

FANS LOVE IT A LATTE: THE RISE AND PARTICIPATORY NATURE OF COFFEE SHOP AUs

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“Explain it to me like I’m five,” wrote an anonymous poster on LiveJournal back in 2011. “Why are coffee shops so prevalent in mundane AUs? Why not bookstores or diners or banks or something?” (Anonymous). This six-year-old, discontinued thread remains surprisingly relevant to both Fandom and Media Studies, because it pinpoints a number of questions that remain unanswered in recent scholarship: What exactly is the Coffee Shop AU? Why have fans embraced this trope so extensively in their fan fiction? And, what might it tell us about modern participatory and convergence culture? Here I would like to begin answering these questions by drawing out some of the significant cultural links between authors and coffee shops, explore how some fans position Coffee Shop AUs as a tool for activism, and end with the recent call to make the trope more realistic, thereby changing how readers and authors alike participate in the creation of transformative texts.

If you frequent online communities that cater to fan fiction you will no doubt notice the prevalence of the Coffee Shop AU, or alternate universe, in which the canon characters of a fandom are taken out of their original environment and reimagined as

either running or frequenting a coffee shop. That is the only requirement of the trope, though there are dizzying number of possibilities here, drawing on Henry Jenkins’ concept of collective intelligence, where “communities are held together through mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge,” with the dispersed knowledge in this case coming together to form an entire trope (Jenkins 27). The fan fiction might, for example, feature a fandom’s cast trying to start up a coffee shop together, working through clashing personalities and interests. Perhaps one character is a student looking for a place to study, a homeless person in need of a warm reprieve, or an overworked businessman, pitted against their equally grumpy barista in an attempt to get their daily cup of Joe. Sometimes the characters must deal with a rival coffee shop opening up down the street, though often the surrounding area is more welcoming, such as interaction with the next door bakery that provides the shop with sweets every morning. Regardless of any outside conflict, each fan fiction focuses on the romance between two or more characters, exploring how the coffee shop itself plays a crucial role in developing their relationship.

Not much is known about the coffee shop AU's origins. Like many practices, jokes, and memes that originate online, the creators and perpetuators of this trope were likely unaware that it was becoming a convention worth tracking until much of the original material was already lost. The lack of historical information has become something of a running gag, epitomized by one Tumblr user's post asking, "But really, who was the first person to take two characters from a fandom and be like, 'Yeah, right, but get this; what if one of them is a *barista*,'" thus highlighting the seemingly inexplicable desire to take characters out of what are usually dynamic, action-packed environments and replace them in a—presumably—boring coffee shop (Radio-silents, emphasis original).

However, dedicated fans have *potentially* traced the trope back to "Café d l'Amore," an NSYNC fan fiction published either in or before 2001. Sadly, the author—who goes by NSyncGrrl—does not have all of her fan fiction archived, as she has turned a number of her stories, including this one, into original novels, and has explicitly asked readers not to re-post her work, saying, "There should be NO other archived versions of these stories posted. Doing so violates copyright" (NSyncGrrl). Questions regarding a fan fiction writer's legal rights aside, the result is that there appears to be no online copy of "Café d l'Amore" left. The re-imagined version of the story, which goes by the same name, is available through J. M. Snyder Press, NSyncGrrl's website, and it is well worth examining in its own right to determine the ways in which fan fiction does or does not adhere to mainstream

expectations regarding gay erotic fiction (Snyder). There is also much to be said about NSyncGrrl's remaining author's notes, based on Alexander Herzog's theories of how fans use their author's note to claim interpretive power over texts that they themselves are re-interpreting (Herzog). However, if this is indeed the first Coffee Shop AU, it is not a text that we are currently able to analyze in its original form.

There is, however, a wealth of other material to examine. Archive of Our Own (AO3), arguably the most popular fan fiction archive currently up and running, has nearly 9,000 stories catalogued under Coffee Shops and Cafes, while Fanfiction.net, the older of the two domains, has over 3,000 fics with "coffee shop" somewhere in their summary. These numbers also do not include inconsistent tagging, fan fictions like NSyncGrrl's that have been taken down for various reasons, purged accounts, and the range of websites that are not fan fiction specific, but nevertheless host stories, such as Wattpad, LiveJournal, and Tumblr. The coffee shop trope is now on par with other fan fiction traditions like first time stories, soul mates, and fix-it fictions, to the extent that many people claim you do not have a true fandom until someone has written a Coffee Shop AU for it. Even incredibly small fandoms like *Kill Six Billion Demons*, a relatively obscure fantasy comic, subscribe to this unspoken rule. The comic has only three fan fictions on AO3, one of which is, you guessed it, a Coffee Shop AU. In an acknowledgement of the trope's popularity author asterCash included the tags: "Alternate Universe - Coffee Shops &

Cafes, I mean really, it was obligatory” (Ys Aster).

The big question though is why this trope has become “obligatory.” Why does it resonate across such a large body of fan fiction authors and readers? How is this trope shaping expectations regarding what fan fiction is meant to provide or achieve, both in its own right and in comparison to mainstream works or other self-published content? And, how might we conceptualize “fandom” if we subscribe to the idea that the Coffee Shop AU is a required part of its definition?

The first thing we need to acknowledge is that the link between authors and coffee shops (or even just coffee in general) is quite old itself. Arabian, French, Italian, and English authors have written of the drink providing inspiration, energy, and—important for this discussion—acting as an aphrodisiac, with poets and novelists going so far as to equate the drink with their lovers and mistresses (Ukers). Within the last hundred years we have amassed a number of legends surrounding authors and their need for a caffeinated fix. We have heard about authors like Fitzgerald and Rankin visiting not just coffee shops, but also pubs and bars in order to get their daily word count in. Establishments like the Caffè Trieste in California helped Coppola write much of *The Godfather*, while the Antico Caffè Greco in Rome has boasted customers such as Keats, Lord Byron, and Hans Christian Anderson. J. K. Rowling famously composed much of *Harry Potter* in The Elephant House, Edinburgh, and Peter Altenberg, an Austrian poet, was so enamored with working in cafés that he had

his mail delivered to the Café Central, treating it like his home away from home. In the 1990s, popular sitcoms like *Friends* and *Frasier* helped to romanticize coffee shops as places to not only hang with friends, but also find romance, and in the twenty-first century it has become a staple of speculative television. From *Buffy*’s Espresso Pump, to the *Flash*’s Jitters, to *Smallville*’s Lana Lang running The Talon, more superhero teams and crime fighting duos are finding solace in homey cafés, treating them as a common ground between their world and the civilians’. Coffee shops have always been tied intimately to fiction, but they are tied even more closely to the writer herself. They are a part of our cultural understanding of what a writer is—or rather, what they are supposed to be.

Some of this association is practical. Coffee shops are relatively cheap spaces where, for the price of a drink and maybe a muffin, you can spend hours working in comfort, and the coffee itself helps to keep you awake and productive. The connection goes much deeper than practicality though, as coffee shops are said to have a creative vibe, an ambience, smell, a feeling that encompasses the creativity that writers are hoping to harness. There is also the effect of visibility. The need to look purposeful is often the catalyst to actual productivity and for many writers it is not enough just to write. Rather, we need others to *acknowledge* that writing, to have people, even strangers, observe us at work and witness our creativity (Gupta). As a *Family Guy* cutaway points out, “all real writers need to be seen writing, otherwise what’s the point, right?” (Kakde). This feeling has

increased manifold with the rise of Starbucks since it first opened in 1971. Beyond their *Moby Dick* inspired name—which, according to the official website, “evokes the romance of the high seas and the seafaring tradition of the early coffee traders”—Starbucks has quickly become, in their own words, a place “to chat, meet up, or even work. We’re a neighborhood gathering place, a part of the daily routine” (Starbucks). This is particularly true of authors who, with more than 24,000 locations to choose from, now have plenty of spaces to gather and commune. The fact that Starbucks itself lists “even work” as the third, last-ditch option re-emphasizes that coffee shops are supposedly spaces geared toward casual interaction or romance, rather than solitary endeavors. It is this expectation that fan fiction writers are exploring in their work.

Thus, when you read a Coffee Shop AU, there is a wonderful sense of possibility. The shop itself acts as a liminal space, poised somewhere between the public and the private, an environment that is obviously a place of business, yet is designed to mimic the comfort of home. A coffee shop appeals to all types of people, and thus it feels like anyone could walk through that door, regardless of factors that might normally separate us, such as our jobs or everyday hobbies. In short, the coffee shop provides endless possibilities for character interactions, a generic yet customizable space. Fans capitalize on this, using possibility as an explanation for how art student Steve Rogers could possibly strike up a conversation with billionaire genius Tony Stark, how a hardened Wall Street

businessman like Mr. Gold might meet and fall for an average barista like Belle French, or even how a previously historical figure like Alexander Hamilton builds relationships with people high above his station. To quote one fan fiction summary: There’s a million drinks he hasn’t made, but just you wait! (Fihli).

Given the wide range of possible interactions, you are unlikely to find a nuclear family in a Coffee Shop AU. These stories cater to queer men and women, those who chose so-called dead end careers, who prefer work over kids, who are barely scraping by on a customer service salary, who find themselves tending the shop late in life with no other prospects ahead of them, the duos working around age-gaps, the groups who falls into polyamorous relationships, or the non-binary characters who bravely display pronouns on their nametags. What is significant is that all of this exists within the environment described earlier; one that feels domestic yet is still very much a public space. It is a fantasy for any non-conforming individual, particularly the young adult, that we can exist freely as we are in comfort and safety, yet still make that existence into a form of activism by broadcasting it in a space as public as a coffee shop. It is no coincidence that the most popular Coffee Shop AUs develop out of spectacular fandoms, worlds like Marvel’s *The Avengers*, Isayama’s *Attack on Titan*, MTV’s *Teen Wolf*, and DreamWorks’ *Voltron: Legendary Defender* that are chock full of excitement and drama. Taking those characters and re-imagining them in a calm, domestic space emphasizes that queer people do not exist merely to die in the fray

or sacrifice themselves for loved ones, epitomized by the Bury Your Gays trope that is seen in shows like *The 100* and *Orange Is the New Black*. Or, worse, Aus counteract the idea that we should not exist at all, as we have seen these last few weeks with the cancellation of diverse shows like *The Get Down* and *Sense8*. The Coffee Shop AU is a trope largely built around the question, What if these kinds of people were allowed to just exist and be happy?

Thus, though there are conflicts within these fics, usually revolving around not if, but *how* the two main protagonists will end up together, the trope as a whole provides, as one fan puts it, “almost unrivaled opportunities for schmoop” an older term used to describe a particularly sweet scenario, often viewed as a further escalation of fluff (Schmoop). Like any form of escapism, these AUs take all of the best parts of a scenario while eliminating the worst. In a Coffee Shop AU, no woman has her work interrupted by solicitation from an unwanted man, but she may very well be approached by the cute, female barista. When a man asks another man for his number after receiving his drink, there is no hint of homophobia, rather, the whole shop is secretly cheering them on. One fan writes, “Come on, who doesn’t want their OTP [One True Pairing] to saunter in, stare moodily over the espresso machine, catching your eye, smile their thousand-watt smile, and gently brush fingers as they take their cup from you? Liars, that’s who” (Anon_a_mouse). This slow, tender, languid description is exactly what fans are looking for in a Coffee Shop AU, only multiplied by a couple thousand words. And, of course, all

Coffee Shop AUs have happy endings, solidifying that such security is not only possible, but also enduring. It is a particular blend of innocent comfort and romance, what Camille Bacon-Smith categorizes as “naughty boys [who] occasionally scrape their knees and need someone to set them on their feet again—juxtaposing sexuality and childishness” (Bacon-Smith). This emphasis on romantic comfort with a predictable ending might seem boring when compared to the original canon, but such stories for minorities are actually viewed as a deviation from the norm, a twist on the expected angst or death. This focus also allows writers to demonstrate their analytical skills, showcasing a firm understanding of a character’s core personality traits. As with most AUs, those populating the coffee shop need to be both recognizable as their canonical counterpart, yet also distinct, given that they have grown up in an entirely new environment. Can we view Steve Rogers serving the American public coffee as some kind of heroic service, equal to his work in the war? Or can Regina Mills from *Once Upon a Time* still be called The Evil Queen, but now because of her horrible service, not any power hungry plan? The point is that fans make their work persuasive by finding a balance between the old and the new—what readers have come to expect vs. what they might be willing to entertain—and then use that influence to lend credence to *all* aspects of their story, including any new features of the character’s identity, be it sexuality, race, disability, or anything else.

That is partly what the Coffee Shop AU is, but it is important to note that there is a change underway. Evolving out of all this

has been the recent call for more “realistic” fan fictions, with fans providing real-life experiences as prompts, tips on how to write “authentic” coffee shop scenarios, and even rants on how they are sick of seeing these “fake coffee shop AUs” that “aren’t rooted in reality” (Off Brand Barista). These posts cover everything from cute encounters that could be turned into fan fictions—such as a secret message on one person’s coffee cup saying, “Careful, you’re extremely hot” —to rants about how coffee shops are actually one of the most stressful establishments to work in. This move towards realism reflects readers’ desire, particularly young adults, to enhance the escapist aspects of the trope by crafting a true element of authenticity, to more thoroughly bridge the gap between story and real life experience. Not only that, but this realism provides a new way for readers and writers of fic to participate in the transformation of texts. It is no longer enough to just alter the commercial canon, to insist that a character is queer or that a certain relationship is viable. In the age of the internet where readers can easily communicate with fan fiction writers and even edit public works themselves, there is an increased expectation that participatory works should cater to individual tastes. As the Coffee Shop AU sustains its popularity and continues to provide readers with an idealistic view of both romantic relationships and outsiders’ responses to such public displays, there is a growing desire to bring these fan fictions even closer to reality. What if the Coffee Shop AU accurately reflected the awful nature of customer service while still remaining optimistic? Or showed a particular

individual how their cute scenario might have played out if they had had the courage to speak up like a character in a fan fiction might? The closer the Coffee Shop AU comes to reflecting real life while still remaining open to diverse characterization, the more of an effect it will have on convincing readers that these stories might actually come true.

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