl47

The last way to give characters more agency is by focusing on both the importance of community support to healing and also individual effort.

Focusing too heavily on community turns into comfort without actual healing, and focusing too much on individual effort puts the responsibility for healing (and trauma) on individuals, rather than communities and systems. A balance of the two is nice.

POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

A lot of fics, especially superhero fics, are at their core stories about trauma and what happens after.

Like with really digging in and exploring the negative effects of trauma, let's bring the positive effects to light as well.
Subvert narratives of deficit and make post-traumatic growth overt.

Name it. Have characters discuss or reflect on it. Tag “post traumatic growth” on works.

NEGLECTED STORIES
Make space for stories of female sexual assault.

Make it clear that microaggressions and racism are traumatic too.

Don’t always place the burden of trauma and recovery on individuals or individual situations.

Acknowledge the systemic causes of certain traumas and the need for social change, ’cause it’s hard to heal from trauma when you and your community is being repeatedly harmed.

** For more: slide 6 of Therapy Narrative

CONCLUSION
Really, fanfiction is currently one of the best existent media spaces for representing trauma in a holistic and productive way.

Let’s take it a step further and use the fact that anyone can write and put their ideas out there to really discuss trauma and make fanfiction an even better space for the representation of trauma and education about it.

SOURCES

Credits
Much credit for fic thoughts and observations goes to my sister, who helped me workshop many of my ideas and proposed new ideas to incorporate. She wasn't my beta per se, but she deserves that level of appreciation.

Similarly, many of my thoughts about trauma come from class discussion from the Rethinking Trauma Seminar. I tried to credit ideas and phrasings to classmates when I had a record of who made a particular point, but I inevitably just stole most of them. Oops.

Thanks everyone :)

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