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Adrian Lucas Mastrocola Garcia

Write thyself: theoretical intersections of narrative therapy and fanfiction writing

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Orientador(a): Prof.(a) Magali Sperling Beck, Dr.(a)

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Adrian Lucas Mastrocola Garcia

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Coordenação do Curso

Banca examinadora

Insira neste espaço
a assinatura

Prof.(a) Magali Sperling Beck, Dr.(a)

Orientador(a)

Insira neste espaço
a assinatura

Prof.(a) Matias Corbett Garcez, Dr.(a)

Instituição UFSC

Insira neste espaço
a assinatura

Júlia Zen Dariva, Me.(a)

Instituição UFSC

Florianópolis, 2026

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Justiça por Catarina Kasten. Ilumina, Catarina.

“Não devo essa força que me permitiu sobreviver nem à psicanálise nem à psicologia, mas, pelo contrário, aos livros feministas, punks, antirracistas e lésbicos.”

Preciado, *Eu sou o monstro que vos fala*, 2022.

RESUMO

Por meio de uma revisão bibliográfica não sistemática e leituras críticas, esta pesquisa se propõe a analisar as interseções entre a terapia narrativa e a escrita de fanfictions em níveis conceituais e teóricos, especialmente — e notavelmente — porque muitos autores de fanfictions compartilham identidades e contextos sociais marginalizados, excluídos de narrativas dominantes e hegemônicas. Através de pesquisas sobre práticas de terapia narrativa, bem como sobre estudos de fãs e fanfictions, esta monografia constrói possíveis conexões teóricas sobre como a fanfiction, enquanto gênero literário concreto, e o processo criativo na terapia narrativa podem interagir dentro desses campos teóricos, assim como paralelamente, ou coexistir independentemente com um mesmo propósito. O estudo será conduzido com análise comparativa de conceitos em livros e textos teóricos sobre terapia narrativa e debates sobre capítulos, artigos e ensaios a respeito do engajamento e do processo de escrita de fanfictions. As interseções entre os conceitos da terapia narrativa e a escrita de fanfictions serão rastreadas ao longo da revisão bibliográfica e analisadas cuidadosamente com uma abordagem de leitura transformadora, ou seja, interpretando o material de acordo com a lente contextual utilizada, imbuída do contexto e da construção social do leitor-pesquisador.

Palavras-chave: fanfiction; terapia narrativa; escrita criativa; revisão de literatura não sistemática; intersecções teóricas.

ABSTRACT

Through a non-systematic literature review and critical close reading, this research proposes to analyse the intersections between narrative therapy and fanfiction writing on conceptual and theoretical levels, specially and notably so because many fanfiction writers share marginalized identity backgrounds and social contexts. Through research about narrative therapy practices as well as research on fanfiction studies, this monograph builds possible theoretical connections about how fanfiction as a concrete literary genre and the creative process in narrative therapy might interact within these theoretical fields, side by side, or coexisting independently. The study will be conducted with comparative analysis of concepts in theoretical textbooks on narrative therapy and debates on articles about fanfiction writing engagement and process. The intersections of narrative therapy concepts and fanfiction writing will be traced along the review of the literature and looked at carefully with a transformative reading approach, that is, to interpret the material according to the contextual lens you are using, embedded by the reader-researcher's own social context and background.

Keywords: fanfiction; narrative therapy; creative writing; non-systematic literature review; theoretical intersections.

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1 INTRODUCTION

A wise person once told me that everything in life experience traverses our imagination. At some and any point every little thing goes through our minds, making us question reality and its limits, its edges, its shapes and meanings. If life is a sequence of events that shape us as persons, and each person tells their own story, then, each story holds an individual bubble of imagination that tries its best to understand the meaning of life. Stories carry the weight of experience, of meaning making, of our subjectivities and doubts, and I wonder if these subjectivities could be externalised and looked at more closely, isolated from the sequence of other tiny subjectivities, perhaps even changed, transformed into a new and brighter meaning.

Narratives can be interpreted as reflections or abstractions of experience; they are powerful forces that shape identities, relationships, and cultural belonging; however, there are details within the narrative itself that might have deeper and more complex meanings for individuals, wherever the context the narrative is a part of. Whether in the therapy room or in online fan communities, stories offer space for transformation, resistance, and healing. Across a range of contexts—from children confronting personal struggles in therapy to young writers reimagining fantastical worlds—narrative emerges as a dynamic site where meaning is not only (re)discovered but made and shaped again and again. This paper explores how narrative operates as a tool of agency and imagination, drawing on works on narrative therapy and on discussions in fanfiction studies to trace the ways individuals—particularly queer and marginalized people—can rewrite the worlds they inhabit; that is, to explore the bridges and intersections traced along the analysed literature.

At the heart of Jennifer Freeman, David Epston, and Dean Lobovits's *Playful Approaches to Serious Problems* (1997) lies the belief that children are not passive recipients of adult knowledge, but imaginative co-authors of their own lives. Their therapeutic encounters invite children to speak back to “problems” through metaphor, storytelling, and play, transforming once-paralyzing experiences into tales of courage, resistance, and hope. However, looking only at children is a limitation of this study. Camila Lion and Laura Vilela e Souza (2022) extend this ethos by emphasizing the ethical, co-creative dimension of narrative therapy, where language is not only a tool of diagnosis but also of liberation. Lion and Vilela e Souza gather studies and approaches that also entail therapeutic work with adults, expanding also the limitation previously mentioned of working only with children.

In digital fan communities (also known as fandoms), this same narrative drive pulses through the reworking and rewriting of beloved stories. As Jennifer Duggan (2022) and Lesley Goodman (2015) show, fans—particularly queer and trans readers—often resist the authority of source text authors, instead claiming the narrative space for themselves, but not as owners of any copyrights nor profitable activities, meaning that the product (fanfiction) does not belong to the publishing world in a traditional way (Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, 2016). Fanfiction becomes a site where silenced identities find voice, and canonical limits are reimagined through plural, expanded visions; and by reimagining canonical limits I mean to explore beyond the fact contained, for example, within the lore of a literary book, or the actual plot of a television show. Bold's (2016) analysis of Wattpad, an online reading and writing platform, highlights how these reader-writers challenge traditional ideas of authorship, constructing relational forms of storytelling deeply shaped by feedback, community, and mutual influence. Fan spaces are also pedagogical, as Rebecca W. Black (2007) reveals in her exploration of multilingual fanfiction communities. Here, language learning is bound up with creativity and cultural negotiation. For writers like those in April Rose C. De Los Reyes and Noel N. Pit's study (2023), storytelling is not simply leisure—it is a lifeline, a space where emotion, aspiration, and identity converge in transformative ways.

Moreover, these studies illuminate narrative as a living, shifting force—a medium through which people challenge the worlds they inherit and craft ones more attuned to their truths. In the context of narrative therapy, as articulated by Lion and Vilela e Souza (2022), this process involves more than storytelling—it entails a deliberate repositioning of the self in relation to the/a problem. Through externalization, problems are named and situated outside the person, allowing individuals to engage with them critically and creatively, rather than internalizing them as markers of identity (Lion; Vilela e Souza, 2022, p. 26). This shift opens space for agency, where a person is no longer “angry” or “anxious” but is, instead, in dialogue with “Anger” or “Anxiety”—inviting strategies, allies, and metaphors to enter the therapeutic conversation. Remembering, as in to make a piece a member of the whole once again (Michael White; David Epston, 1990), further deepens this work by reintegrating supportive figures—real or imagined—into the person's narrative landscape, reconstructing a sense of belonging and strength. In this way, narrative becomes not just a mode of expression,

but a structured, imaginative act of resistance to suffering: a means by which lived trauma is re-authored into survivable, even empowering, stories.

Considering that both narrative therapy studies and fanfiction writing studies approach narrative as a transformative tool of self-awareness and agency within the text and as experience, in this work I will explore the possibilities of intersecting some of the tenets of these two areas of study, since I could find only two other studies on online databases that linked these two areas, as exposed further on. That being said, below I present my motivations and objectives for this research.

1.1 OBJECTIVES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to explore theoretical and conceptual intersections between narrative therapy and fanfiction writing, emphasizing their shared focus on reimagining storylines, identities, and use of creative expression as a tool for overcoming problems, altering the dominant perspective of a situation. Those intersections are also possible connections about how fanfiction and the creative process in narrative therapy might interact within themselves, as in the practice of writing fanfiction and engaging in narrative therapy. Considering the creative aspects of narrative therapy and the shared experiences of fanfiction writers about their own background on their works, I saw a possibility of interaction between the objects.

I noticed that there is a gap in scholarly works about fanfiction practice; there are a lot of fan-behaviour studies and of the cultural impact of mainstream transformative works (Goodman, 2015), but about the individual writing process itself, there is a lack of studies discussing fanfiction in academia. Narrative therapy, on the other hand, is a concrete concept valued by scholars and further studies, as I will point out further on, but the practice itself lies within health and wellbeing studies and research. There has been no application of these studies on the daily routine of non-profitable writing without the therapeutic guidance, an area I intend to explore in this research. In other words, this research work proposes to investigate if the therapeutic setting can be a part of the fan's writing practice on the conceptual aspects of both areas through theoretical studies.

Many times I saw fanfiction authors writing in the introduction notes, as well as in the ending notes of their work, that those narrated feelings and experiences were their own perspective on something they lived or heard from someone else that lived that, and most of them also said that it was a work of fiction and it should not be taken

as truth and facts, which could mean: this is what I think about what I lived, do not assume that is true for everybody. And I saw that the self-acknowledgement within these notes is a key point to understanding the narrative therapy approach as well, as it implies that writers might be working through their experiences and issues as they write.

This project reflects my personal experience with fanfiction writing and reading. I identify myself as a reader of fanfiction as well as anybody else who reads romances or thriller published books, taking into consideration that fanfiction is just another medium for displaying romances and thrillers. It was through a fanfiction story, back in 2019, that I saw a line by a non-binary character and I understood myself as transgender. That line, with all its sexism and gender issues, rocked my world. I could have found that reflection, that dialogue in a traditionally published paperback book perhaps, but I didn't, because buying books does not fit in my routine or financial possibilities; however, fanfiction does fit, and it fits me well. Writing, on the other hand, was a tool to discover desires and fears that I couldn't experience first-hand, but it also made me realise things about myself, such as handling and grasping consent, self-worth and care, that I might not have realised without writing about it. Those realisations could have happened in any other forms or texts, but they happened through fanfiction. My intent with this research is to enhance the possibilities of understanding the creative process of writing and self-analysis, knowing oneself as much as the other, through looking at the therapeutic aspects of narrative therapy and how they might be related to one's writing practices, specifically in fanfiction writing.

The organization of this project was planned to be a construction of the research, step by step. The Theoretical Framework will set the base for this construction, cementing the crucial elements that I will be analysing further on, as it is explained further below, in the Methodology section. As this project refers to a literature review within an exploratory research, the section Narrative Review of the Literature will be divided in three main subsections, paving the way(s) to my final destination, the Final Remarks section.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, I will highlight themes and concepts that are relevant for the study of fanfiction and narrative therapy.

2.1 FANFICTION AND NARRATOLOGY

Starting off easy, according to online dictionaries (Cambridge, c2025; Merriam-Webster, c2025), fanfiction means “stories written about TV, film, or book characters by their fans, or an example of such a story” and “stories involving popular fictional characters that are written by fans and often posted on the Internet”, respectively. For many writers and researchers of fan studies, fanfiction is “writing their own version of the original story or a canon” and “based from the ‘world’ of another writer” (Los Reyes; Pit, 2023, p. 40), “fan-produced texts that derive from forms of media, literature, and popular culture” (Black, 2007, p. 385), and one detail that I particularly like was added by Jennifer Duggan, in her article “Transformative Readings: Harry Potter Fan Fiction, Trans/Queer Reader Response, and J. K. Rowling” (2022), as she discusses that it also happens that fans might “appropriate texts for their own purposes”, whatever those purposes might be (Duggan, 2022, p. 148).

It is relevant to notice that none of those definitions say that fanfiction is a genre of texts, nor a specific kind of literature. For Stevie Leigh, it “can be a valuable literacy practice because it encourages creativity and literacy appreciation, promotes socialization, offers a platform for self-exploration, and motivates students to advance their writing skills” (Leigh, 2020, [1]). Also, as fanfiction engages in storytelling, understanding it as a kind of narrative is crucial.

According to *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2008), narrative is “the representation of an event or a series of events”, or more elaborately “a model of verbal presentation and involves the linguist recounting or telling of events” (H. Porter Abbot, 2008, p. 29, 31). Narrative is embedded in our human experience from very early on, in childhood, in our past, in the world’s past history, etc. It is crucial to understand that we, as individuals, are used to telling stories, to retell events, to relate to others in the form of narratives. Claude Bremond puts it this way: “A story is neither words, not images, nor gestures, but the events, situations, and behaviours signified by the words, the images, and the gestures” (Claude Bremond, 1964 *apud* Porter Abbot, 2008, p. 21); that is, a narrative is how we make sense of the world, how we process events and situations, and through this narrative we keep going, retelling these events and situations, making meaning out of things, comprehending the significance things have to ourselves.

Similarly, in *The Triumph of Narrative* (Robert Fulford, 1999), the definition of narrative can be understood as verbal texts that navigate through shape, outlines,

limits and edges of reality and imagination. This approach also entails that stories are always meaningful, a juncture of facts and feelings that is how we explain things, how we teach and learn about the world and ourselves, as well as how we entertain others and ourselves (Fulford, 1999, p. 9). Fulford (1999) delimits the difference between stories and experience by outlining that experience has blurred edges, merging with other related experiences, while stories have those edges well defined, that is, life has overlapping events, details that go way back in the past to comprehend the present and suppose the future, while fictional stories begin and end in themselves, their edges are hard and round. For backing up this statement, in *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* (James N. Frey, 1987), Frey explained how a story has all its actions rounded, the conflict and the climax go back to themselves, the events are connected so the plot has a meaning, a message to pass on, and that's a complete good narrative. So, these well-defined edges mean that actions and their meanings are always within the story itself, while experience intersects with other actions, other feelings, other related experiences, and might go back and forth.

To understand how this idea of narrative and storytelling can be applied in therapy, we must also understand what is a dominant narrative. A dominant narrative is a story told many times, in a repeated matter, nailing that comprehension of the event in our mind as the absolute truth. This understanding also applies to hegemonic narratives, that is, truths that we have been retelling over the decades through power dynamics and perpetuating ideas that harm others that do not relate to the same narrative. Hegemonic and dominant narratives are broadcast through power institutions and dynamics, and this includes mass media. In a narratological aspect, Fulford (1999) makes the distinction between one's own story and mass media, or the world's story. This mass media/world's story is a dominant narrative, and while one's own story can be correlated or can coexist with the dominant narrative, the majority of conflicts happen because the personal narrative is not the dominant narrative, so they exist in dichotomy and with blurred edges. How does this relate to fanfiction writing? Altering a dominant narrative (or canon, in the fanfiction context) retells the event through another point of view, usually an alternative or marginalized point of view, reorganizing events and (re)actions so it is acceptable, relatable, and bearable.

2.2 NARRATIVE THERAPY

Regarding narrative therapy, it is essential to understand where it comes from and where I see it intersecting with studies in literature. Narrative therapy was developed firstly by Michael White, a family therapist and social worker from Australia, in the 1970s. He was later joined by David Epston in the 1980s, who is also a social worker and therapist, as well as an anthropologist from New Zealand. White's and Epston's understanding of narrative therapy was put together through the years while looking at other philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, and the epistemology of social constructionism, because every ounce of narrative therapy is somehow connected to other approaches of psychology studies. Some examples of their sources are Michael Foucault, Lev Vygotsky, Jerome Bruner¹, and Jacques Derrida (Lion; Vilela e Souza, 2022). White's and Epston's conceptualization of narrative is important for the development of what is about to be said and/or explored collaboratively in the therapeutic environment, that is why Derrida's, Bruner's, Barthe's, Brokmeyer's and Harré's studies are so relevant for the theoretical discussion of narrative therapy. To White and Epston, narrative is a process of linking events in a sequence, across time, in a way that gives those events meaning and direction. That is, people tell their life stories in a certain way, based on their understanding of their timeline, and make meaning of their lives and experiences through the interpretation of those events. Michael White and David Epston comprehend narrative, then, as an interpretation of experiences through a plot. This plot, for these authors, is how people understand who they are, what is possible for them, and how they relate to the world (White; Epston, 1990).

Opposing some other approaches of psychology practitioners focused on sickness or specific conditions, narrative therapy understands that people deal with problems, and these problems can be walked through, understood and reshaped, not necessarily resolved (Anderson, 1996; Brockmeier; Harré, 2003; Lion; Vilela e Souza, 2022; White; Epston, 1990, 1992). In practice, someone can tell their therapist what they are dealing with at work and the therapist might suggest a narrative approach to

¹ Further on I will be elaborating on Bruner's work to discuss relevant intersections, thus, it is important to understand Bruner's take on narrative. That being said, Bruner's major contribution is to insist that narrative is not a secondary or decorative form of thinking, but a primary, irreducible way humans understand themselves and their worlds. He also claims that humans do not just perceive reality but construct it through culturally shared narrative structures. Then, through this narrative capacity, we construct possible worlds—the imaginative spaces in which meaning, identity, and culture are negotiated (Bruner, 1986).

comprehend what the problem is, how it affects the patient and what the patient does with that affection, and what their reaction to it is. The main steps of the narrative therapy are externalization, reauthorship, and re-membering, i. e., mapping the problem and its dominant narrative, deconstructing it and reorganizing or reconstructing it. This reconstruction is based on actions, intentions, values, identities etc., and consolidation through reassociating that plot and its consequences within an alternative narrative (Lion; Vilela e Souza, 2022).

When a person is willing to go through this process in therapy, they are claiming back their agency, their power over their own narratives and how they deal with it. To Harlene Anderson, agency “is a resource and product of the inventive and creative aspects of language and narrative” (Anderson, 1996, p. 199), that is, agency brings back authority and responsibility to their (authors’, writers’, patients’ etc.) process and management of the problem they are narrating.

Going back to dominant narratives, narrative therapy involves picking apart this dominance, understanding how the problem settles itself in that situation for the patient and how the patient got to the point where the problem is the dominant aspect of that narrative. Once this dominance is looked at, the reauthorship takes place to comprehend the patient’s actions and how that problem might be approached and reorganized. So, an alternative narrative appears, a counternarrative that goes against the problem, and side by side with the patient’s processes.

3 METHODOLOGY

The method to conduct this research is a non-systematic literature review, also called narrative review, with critical and close reading of the selected texts of both fields in focus. For the close reading of the texts surrounding narrative therapy, I apply the concept of queer reading (Tosenberger, 2008; Duggan, 2021), also mentioned as transformative reading. Queer² reading can be comprehended as a lens used to find specific elements within a text, which is not, under any possibility, the same as intentional fallacy. Queer reading does not mean adding things to a text that are not there, but to critically interpret what is in the text according to the lens you are using, mostly these lenses are embedded by the reader’s own social context and background. My lens to approach narrative therapy is not of a psychologist, but the lenses of a

² Queer, in this monograph, means identities that belong outside dominant expectations of binary cisgender, hetero sexuality and white-occidental/Western ways of living.

Literature scholar, queer person and researcher, that really likes fanfiction and has been in contact with the practice since 2013.

A narrative review encapsules the summary of the overall state of art or knowledge on a topic, and provides a contextual background while “identify[ing] existing theories and frameworks, compar[ing] and contrast[ing] them, and discuss[ing] their applicability in different contexts” (Felix, 2024). This method of review allows me to interpret and critically analyse theoretical frameworks and conceptual models of different fields while finding relevant intersections between them. That is, the texts for review are selected by their relevance in that field of knowledge, critically analysed by its content and context, and put side-by-side to the texts selected in the same way from the second field of knowledge targeted for this research, aiming to find and highlight the intersections of possible practices. I understand a narrative review as a flexible and powerful tool that allows the researcher the autonomy of subjective interpretations.

The initial sources about narrative therapy to be investigated were recommended to me in a formative setting where I volunteered to be a part of as a passive listener at SAPSI³ (Serviço de Atenção Psicológica), a school clinic that prepares psychology students to act as psychologists, in this particular group with children as patients, for the Psychology undergraduate program at UFSC. For ethical and safety reasons, all information about the cases and patients were not incorporated into this research and were never disclosed outside of the supervision sessions. The texts were provided by the formative sessions’ supervisor, Pedro Henrique Geremia, who authorized and encouraged my participation to learn more about narrative therapy specifically.

The contemporary texts used for the formative sessions explore more practical concepts, especially about how to apply the narrative therapy approach by psychologists in clinic practice. However, all these texts have in common the original work of Michael White and David Epston (1990, 1992), social workers and family therapists, who came up with the methods and concepts to work with narrative therapy. So, the text *Narrative Means for Therapeutic Ends* (1990) was selected by its relevance in the consolidation of the field Narrative Therapy. The explanation of the processes of externalization and re-authorship conversations in narrative therapy was well synthesised by Camila Lion and Laura Vilela e Souza's article “Narrative Therapy:

³ <https://sapsi.ufsc.br/>

relevant aspects about the therapeutic process and relationship” (2022). I selected their text because of its fluidity and easy reading as someone who is not a psychologist, for its structure and practical explanations, as well as an updated source material.

Now, for fanfiction studies, every scholar and writer uses different ways of defining the concept of fanfiction, and to each of them, fanfiction might have a different significance, and I do not mean “what does fanfiction mean”, but what it means personally to the writer, or researcher defining it in their words. For exposing briefly the reconfiguration of canonical limits and a foundation for fan studies, I selected the book *Textual Poachers*, by Henry Jenkins. However, to review the whole book I would need another singular monograph, so I used Jenkins text as a baseline for the selection of other texts because of its relevance for the fan studies foundation. When reading the texts “Transformative Readings: Harry Potter Fan Fiction, Trans/Queer Reader Response, and J. K. Rowling” (Duggan, 2022), “Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts: Harry Potter Slash Fanfiction” (Tosenberger, 2008), “‘Coming Out Okay’: Community Narratives for LGBTQ Identity Recovery Work” (Dym *et al*, 2019), and “‘Write the story you want to read’: world-queering through slash fanfiction creation” (Floegel, 2020), I was captivated by their expositions and discussions of meaning (re)making, world queerness, identity explorations, and reconstructing ontological frameworks through interpretive legitimacy and fanfiction writing, and that was my criteria for selecting them all, how they manage to find words to discuss the reclaim of authority and agency of fanfiction writers and readers. And finally, but nonetheless important, the text “The dysphoric body politic, or Seizing the means of imagination” (Ledbetter, 2020) impacted me through its affirmation on the radical potential of fanfiction as affective and political praxis, that is, how powerful fanfiction writing and reading can be for marginalized people whose identities are not accepted nor acknowledged by the mainstream and hegemonic cultures. Briefly, I will rely on Wolfgang Iser’s understanding of formulation of the self, however, his text is not part of the literature review. Nevertheless, all texts were selected by their relevant inputs on writing practices, identity processing and community making.

When researching databases for previous works bringing narrative therapy and fanfiction writing together, I was able to find two books compiling a variety of psychology researchers and clinicians. Both books had chapters available online through Google Scholar, however only one chapter of each interested me to review non-systematically, and these chapters are: “Now What? Living in a Rewritten Story”

chapter 12 from *Starship Therapise: Using Therapeutic Fanfiction to Rewrite Your Life*, and “Beyond Canon”, chapter 17 from *Using Superheroes and Villains in Counseling and Play Therapy: A Guide for Mental Health Professionals*. My criteria for selecting these chapters was how they approached writing and authorship, however both have their limitations about autonomous writing and individual agency, as I will present further on.

Thus, the intersections of narrative therapy concepts and fanfiction writing will be traced along the non-systematic review of the literature and looked at carefully with a transformative reading of a narrative review.

4 NARRATIVE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

4.1 EXTERNALIZATION: NARRATIVE THERAPY APPROACH, PAST AND PRESENT

Narrative therapy emerges within a post-structuralist, social constructionist, and hermeneutic paradigm, situating human experience not as a fixed or intrinsic psychological essence but as a discursive, relational, and interpretative production. Michael White and David Epston’s *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (1990) remains one of the foundational texts of narrative therapy, articulating a radical shift from intrapsychic models toward an interpretive, relational, and meaning-centered therapeutic practice. Influenced by interpretive anthropology, post-structuralism, and literary theory, White and Epston argue that identity is not discovered but constructed, shaped through the stories individuals tell—or are invited or compelled to tell—about their lives (White; Epston, 1990). Their central premise is that what feels true about oneself is often simply the narrative that has been rehearsed the most, or what they call a dominant narrative, shaped by social, cultural, and institutional discourses.

White and Epston define narrative as a selective and structuring process through which people link events over time to produce a coherent plot. A narrative is therefore never a transparent representation of lived experience. As they assert, “a narrative can never encompass the full richness of our lived experience” (White; Epston, 1990, p. 11). Lived experience always exceeds the stories used to represent it. Narratives simplify, organize, and highlight certain events while excluding others. This selectivity is not merely descriptive; it is constructive, producing identities, relationships, and expectations. Narratives do not merely reflect lives—they perform meanings, shaping how people live and understand themselves and others.

This theoretical stance rests on a crucial insight: every telling of a story is also a transformation. White and Epston draw on Clifford Geertz's anthropological idea that "it is copying that originates" (Geertz, 1980, p. 380 *apud* White; Epston, 1990, p. 13), suggesting that even repetition generates novelty. Every new reading or retelling of one's life story is thus also a new writing. This dynamic perspective prevents narrative therapy from treating identity as static or essential. Instead, identity becomes a fluid, negotiable, and revisable construction.

This interpretive fluidity becomes especially important in moments of crisis. Traditional psychological models often treat crisis as regression or breakdown. White and Epston challenge this assumption, proposing instead that crisis indicates "progress in motion"—a moment when the dominant narrative fails to adequately account for newly emerging experiences. Crisis is not a personal failure, but a failure of the story that has been organizing the person's life. Narrative therapy therefore does not deny distress; rather, it recognizes distress as evidence that new interpretations and new stories are required. The therapeutic task is not to restore an old narrative but to help generate alternative ones.

The concept of the dominant narrative is pivotal here. Dominant narratives are stories that have been socially sanctioned, repeatedly rehearsed, and widely circulated, making them appear natural or inevitable. Many of the clients described in White and Epston's clinical work arrive organized by problem-saturated narratives that present the self as fundamentally deficient or powerless. These narratives function as a form of dominant knowledge, derived from broader socio-political discourses that dictate which identities are legitimate or valued (White; Epston, 1990). Narrative therapy seeks to interrogate, unsettle, and expand these restrictive discourses.

One of the key techniques that enables this expansion is the exploration of ambiguity within stories. Stories contain implicit meanings, multiple metaphors, and often contradictory or incomplete elements. As White and Epston note, narratives are "full of gaps which must be filled in order to be performed" (White; Epston, 1990, p. 13). These gaps open space for creativity, imagination, and reinterpretation. By examining ambiguity, therapists can help clients identify elements of their lived experience that fall outside the dominant narrative—elements that the dominant story has neglected, rejected, or obscured.

These neglected elements are what White terms as unique outcomes. Unique outcomes are events, thoughts, feelings, intentions, or actions, that contradict or

escape the problem-saturated story, which is a situation where the problem has become a constant part of someone's life, the problem is so persistent and present that the scenery becomes saturated with it (White; Epston, 1990, p. 4). Identifying them requires a therapeutic posture grounded in curiosity and attentiveness. Unique outcomes often appear minor or incidental at first but, when explored, they reveal alternative plots in which the client demonstrates agency, competence, or resistance (White; Epston, 1990). So, a unique outcome is a gap, or a needle in the stack in a situation where a problem has overcome other perspectives.

Once identified, unique outcomes become the foundation for the process White and Epston call externalization, that is, separating the person from the problem. Rather than seeing the client as the problem ("I am depressed"), the problem is treated as an entity acting upon the client ("Depression is trying to influence me"). Externalization allows clients to recognize their own intentions and capacities as distinct from the problem's effects. Following externalization, therapists engage in mapping the influence of the problem on the person's life and mapping the influence of the person on the problem. This bidirectional mapping reveals where the person has already resisted or countered the problem's effects, helping them reclaim agency.

Through this process, previously neglected aspects of lived experience are articulated, circulated, and given meaning. As these aspects accumulate, they form "plots of alternatives"—coherent alternative stories that challenge and displace the dominant narrative. These stories do not deny the presence of distress or difficulty; rather, they situate them differently, opening possibilities for action and meaning that were previously inaccessible.

White and Epston conceptualize the broader trajectory of this work through the metaphor of reauthoring. They describe the evolution of lives as "the process of persons' entering into stories, taking them over, and making them their own" (White; Epston, 1990, p. 13). Reauthoring does not involve fabricating a new life story out of nothing; it is an interpretive intervention into existing stories. Clients reinterpret events, reassign meanings, and reorganize plots to produce narratives that better reflect the complexity of their lived experience and their preferred ways of being.

Importantly, narrative therapy is not limited to spoken conversation. While oral dialogue—particularly through structured questioning—is central, White and Epston draw heavily on the literary tradition. They incorporate therapeutic documents such as letters, certificates, and counter-documents. These texts serve to "thicken" the

preferred narrative, giving it material form and enabling it to circulate beyond therapy sessions. Written documents reinforce alternative meanings and extend the performative reach of the reauthored story (White; Epston, 1990, p.13, 37, 189).

Ultimately, narrative therapy emerges as a deeply ethical practice. By foregrounding the socio-political contexts in which dominant narratives are produced, White and Epston position therapy as a space where oppressive discourses can be challenged and resisted. The goal is not to uncover a hidden, authentic self, but to support clients in (re)creating stories that more adequately represent their lived experiences, values, and hopes. The process is helpful, satisfying, and open-ended, emphasizing possibility rather than closure. In this way, narrative becomes not only a means of understanding life but a means of changing it.

According to Camila Lion and Laura Vilela e Souza, the narrative paradigm enables a conceptual shift in which individuals are not treated as passive recipients of reality but as authors, co-authors, and active organizers of meaning. Their theoretical essay "Narrative Therapy: relevant aspects about the therapeutic process and relationship" (2022) develops not only an overview of narrative practices but also a theoretical scaffolding that explains how narratives operate verbally, visually, symbolically, and temporally, articulating identity and experience through language, culture, and relational action.

The authors begin by defining narratives as dynamic and open forms of discourse, which operate within instructions and conventions that allow the communication and negotiation of meanings. They state that narratives are a particular kind of discourse that involves dynamism, plasticity and opening, through a gathering of instructions that aim to produce a diverse communication. Such a definition situates the narrative not as a rigid structure but as a living, fluid, and constantly reorganized construct, which also resonates with constructivist epistemologies and with Jerome Bruner's notion of narrative as a basic cognitive tool used to organize human life. In this sense, narrative is not merely representational: it is constitutive, since it not only tells about the world but also frames, configures, and legitimizes it (Lion; Vilela e Souza, 2022).

The two authors emphasize three fundamental analytic factors: form, content, and context. Form refers to how the narrative is structured and presented, its style, sequence, rhythm, metaphorical resources, and semiotic choices. Content concerns what is narrated, what is selected as relevant, problematic, or meaningful. Context,

arguably the most important dimension in narrative therapy, refers to who speaks, from where, under which circumstances, and to whom. These three factors articulate the situated nature of narrative production, revealing that any statement, memory, or interpretation is always tied to social position, relational dynamics, cultural codes, and discursive authority. Consequently, meaning is seldom autonomous; it is co-authored, negotiated, and re-signified (Lion; Vilela e Souza, 2022).

This approach gives narrative therapy a diachronic orientation, meaning that narratives unfold across time, accumulating, reorganizing, omitting, transforming, and revisiting events (Lion; Vilela e Souza, 2022). The narrative is not a mere chronological timeline, but rather a selective hermeneutic device that attributes value and causal coherence to events, privileging some while silencing others.

Lion and Vilela e Souza highlight four epistemological difficulties that make narratives complex constructs to define and work with:

1. Plurality of forms and styles: narratives may appear in literary written, oral, visual, bodily, symbolic, or digital modalities;
2. Presence of non-exclusive to narrative elements: not all elements typically associated with narratives are necessary to qualify a discourse as narrative, however, many narrative elements are not exclusive to narratives and may appear in other forms, contents, and contexts;
3. Incomplete or ambiguous contextual intelligibility: it is not always possible to trace, access, or interpret the full context in which a narrative emerges;
4. Omnipresence of narratives in human experiences: human life is culturally permeated by narrative models, making it difficult to differentiate narrative from everyday conceptualization (Lion; Vilela e Souza, 2022).

These challenges, instead of undermining narrative theory, confirm its complexity and interdisciplinary nature, reinforcing its applicability within education, cultural studies, mental health, social services, and many other fields of humanities.

For Lion and Vilela e Souza, narratives do not aim to reach or express an objective, absolute, or neutral truth. Rather, they rely on verisimilitude, that is, the sense of coherence and plausibility within a given cultural and relational context. Meaning does not come from accuracy, but from interpretive coherence and shared intelligibility. Thus, narrative therapy does not pursue factual verification but meaning negotiation. Such a perspective aligns with Bruner's view, as pointed out in their

theoretical essay, that narrative is an organizing principle of human action, not a mere representational tool. Stories, therefore, do not reflect reality, but configure it, as they are fabricated between people, not merely retrieved from memory. There is no right or wrong in producing narratives, however, there is a grammatical base of storytelling, that is, an adequate way to conduct the narrative, a constructive device of mental and social realities (Lion; Vilela e Souza, 2022).

Lion and Vilela e Souza propose a triadic model for narrative's contextual understanding: beliefs, phenomenology, and behaviorism. Through beliefs, the therapist accesses value systems, cultural premises, external discourses, and worldviews. Phenomenology allows the comprehension of subjective perception, lived experience, and emotional-sensory significance. And behaviorism enables the observation of actions, consequences, and practical relational effects. Such triangulation prevents reductionism and supports a plural therapeutic posture (Lion; Vilela e Souza, 2022).

The authors synthesize narrative processes in ten conceptual components that serve as analytic scaffolding, they are:

1. Narrative Diachronicity — temporal ordering and evolution of events;
2. Particularity — focus on specific events, especially unique outcomes;
3. Intentional Bonds — coherence of intentions and agency among related actors;
4. Hermeneutic Compositionality — interpretive multiplicity;
5. Canonicity and Violation — negotiation between norms and unexpected ruptures;
6. Referentiality — legitimacy through coherence, not factuality;
7. Genericity — repertoires of verbal expression and narrative genres;
8. Normativity — social compliance or resistance to dominant norms;
9. Context Sensitivity and Negotiability — recognition of multiple narrative possibilities;
10. Narrative Increase — progressive narrative enrichment and completion of the story as a whole (Lion; Vilela e Souza, 2022).

These principles highlight the complex and systematic nature of narrative meaning-making and reaffirm that narrative therapy requires linguistic, semiotic, social, and phenomenological sensitivity, not merely technical and clinical intervention.

Narrative therapy, as detailed by Lion and Vilela e Souza, consists of three main dialogical processes: deconstruction, reconstruction, and consolidation. Deconstruction involves separating the person from the dominant narrative that oppresses, restricts, or invalidates experience. Reconstruction focuses on alternative interpretations and unique outcomes, allowing new identity positions to emerge. Consolidation involves stabilizing, practicing, and socially validating these alternative storylines. This triadic movement results in the process of co-constructed meaning, founded on dialogical agency through language (Lion; Vilela e Souza, 2022).

They quote Bruner once again to explain that the act of producing and telling stories was instituted as an inseparable part of human culture and narrative is a principle that organizes and frames actions and intentions of human life; that are fabricated by language between people, being so, they are not stories that are ready to be told, or that have a single way of being narrated (Lion; Vilela e Souza, 2022). These are narrative conventions. Using metaphors and safe spaces, even if imaginary spaces, crash with epistemological confusions as a processual mode of storytelling. The narrative metaphor is a possibility of making a story about oneself, facing the dilemma of dominant uses of discourse, that is, discourse and language are constructed culturally. Changing the way a person speaks is to change their way of thinking and acting, actively influencing their way of comprehending the world and their own context.

Lion and Vilela e Souza show that narrative therapy is not a technique, but a philosophical-therapeutic stance, grounded in relational ethics and semiotic awareness. By recognizing that narratives do not describe reality but create viable worlds, narrative therapy expands human possibilities for identity, belonging, and action. Thus, the therapeutic process becomes a collaborative authorship project, guided not by diagnosis but by imagination, interpretation, and meaning-making.

4.2 RE-AUTHORSHIP: FANFICTION WRITING PRACTICE, INS AND OUTS

Fanfiction studies have increasingly focused on the ways marginalized readers—particularly queer, trans, and otherwise non-normative subjects—mobilize fan writing as a space for identity work and representational repair. Contemporary scholarship demonstrates that fanfiction allows readers to challenge heteronormative and cisnormative constraints by reconfiguring relationships, bodies, and narrative

possibilities. This was built from foundational analyses of participatory culture mostly by Henry Jenkins⁴, researcher of various aspects of media and popular culture (Jenkins, 1992). Furthermore, the following studies selected will expose how fanfiction is not merely a derivative literary form; it operates as an interdisciplinary critical site for exploring queer discourse, communal and subjective meaning-making, trauma recovery, and the imaginative reconstruction of self.

The proliferation of digital fan communities has opened avenues for reader response, identity experimentation, and queer world-building that exceed conventional literary consumption. Historically, queer readers have had to develop alternative interpretive strategies to navigate narratives that excluded, erased, or pathologized their identities. Jennifer Duggan⁵, Professor and researcher of the Department of Languages and Literature at University of South-Eastern Norway from Canada, explains that queer readers had to develop ways to allow them to see the subtextual “queer-ness” of texts, mobilizing interpretative practices that exceed authorial intent and expose dormant narrative possibilities, in light that queer topics were for a long time (and still are) avoided as taboo (Duggan, 2022). This interpretive work situates readers in a dynamic relationship with literature, recognizing that textual meaning is inseparable from cultural context and the layered, shifting identities that respond to dominant social norms either from within, at the margins, or in critical resistance. Thus, meaning emerges not simply from the text’s semantic structures but from the intersectional positionality of its readers, who locate queer affect and identity potentiality in narrative gaps, ambiguities, and silences. Under this view, literary interpretation becomes an active, fluid process, rather than a passive reception aligned with authorial authority. Literature, according to Duggan as she quotes Maria Nikolajeva, was long instrumentalized to socialize, educate, and oppress specific social groups, and simultaneously it contains the capacity to subvert its own oppressive function, evidencing fissures where dominant and established power structures and institutions can be resisted and reimaged (Duggan, 2022).

Fanfiction, particularly slash⁶ and queer-oriented production, has emerged as a productive site where marginalized subjects reclaim narrative authority. Catherine

⁴ To see more of Jenkins current work you can visit <https://henryjenkins.org/aboutme.html>.

⁵ For more information on Duggan’s academic work see: <https://www.usn.no/english/about/contact-us/employees/jennifer-duggan>

⁶ It is not relevant to dismember what is slash fanfiction to this monograph. If needed, see <https://www.angelfire.com/falcon/moonbeam/terms.html#S>

Tosenberger⁷, Associate Professor at the University of Winnipeg, wrote in 2008 the article “Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts: Harry Potter Slash Fanfiction”, where she demonstrates how Harry Potter fanfiction functions as both an interpretive and creative insurgency against heteronormative canon and norms, revealing that queer reading is not synonymous with distortion or misinterpretation, but arises organically from textual gaps, silences, tensions, and symbolic ambiguities. The accusation that such readings are inherently “distorting and/or misreading” fails to acknowledge the historical erasure of queer subjectivity in mainstream content such as literature. As Tosenberger defends, queer readings are not external impositions, but emergences of critical engagements with narrative polysemy, aligning with Iser’s premise, as she quotes, that “the production of the meaning of literary texts [...] also entails the possibility that we may [re]formulate ourselves” (Iser, 1972, p. 299 *apud* Tosenberger, 2008). Reading, writing, and rewriting thus become practices of subjectivization, where identity is not merely reflected but constructed, negotiated, and transfigured. When queer fans appropriate narrative structures to produce alternative forms of belonging, they showcase how imaginative practice becomes a mode of counter-narrative knowledge-making. The fictional world’s expandable architecture exemplifies the principle that identity categories are neither fixed nor biologically inevitable but narratively constructed and open to revision.

Online fan spaces have historically attracted subjects who diverge from dominant cultural norms. As multiple scholars point out, fan communities have proven to be particularly attractive to those who feel marginalized by hegemonic culture, and fan cultures have been linked to those who are odd, weird, deviant, and marginal of the dominant narratives of hegemonic cultures. Within these communities, transformative works—particularly queer, trans, and gender-expansive narratives—reconfigure textual boundaries, revealing that boundaries and limits of texts and canon are not fixed and static, rather, they are infinitely expandable. This resonates with Jenkins’ assertion that fans form “interpretive communities” that legitimate readings otherwise rejected by dominant and mainstream culture (Jenkins, 1992).

The pseudonymous and identity-bending nature of digital platforms is especially relevant for young queer and trans participants. As Tosenberger notes, such

⁷ For more information on the current position and research interests of Tosenberger, see: <https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/english/faculty-and-staff/catherine-tosenberger.html>

environments create a measure of concealment, a safe space, which proves especially valuable for people who fear the consequences of expressing other than normative and dominant desires and experiences in their real lives. Therefore, fanfiction spaces operate as para-clinical, para-pedagogical zones where disclosure does not require real-life risk, offering what might be conceptualized as scaffolded self-experimentation. These textual arenas allow users to be unusual, weird, strange, embarrassing, overly sexy, and to explore sexualities that can be exuberant, joyful, messy, and even violent, without the mediating force of real-world surveillance, shame, or retaliation. This capacity positions fanfiction as a counter-hegemonic psychosocial playground, in which desire, embodiment, gender, and affect may be tested, stretched, disassembled, and recombined.

This resonates strongly with Brianna Dym⁸ and collaborators' analysis of online queer community participation in "Coming Out Okay: Community Narratives for LGBTQ Identity Recovery Work". The authors argue that "online communities offer a place to recover, [and] explore their identity" (Dym *et al.*, 2019, p. 154:2), functioning through narratives that combine individual disclosure with collective meaning-making. Participation frequently includes paratextual commentary such as disclaimers and author's notes, facilitating meta-reflection and consent-based signaling. In addition, psychologists have demonstrated that expressive writing has measurable benefits for physical health and subjective well-being, and fosters longevity within support communities, illustrating the therapeutic and regulatory dimensions of narrative participation (Dym *et al.*, 2019). Dym and her colleagues, drawing from Judith Herman's trauma recovery model, note how online narrative communities assist in the stages of establishing safety, reconstructing personal story, and restoring social connections, thus operationalizing narrative creation as clinical-adjacent identity repair. They found that queer participants used online fanfiction communities to build protective distance from hostile environments, process identity through personal or narrative disclosure, and then re-enter social worlds with strengthened agency. A participant's testimony states: "I could be as gay as I wanted and no one batted an eye" (Dym *et al.*, 2019, p. 154), indicating how fanfiction works simultaneously at

⁸ Dym is an Assistant Teaching Professor at The Roux Institute, her research can be accessed on <https://briannadym.com/>.

personal and communal registers, functioning as both narrative experimentation and collective holding environment.

This is particularly significant because queer and trans individuals frequently encounter hostile environments where “harmful stereotypes in media add to the challenge of facing hostile or intolerant environments in reality” (Dym *et al.*, 2019, p. 154:4). When institutional, familial, or educational spaces deny support or representation, digital fandom becomes a substitute site of care, reflection, and validation. Through reading and writing practices, participants engage in “forming, repairing, maintaining, or strengthening their identities,” a process that Herminia Ibarra differentiates as identity work rather than identity play, though in fanfiction contexts both modalities intertwine (Ibarra; Petriglieri, 2010 *apud* Dym *et al.*, 2019). These processes respond directly to trauma-linked experiences—helplessness, social isolation, and the loss of agency—reframing narrative production as a reparative act that restores agency by reshaping meaning and positioning.

Diana Floegel⁹’s work, “‘Write the story you want to read’: world-queering through slash fanfiction creation”, conceptualizes this creative engagement as “world-queering”, a process whereby fans rewrite and reorganize narrative universes to reflect queer epistemologies and information practices (Floegel, 2020), which I consider an essential aspect of fanfiction writing, especially for this research. This process goes beyond adding queer characters or relationships; it entails reconstructing ontological, social, and ethical frameworks that govern fictional spaces. A crucial aspect identified by Brianna Dym and collaborators is the relationship between personal narrative and community narrative (Dym *et al.*, 2019). While individual fanfiction texts may articulate personal distress, desire, or confusion, they become part of a broader discursive ecology through comment systems, author’s notes, beta-reading, and shared tropes. The interactive components of fanfiction platforms thereby constitute what Floegel terms “validating interpretive loops,” in which readers affirm interpretive legitimacy through feedback structures (Floegel, 2020).

Charlie Ledbetter’s discussion of anti-oppression, erotic, escapism, trauma, and political dysphoria underscores the radical potential of fanfiction as affective and political praxis (Ledbetter, 2020). His essay “The dysphoric body politic, or Seizing the

⁹ Diana Floegel is a part-time faculty of the School of Communication and Information Rutgers-New Brunswick. More information about the School and its courses can be accessed on <https://comminfo.rutgers.edu/>.

means of imagination” explores how genres such as darkfic—narratives involving disturbing content, including violence—can paradoxically serve as escape, not by romanticizing harm, but by naming it, contextualizing it, and situating it within controllable narrative structures. As Ledbetter states, “the experience of naming my trauma and having it acknowledged in fiction gives me a sense of consistency and therefore relief” (Ledbetter, 2020, [6.2]). The possibility of being universally validated within community spaces contrasts, but also counteracts, the erasures of mainstream media, which “consistently fails to meet our expectations or reflect our realities.” (Ledbetter, 2020, [7.10]). In this regard, affective exchange is not incidental but structural: comments, kudos, and forum discussions are forms of social attunement that transform expressive writing into communal witnessing. Rather than pathologizing dark content, such readers and writers recognize narrative exploration of pain as a legitimate form of affective processing within a collective interpretive frame. Through such engagements, fanfiction not only produces emotional catharsis but also becomes a site of political imagination, enabling subjects to acknowledge and destabilize categorizations and hegemonic/dominant narratives, to revel in the subversive, carnivalesque polyphony these ruptures permit them to create.

If literature can oppress, it can also liberate—and fanfiction demonstrates how readers seize the means of imagination, turning consumption into production, and marginalization into narrative agency. The carnivalesque, polyphonic, and subversive modes enacted by queer fan communities destabilize hegemonic categorization, refusing taxonomies that confine identity and textuality to fixed forms. Bodies, identities, and desires become textual laboratories where experimentation explores limits, reconfigures possibility, and resists epistemic closure. In such spaces, alternative worlds are not merely represented—they are lived, rehearsed, and collectively held. They can be body experimentation, feeling the body and its limits through text; possibilities for interrogation, solidification, resistance, destabilization and reconfiguration of dominant narratives and knowledge of the self.

Furthermore, from an epistemological viewpoint, queer fandoms challenge the premise that literary meaning is a stable object delivered by authors to readers. Iser’s assertion that textual meaning entails the possibility of “formulating ourselves” situates reading as an act of subject formation rather than consumption (Iser, 1972, p. 299). Queer fan communities amplify this potential by moving from interpretation to

production, from reading to world-making, thereby enacting collective authorship as an emancipatory practice.

As seen in these reviewed studies and essays, queer fanfiction exemplifies how marginalized readers and writers transform canonical texts into queer imaginative spaces capable of producing identity meaning, community belonging, and epistemic resistance. Far from being trivial, deviant, or escapist, these practices constitute a concrete form of cultural participation that revises literary authority, reconfigures narrative embodiment, and enables queer world-building that contests normative and dominant narratives. Through safety, anonymity, collective authorship, and imaginative insurgency, fanfiction becomes not merely a genre of narratives and storytelling but a mode of queer survival, relational knowledge, and ongoing speculative liberation. Fanfiction texts open a safe space for people to be unusual, weird, strange, embarrassing, overly sexy, or whatever they want to be. A space where sexualities can be exuberant, joyful, messy, instead of repressing, closed, and hateful, without the limitation of other's sensibilities and comfort levels. It's a space of intellectual stimulation and exposure to discourses outside of culturally mandated/dominant. It is also a space for exploration that people do not necessarily want to go through in real life.

4.3 RE-MEMBERING: COMBINING PRACTICES, INTERSECTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

This subsection will explore the findings and main discussions of three texts chosen due to their interdisciplinary approach. Two of these texts were already mentioned at the Methodology section because they were the only two studies I could find on online databases regarding the intersection of narrative therapy and fanfiction writing. The third chosen text is "Merely Telling Stories? Narrative and Knowledge in the Human Sciences", by Martin Kreiswirth, which is part of a bigger interdisciplinary research project entitled "Narrative between the Disciplines". This essay stretches and questions the bivalency of narratives and fields of knowledge that claim truths, looking more carefully at who tells, what is told, and who is told to.

Although emerging from distinct disciplinary locations—therapeutic fan studies, clinical play therapy, and narratology—*Starship Therapise: Using Therapeutic Fanfiction to Rewrite Your Life* (particularly chapter 12, "Now What? Living in a Rewritten Story", *Using Superheroes and Villains in Counseling and Play Therapy: A*

Guide for Mental Health Professionals (specifically chapter 17, “Beyond Canon”), and Mark Kreiswirth’s article “Merely Telling Stories?” converge around a central epistemological claim: human beings construct, inhabit, and transform identity through narrative, and stories are neither mere entertainment nor simple reflections of reality, but mechanisms through which meaning, agency, and relational belonging are negotiated. Each text articulates an understanding of narrative as a dynamic instrument, yet they differ in how they conceptualize authorship, transformation, and the ethical/affective stakes of narrative rewriting. Thus, while all texts understand narrative as a vehicle for meaning-making, Kreiswirth warns against naive procedural thinking, *Starship Therapise* embraces narrative rewriting as self-transformation, and “Beyond Canon” grounds narrative play in structured clinical intervention (Kreiswirth, 2000; Garski; Mastin, 2021; Rubin, 2019).

Briefly, I’ll list the two books that previously intersected narrative therapy and fanfiction, pointing out their objectives and how they were developed to share their ideas.

1. *Starship Therapise: Using Therapeutic Fanfiction to Rewrite Your Life*, published in 2021, was organized by Larisa A. Garski and Justine Mastin, psychotherapists who also host a podcast under the same title. The book shares the use of modern mythologies, that is, popular culture that holds attention and devotion from consumers, as a tool for improving connection between the person and their healing process, offering paths to growth and self-discovery with explorations of the triumphs and trials of heroes and heroines of these popular and modern mythologies, e. g. Marvel Comics, Star Wars, Supernatural, Star Trek, etc. The book is aimed for researchers as well as for clients, geeks looking for community connections hoping for better mental health and wellness in general, which is prompted by the book that offers exercises and suggests body practices alongside writing engagement with one's therapist.
2. *Using Superheroes and Villains in Counseling and Play Therapy: A Guide for Mental Health Professionals* edited by Lawrence Rubin and published in 2019, offers applications and insights for psychology clinicians to use superheroes and metaphors with patients of all ages. A particular detail of this book, that I considered relevant for selecting it for review, is the acknowledgment of issues

of race, gender, culture and ethnicity when approaching subjectivities of individuals during psychotherapy.

A central comparative motif across the three works is the question of canon versus possibility—who has the right to define meaning, and how narrative authority is constructed or resisted. *Starship Therapise* explicitly draws from fanfiction culture, where canon is neither fixed nor sacred but rather a shared point of departure. By encouraging clients to rewrite stories, characters, or worlds, the authors position fan engagement as legitimate psychological authorship capable of re-encoding power dynamics, trauma histories, and identity narratives. The therapeutic objective is not only interpretive but generative—clients may create endings unavailable to them in real life or mainstream culture. Canon is therefore a psychological boundary condition designed to be trespassed (Garski; Mastin, 2021).

“Beyond Canon”’s applicable theory invites clients to move past rigid canonical identity constructions and utilize superheroes as metaphors rather than prescriptions. However, the chapter emphasizes therapeutic containment, meaning that subversion is encouraged insofar as it supports developmental and emotional goals. While alternate versions of characters are acceptable, they are often treated as symbolic projective spaces that clinicians help regulate. Thus, alternative stories are authorized, but through professional facilitation, autonomous interpretive rebellion is not (Rubin, 2019).

Kreiwirth’s work provides a meta-critical lens to interpret both approaches. His analysis suggests that the meaning-making power of narrative—canonical or not—is contingent on interpretive communities, rhetorical framing, and discourse circulation (Kreiwirth, 2000). If canon is subverted, it is not merely a personal act but part of a cultural system where legitimacy depends on broader narrative domains. In other words, the therapeutic rewriting celebrated in *Starship Therapise* and cautiously operationalized in “Beyond Canon” must be understood not as isolated acts of self-determination but as discursively situated reinterpretations shaped by genre, expectation, and credibility.

Starship Therapise positions narrative rewriting—especially within fanfiction frameworks—as a therapeutic mechanism for emotional regulation, identity repair, and imaginative agency (Garski; Mastin, 2021). Chapter 12, “Now What? Living in a Rewritten Story,” argues that once a client or reader has constructed an alternative narrative through fan-based creative engagement, the subsequent task is to integrate

this imaginative possibility into lived practice. The focus thus shifts from story construction to story embodiment, proposing that narrative transformation acquires therapeutic value only when it produces observable changes in self-concept, interpersonal patterns, or decision-making processes. Within this model, fictional characters operate as protected symbolic vessels that enable the externalization of internal conflict and the exploration of affective states without requiring direct autobiographical disclosure. Identification becomes participatory rather than mimetic, blurring conventional boundaries between audience and author. The process therefore functions as imaginative rehearsal, enabling clients to experiment with alternative identity trajectories and ultimately to translate these counterfactual scenarios into real-world behavioural or relational shifts. Rewriting is conceptualized as an embodied narrative praxis rather than a purely representational exercise.

Using Superheroes and Villains in Counseling and Play Therapy similarly examines how superhero narratives function as regulatory and symbolic templates that clients may modify to express internal conflicts, moral dilemmas, and traumatic experiences (Rubin, 2019). While this approach likewise supports the therapeutic re-utilization and alteration of culturally shared narratives to facilitate psychological movement, it places stronger emphasis on symbolic distancing, developmental calibration, and the projection–transfer cycle, rather than on identity performance or fan-cultural authorship. Although it shares *Starship Therapise*'s reliance on identification processes, it is situated within a structured therapeutic play methodology in which superheroes and villains serve as metaphorical representations of internal parts, conflicts, or developmental tasks. In this framework, narrative rewriting becomes a form of regulated representational rehearsal, enacted through techniques such as story completion, figurine-based enactment, drawing, or role-play. Agency is reconstructed through metaphorical victory, re-contextualization, or alternative resolution, prioritizing emotional mastery and symbolic reorganization rather than autobiographical identity transformation.

Kreiwirth's "Merely Telling Stories?" provides a critical and theoretical counterpoint to both therapeutic models by challenging the reduction of narrative to an explanatory or inherently curative paradigm. While acknowledging the interdisciplinary influence of narrative theory, Kreiwirth critiques the popular assumption that storytelling naturally fosters coherence, insight, or healing. He contends that narrative is neither a universal interpretive resource nor an intrinsically emancipatory practice,

but a culturally and rhetorically mediated act shaped by discursive frameworks, ideological assumptions, and communal conventions. Consequently, neither telling nor rewriting a story necessarily guarantees therapeutic coherence, resolution, or empowerment; narrative can equally constrain, moralize, or reinforce normative identities (Kreishirth, 2000). Identification, therefore, cannot be presumed to function as an inherently therapeutic mechanism, but requires contextual mediation, interpretive accountability, and critical awareness. From this perspective, narrative rewriting may reproduce dominant discourses, idealized identity scripts, or compensatory illusions rather than addressing structural or relational complexities. Meaning-making must thus be understood as contingent and situated rather than universal or guaranteed, dependent upon interpretive legitimacy, discursive circulation, and cultural intelligibility rather than personal intention alone.

Therefore, therapeutic storytelling—whether through fanfiction, superhero play, or narrative analysis—must be recognized as an interdisciplinary operation that combines creative agency, psychological safety, cultural semiotics, and interpretive reflexivity. In sum, narrative rewriting holds transformative potential, but its efficacy depends upon acknowledging the complex ecosystem of meaning-production, where canon is not simply broken, characters are not simple mirrors, and stories are not merely vessels of truth but sites of negotiation between imagination, subjectivity, culture, and power.

What is most important for this research is that, through the narrative review presented here, the intersection between narrative therapy and fanfiction writing becomes more evident. Fanfiction writing holds a firm grip in queering the canon, finding gaps that can be reinterpreted and negotiated through its fictional fillings, unsettling and expanding restrictive dominant discourses that do not comprehend non-normative experiences and identities. Seeing that previous reviewed studies and some professional psychotherapy clinicians offer new paradigms and edges to blur, there is one more aspect that I would like to consider for this paper.

The writing process, if aimed at wellness, might be an individual practice as well, not only a therapy-guided process. Perhaps the coaching of a professional clinician is essential when the problem-issue holds the patient/client/individual at a particularly difficult stance, considering mental health aspects that, as a literary scholar, I cannot interfere nor judge how serious it may be. However, the writing practice could be parallel and/or paratextual to the psychotherapy processes.

Considering that many fanfictions address hard topics, e. g. as mentioned previously darkfics¹⁰ with elements of violence and assault, perhaps the writer/patient/client wants and needs to explore different aspects in writing while addressing other issues and experiences in their psychotherapy sessions. All writing is contextual, if it is coherent for them to write something hard and dark, then, let them do it. No one knows what goes on individually to others, not even one's therapist, because they have the context and background you offer, it passes through the same externalization process as writing does, the reader only has access to the context and background the writer shares in the text. And, overall, these fanfiction texts are not necessarily made available, much like the therapeutic documents created during narrative therapy processes they belong to that person and their intimacy, their limits and boundaries, only shared if willingly agreed to.

5 FINAL REMARKS

In bringing together narrative therapy and fanfiction studies, this monograph has shown that both fields share a profound commitment to the transformative potential of storytelling. From the therapeutic re-authoring practices outlined by White and Epston to the participatory, agentic forms of storytelling described by Jenkins and subsequent fan studies scholars, the analysis has shown that narrative can function simultaneously as method, medium, and site of identity negotiation. The convergence of these perspectives highlights how subjective meaning-making is not merely an interpretive act but a relational and imaginative process through which individuals test possibilities, renegotiate and reinterpret self-understandings, and articulate alternative narratives. As desiccated previously, the final understanding is that these intersections—between narrative therapy and fanfiction writing—are a field of possibilities of interpretation, re-imagination and getting back control over one's sense of self within the bigger plot, that is, life experience. Reconstructing storylines is a healthy approach to deal with identified problems and issues in real experience, and through writing practices these processes of reconstruction can be satisfactory and safe, without the risk of exposure and hegemonic judgement of character. This doesn't mean that online fan communities are free of judgment or prejudice, however, the therapeutic process is personal and individual, as it is the writing practice if a person is not connected to a fandom, or a therapist. Narrative may be mobilised as a clinical

¹⁰ <https://www.angelfire.com/falcon/moonbeam/terms.html#D>

or a self-transformative strategy when applied intentionally, ethically, and creatively. Therefore, narrative rewriting—or fanfiction writing as a therapeutic process—should be understood as a situated practice requiring methodological and sociocultural awareness, contextual grounding, and critical reflexivity.

As explored throughout the work, fan fictional creative writing offers readers and authors a fertile arena to challenge canonical constraints, explore marginalized identities, and construct emotionally resonant counter-narratives. These practices closely parallel narrative therapeutic strategies that emphasize externalization, replotting, and the deliberate shaping of authentic alternative stories. By situating fanfiction within a broader theoretical framework of narrative agency, it becomes possible to appreciate its value not only as a cultural phenomenon but also as a mode of psychosocial care grounded in imagination and community collaboration. This interdisciplinary approach has also underscored the ways readers and writers position themselves in relation to texts. Fanfiction practices—reframing characters, reinterpreting conflicts, queering established narratives—demonstrate how readers actively negotiate meaning in ways that align with their lived experiences, a dynamic that resonates with the therapeutic emphasis on individuals as authors of their own lives. Consequently, narrative becomes a shared terrain where personal, communal, and cultural narratives intersect, illustrating how stories can both mirror and reshape the conditions under which they are produced.

Ultimately, the findings of this monograph suggest that approaching fanfiction through the lens of narrative therapy opens productive pathways for understanding how people use stories to survive, repair, imagine, and belong. It reveals that creative engagement with fictional worlds can facilitate real-world shifts in self-perception, affect regulation, and identity consolidation. As such, the study contributes to ongoing conversations in both fields by demonstrating that fanfiction is not merely a derivative cultural practice, nor narrative therapy an isolated clinical technique, but that both are part of a broader human endeavor to make sense of experience through narrative (re)construction and transformation. The intersection of narrative therapy and fanfiction studies invites scholars, clinicians, and readers to recognize storytelling as a practice of possibility. Whether in therapeutic sessions or in digital fan communities, stories remain central tools through which individuals articulate what has been, envision what might be, and reclaim the imaginative agency necessary to inhabit more livable

narratives. This monograph therefore affirms storytelling not simply as an object of study but as a vital resource for personal and collective transformation.

Considering all the above, all theories and highlights presented in this monograph, I reinforce the notion that fanfiction writing can be a narrative therapy practice within itself. However, it does not mean that all fanfiction is a therapeutic document. Some texts are purely fiction, writing for pleasure and leisure. It is relevant to underscore that the writing process of narrative therapy, if aimed for personal healing and recovery, is advised to be conducted under the careful eyes of mental health professionals. Once a person decides to write by oneself, they must comprehend that particular process as an individual subjective meaning-making practice, and not an universal experience, not a universal truth.

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