IDENTITY AND BELIEF

An Analysis of the Otherkin Subculture

Stephanie C. Shea

Dr. Marco Pasi (supervisor)
Dr. Carolina Ivanescu (second reader)
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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary society is presently saturated with imagery of the marvelous fantastic, seen in popular culture and various forms of media. We are surrounded on a daily basis by films, books, television series, and advertising that emphasize spectacular narratives and fabulous effects. Technology allows us to play with, and alter images of our environment and of ourselves, not only for pleasure, but also for other purposes, such as politics. This ‘flip side’ of modern life often leaves us asking what is ‘real’ and what is ‘fake’, leaving us to try to find our footing in an unstable, complex world. Simply watching or listening to the daily news can leave us feeling baffled and somewhat alienated. The Internet has provided us with social media outlets that profess to connect us all, no matter our location. Yet the so-called ‘Facebook syndrome’, where people attempt to create an image of success and happiness, leads to unrealistic perceptions and comparisons to others at an attempt to ‘fit in’ with their social circle. We want to belong, to matter. While there has always been an ‘other’ in human societies, either as the result of discrimination, or by those who opt to push against the status quo, our modern society has also seen the formation of a subculture that is quite bewildering to those outside of it. There are people who, while recognizing they have a human body, do not feel they are completely human. These people are the Otherkin.\(^1\) The other-than-human identification can be expressed as countless types and combinations: dragons, centaurs, or any type of mythical being; any type of extinct or extant animal type; plant forms; non-corporeal forms; alien entities; androids or cyborgs – the list can go on and on. While some may prefer to prematurely dismiss this group as being nonsensical or fantasy-prone (or in other words, a product of the ‘fantastic’ popular culture mentioned above), a closer examination of this group reveals something much deeper at play.

Anthropologist Devin Proctor, who has studied Otherkin for the past five years,\(^2\) finds that this group is “suspended between the observable limits of the physical human body and the subjectivity of personal experience.”\(^3\) They must reconcile this experience with those same laws that govern their understanding of the larger world.”\(^4\) Proctor suggests that Otherkin are perhaps assisting us in the realization that our bodies are “not so bounded and pragmatic as we have come to believe.”\(^4\) He argues that Otherkin are “at odds” with the “Cartesian mind/body dualism on which the West bases

\(^1\) Otherkin can be used as an umbrella term to denote all other-than-human identities, but also to denote those people who identify as mythical beings. This thesis will use the term in the umbrella sense unless otherwise noted. See also the Glossary of Terms for more information about the Otherkin lexicon.

\(^2\) Proctor, “Policing the Fluff,” 491.

\(^3\) Ibid., 490-491.

much of its understanding on what it means to be human.” Due to this issue, Otherkin look to the Internet as a safe space (although it did not “invent” Otherkin) where they can gather. Proctor estimates that Otherkin “make up a group of at least 5,000 people.” Shane states that the online network “affords Otherkin opportunities to play their way into new ontologies where play refers to an earnest experiment on one’s self in pursuit of personal revelation and growth,” yet notes that within the community, there is “no formal hierarchy, rites, structure, or demands of fealty.” The unifying factor that Otherkin share is their identity as other-than-human, something that is seen as being innate and not chosen. Identities are shared through the telling of the personal story of ‘Awakening’, i.e., the realization process that a person is not human but ‘something or someone else.’ As Jensen states, “narratives are crucial in individual self-understanding and social integration.” Otherkin narratives “generate new concepts that emancipate us from ossified habits of thought.” These narratives are extremely diverse; as a result, Otherkin as a subculture do not easily fit into neat categories or systems. This thesis will attempt to help shift our thinking ‘outside of the box.’

As Otherkin constitutes a relatively small group of people, it has not received considerable attention from academia. However, the subculture has been discussed by a handful of Religious Studies researchers. Those who have written about Otherkin mainly portray this sub-culture as a type of spirituality or religion, largely influenced by popular culture and concepts such as occulture, as a way to categorize Otherkin as a potential alternate spirituality and/or New Religious Movement. However, my own research data shows that this group is so diverse and complex that it fails to consistently adhere to the definitions of ‘a spirituality’ or ‘a religion’ (as put forth by Hanegraaff, for example), or a ‘fiction-based religion’ (as put forth by Davidsen).

In order to gain understanding of this problem, this thesis will examine the existing academic literature in order to ascertain the scholarly claims being made about the Otherkin; compare this information with my own research data (compiled over the past four years); and address the inconsistencies that arise from this process. Furthermore, an alternative method of study will be

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5 Proctor, “Policing the Fluff,” 492.
6 Proctor, “Cybernetic animism,” 228.
7 Proctor, “Policing the Fluff,” 488-489. Proctor’s “interlocutors” have suggested that the number could be as many at 10,000; Proctor does admit that this number is difficult to determine, due to worldwide population numbers as well as those who do not communicate in English. The various groups I frequent have members/followers ranging from several hundred to over two thousand.
8 Shane, “Some People Aren’t People on the Inside,” 265-266.
presented here, with case studies (taken from my research) provided as illustration and support of the proposed methods.

Chapter One will offer a brief history of other-than-human identities. The Otherkin ‘phenomena’ is located in contemporary culture, but ‘beliefs’ about other-than-human identities can also be found in history. As Otherkin origins stem from the pre-Internet Elven, Vampire and Werewolf communities, I will highlight some scholarly discussions surrounding these non-human entities taken from history, in order to show that alternate beliefs about other-than-human entities and ‘reality’ have been present for centuries. Examples of Otherkin that correspond to each sub-type that offer current ‘expressions’ will be dispersed throughout the chapter.

Chapter Two will provide an overview of the discussions given by the four main scholars (within Religious Studies) who have written about Otherkin (Kirby, Robertson, Laycock, and Davidsen). For example, it is argued that Otherkin make use of, or are influenced by notions such as occulture (“rejected,” “oppositional beliefs” from “subcultural” belief systems); fictional sources in popular culture; shamanistic techniques and practices; Gennep’s rites de passage (as a type of initiation); Turner’s ‘liminality’ (as being in-between categories of human and nonhuman); and Berger’s concept of the nomos (a “meaningful world order” established by a community). While each author makes their own statements, several of the concepts overlap in the discussions.

Chapter Three offers a discussion of four problematic areas found in the literature; these pertain to the definitions used to categorize Otherkin, the concepts used that do not correspond to my own research data, the use of research methods, and my conclusion that Otherkin falls outside of the proposed categories. It is in this chapter that I present my critique of the inconsistencies found while analyzing the academic literature, and my conclusion that Otherkin do not adhere to the explanations presented in the literature.

Chapter Four will offer an emic response by providing data taken from survey results generously provided by two Otherkin researchers. It will also address the dissonance found in three additional academic discussions in more detail. These discussions concern the ‘Awakening’ process of Otherkin, the importance of community for the Otherkin, and notions of choice and/or conversion. I provide my own research data in this discussion to support my arguments.

Chapter Five offers a discussion of alternate methodologies, taken from qualitative psychological research methods, as a means to find a new way in which to study Otherkin, with a brief explanation

12 Laycock, “We Are Spirits of Another Sort,” 66.
of the methods I use, that include: Smith and Osborn's Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; Strauss and Corbin's Grounded Theory; and Narrative Psychology, with theories taken from McAdam's Life-Story interviews, and Schachter's identity configurations. This chapter also discusses the influence of the Internet (including role-playing games) on identity formation. Case studies taken from my research are used to illustrate and support the proposed theories and methods. The goal of this chapter is to show the importance of narrative as it relates to the diversity of Otherkin types.

Lastly, Chapter Six places the information discussed in Chapters Four and Five into a larger societal context. It will address three areas relevant to the Otherkin: the popular attitudes surrounding identity, how fiction influences perceptions of reality, and the tension between human and other-than-human boundaries that has been supported by monotheistic religion and Enlightenment thinking. Otherkin are seen as challenging rigid, normative ideas surrounding what it means to be a person.
CHAPTER ONE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF OTHER-TAN-HUMAN IDENTITES

When examining the history of the Otherkin and the beginnings of this subculture, one finds connections to older concepts such as elves, vampires, and werewolves, as Otherkin Orion Scribner has documented in his ‘Otherkin Timeline’ from 2010. According to his research, the concept of Otherkin began in the early 1970s, developing out of the earlier-established Elven communities (namely the Elf Queen’s Daughters and the Silver Elves) that grew out of the American counter-culture movement of the 1960s and 70s (the Elven groups were located in Illinois, Ohio, Oregon, Minnesota, Florida, Washington, with both eventually settling in California). People who identified as Elves or other non-human entities were called ‘otherkin’ (after ‘otherkind’) at this time. The early 1970s also saw the rise of the ‘real’ Vampire subculture, that was inspired by literary and Pagan sources, as well as the ‘occult’ group The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Werewolves and wolves, as well as dragons and great cats, began to appear in the early 1990s. Many of the other-than-human beings one encounters in the contemporary Otherkin community are presumed to have their origins in myths, folklore, fairy tales, plays, and literature of the far past. While this community can be considered a subculture, and the beliefs of this group could be considered ‘fringe’, beliefs in other-than-human beings are not remarkable or unusual when one examines historical sources. This chapter discusses several sources, taken from archeology and anthropology, philosophy, literary history, linguistics, and the history of religions, that examine the historical and cultural ideas surrounding animal-human relationships, as well as the three main groups of elves, werewolves, and vampires that inspired and informed the development of the Otherkin community. While it is not intended to be exhaustive, it will show that beliefs about non-human entities were present throughout different eras of time, and were not considered out-of-the-

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13 Scribner is a long-time member (more than 10 years) of the Otherkin community and functions as one of their main historians. His ‘Timeline’ has been referenced by Otherkin and academics alike. He identifies as a dragon. His previous moniker was Orion Sandstorm; many of the authors in this thesis cite his work under this former name. He posted online about his name change on September 8, 2012. See https://frameacloud.com/


16 Ibid, 5.

17 Laycock, “We Are Spirits of Another Sort,” 71 and “Real Vampires as a Identity Group,” 15.

ordinary. Each sub-section will also briefly include contemporary examples of Otherkin identities, taken from my research data, that reflect and support the ideas presented from the various authors.

1.1. Animal-Human Identities

According to Lindstrøm, diverse archaeological and anthropological reports taken from different periods and cultures show abundant examples of the ways in which humans experienced a “merging of identities” with animals, as well as animals having human-like identities being assigned to them.\(^{19}\) In many “hunter-gatherer contexts, certain animals were, [...] regarded as different kinds of ‘people’, with personhood and identity, transcending the species barrier, and having individuality.”\(^{20}\) “Hybrid” human-animal beings were seen as possessing the special, “admirable characteristics” of various animals, such as lions or stags, and therefore also “higher cognitive functions.”\(^{21}\) These hybrids “represented the idea and belief that people and animals could merge physiologically and psychologically.”\(^{22}\) This can be seen in artifacts such as the ‘Löwenmensch’/lion-person statue and the ‘Sorcerer of Trois-Frêres’ cave art, found in Ariège, France.

\(\text{Fig. 1: Sorcerer of Trois-Frêres. Image source: https://fineartamerica.com/featured/sorcerer-trois-freres-granger.html.}\)

\(^{19}\) Lindstrøm, “I am the Walrus,” 151-152.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 156-157,
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 160, Emphasis original.
A second representation at Trois-Frères shows a being with a bison head, “dancing with outstretched hands.”23 Upper Palaeolithic figures of half-human, half-animal beings are not understood as wearing masks.24 This “merging” suggests a “flexible, fluid, and versatile” essence to human nature that allows for change, not only in the mind, but also in the body.25 Lindstrøm argues that this merging with animals acts as a “common denominator” when attempting to understand the meanings of different phenomena (whether it be found at burial sites, in caves, or with man-made artifacts), and that the observation of similarities between people’s behaviors across time are not so much a result of “cultural transmission” but more because of the “species-specific characteristics of animals” themselves.26

Various studies have investigated “the role of humans as part of the animal world,” stating that humans perhaps regarded their “prey as kin,” on an equal status as human hunters,27 and as such, it was “necessary to establish good relations” with them.28 “Mobiliary art” (i.e., portable, small objects) offers insights into relationships, such as animals having significance other than a food source, or being seen as persons that “inhabit different bodies.” According to Antl-Weiser, “[w]e can be rather sure that people reflected on the abilities and qualities of animals and compared some of these qualities with their own.”29

One Otherkin with whom I have interacted during my research could be seen to bolster the ideas of merging and hybridity as purported by Lindstrøm. “J” (51 years old) identifies as a hybrid being consisting of a great cat and a human-like being with wings.30 As he is of Native American Kiowa and Comanche descent, he states having no difficulty interpreting his identity due to having memories of his former life as this being since around age three, as well as family members who have guided him along his spiritual ‘path’. The belief that Otherkin or Therians31 can be a human being in their physical form but have an animal/hybrid ‘mind’ or soul is not difficult for Otherkin to accept, thereby supporting Lindstrøm’s argument of a flexible and fluid human nature. Otherkin do not claim to be

23 Antl-Weiser, “Beyond hides and bones,” 63. Similar images can be found in Le Gabillou.
25 Lindstrøm, “I am the Walrus,” 164.
26 Ibid., 164, 167.
27 Antl-Weiser, “Beyond hides and bones,” 63.
28 Ibid., 51-52, referring to studies made by Hussain and Floss (2015), Ingold (1194), and McNiven (2010).
29 Ibid., 58, 66.
30 This being is called a Ptero-ailuranthrope by “J”. Information obtained via a short-term research project in April 2018, with follow-up information provided in April, 2019.
able to physically shift into an animal, or morph into a hybrid human-animal being in their present lifetime, but completely accept the idea of a former life as a hybrid or as an animal. They also claim to have memories of the former life, as well as physical feelings and sensations of being the animal or hybrid (such as sensing/feeling fangs, claws, horns, tails, wings, etc.). This could also support the arguments of animals having identity similar to that of human beings.

Fig. 2: This figure is an ailuranthrope creature taken from the Final Fantasy X video game, called ‘Kimahri Ronso’, and somewhat resembles “J”’s ‘kintype’ (i.e., the Otherkin type). "J" explains that his type has no horn, and the wings are much larger (longer than the body), covered in fur, with an unfurled wingspan of thirty-four feet. His kintype stands at six feet, ten inches. Image source: https://myfigurecollection.net/picture/142670&ref=item:2092. Figure manufactured by the Kotobukiya company of Japan in 2002.

Animal-human identities, based in history, can also be seen in ancient Greece, with the philosopher Diogenes of Sinope. As the founder of Cynicism, and with nickname “Cynic” (meaning ‘doglike’), Diogenes offered a radical view of humans relationship with nature and society. What is interesting for this thesis is that he was referred to as a dog, and accepted this title, going so far to eat raw meat and behaving as a dog in public, and also comparing himself to other breeds of dogs. While there are not many facts of his life available, and his literary activity is also somewhat contested, what remains is an unconventional man who, although a poor exile, challenged Greek ideas about taboos

and also praised nature as offering morally superior insights than those of societal customs or philosophical schools.\textsuperscript{35}

1.2. Elves

Historical references to elves appear in the European Nordic literary epics of the \textit{Prose Edda} and the \textit{Poetic Edda}, were elves are referred to as \textit{álf}.\textsuperscript{36} Elves were also associated with the \textit{Æsir}, i.e., the Norse pantheon of gods\textsuperscript{37} Hall’s discussion of a late-10\textsuperscript{th}/early-11\textsuperscript{th} century Anglo-Saxon medical text known as \textit{Wið færstice}, notes how elves, or the \textit{ælfe}, are frequently mentioned as a threat to humans by spreading diseases through their “magical arrows” of “flying venom,” or “elf-shot.” Hall notes in his book how this attribution is actually inaccurate, and that it is “never attested in medieval English.”\textsuperscript{38} He comes to this conclusion through an examination of “comparative linguistic material” found in “medieval Germanic cognates of \textit{ælf} and other pertinent Old English words,” as well as narrative material found in medieval Norse, Irish, French, English and Scots, otherwise known as medieval north-western Europe. This narrative material “helped to determine” the meaning of \textit{ælf}, including cultural meanings of the word; it also helped to “reconstruct Anglo-Saxon beliefs”. Referencing Berger and Luckmann, Hall notes that “language influences how people communicate their thoughts and so how communities construct shared realities.” He argues that characteristics of supernatural beings can be “constructed through language”, and that by studying that evidence, one views “reflections of beliefs” as well as “media of beliefs.”\textsuperscript{39}

Hall’s initial premise is that the \textit{ælfe} were a “social reality” (after Berger and Luckmann) in Anglo-Saxon world-views, not an objective one like things perceived in the physical sphere, but seen as existing much in the same way Christians believe that God exists. This “social reality” should not be regarded as fantasy, as it is not something easily dismissed.\textsuperscript{40} However, the evidence Hall found in his research suggests that the \textit{ælfe} should not be exclusively placed in an “extrasensorial world,” but also in the corporeal, physical one. He finds that scholars have aimed to discriminate between “real” and “supernatural” entities, “when the lexical and literary evidence militates against this division.”\textsuperscript{41} For example, Old English evidence shows that the \textit{ælfe} were essentially akin to the Irish \textit{díes side} (fairies

\textsuperscript{35} Branham, “Diogenes of Sinope,” 1.
\textsuperscript{36} Kirby, \textit{Fantasy and Belief}, 73.
\textsuperscript{37} Griffiths, “Believing in Fictional Beings,” 137-138.
\textsuperscript{38} Hall, \textit{Elves in Anglo-Saxon England}, 1,3, 6-7, 173.
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Ibid.}, 14-15.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.}, 9.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Ibid.}, 170.
and/or elves), and there is ample literary documentation that shows that the Irish believed in these beings as 'otherworldly' yet having real effects in the physical world.\textsuperscript{42}

Hall's study shows that the importance and relevance of the Ælfe continued even after conversion to Christianity. In essence, his work suggests that while the idea of 'elf-shot' is not found in medieval English, the Ælfe were attributed to causing illness, but for a purpose.\textsuperscript{43} The evidence provided in his book exhibits that "early Anglo-Saxon Ælfe were human-like, as they remained in many varieties of belief for over a thousand years." Additionally, there seems to have been a distinct difference between the Ælfe and monsters that threatened humans: Ælfe were "fundamentally aligned" with humans, even though they were considered "otherworldly" and were later considered to be linked to demons after conversion to Christianity (the word elf was used in the Royal Prayerbook of ca. 800 CE as a synonym for Satan). Middle English, Old Irish, and medieval Scandinavian narratives link the Ælfe with "human-like, non-monstrous,"\textsuperscript{44} yet dangerously powerful, androgynous "otherworldly beings" that only dispense diseases on humans who "transgress[ed] certain societal norms." While monsters are dangerous to all humans, Hall's interpretation is that the Ælfe "exert their threats to maintain society."\textsuperscript{45}

Later Danish legends from the late 19th century about elves were associated with religious beliefs and myths.\textsuperscript{46} Alternatively, the "epic poem cycle Haugtussa – A Story" (1895) by Norse writer Arne Garborg explored the questions of what is real and what is imaginary in the context of tales involving humans and elves. It was left to the audience to decide if the tales were real or fiction.\textsuperscript{47} The incident of the "Cottingley Fairy photographs" in 1920 involving Arthur Conan Doyle (the British author of Sherlock Holmes) was also an opportunity for people to speculate about the existence of 'real' fairies, with Conan Doyle (along with his mother) believing in the authenticity of the fairy photographs.\textsuperscript{48}

One finds many of the features mentioned above in contemporary elven groups. For example, the Silver Elves, mentioned above, are still highly active on the Internet, with Facebook groups, blogs, and published (print) books as well. The Silver Elves claim to be the Eldar race\textsuperscript{49}, who were the first

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 172.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 173.
\textsuperscript{44} The Ælfe were also seen, according to Hall's research, as being androgynous beings that transgressed gender stereotypes. Chapters 6 and 7 of Hall's book discuss this in more detail.
\textsuperscript{45} Hall, Elves in Anglo-Saxon England, 174-175. Cf. Johannsen, "On elves and freethinkers," 599, for discussion about the moral guidelines that folk tales about elves provided in 18th and 19th century Europe.
\textsuperscript{46} Johannsen, "On elves and freethinkers," 599-600.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 592, 602-603.
\textsuperscript{48} Homer and Introvigne, "The Recoming of the Fairies," 59, 70-74.
\textsuperscript{49} Although this reference has strong ties to the work of J.R.R. Tolkien, the Silver Elves speak also in terms of being the "second root race" or the Hyberboreans, and having strong ties to the lore of Lemuria and Atlantis.
people on Earth. The contemporary group explains that its founding members were “awakened and became part of the Elf Queen’s Daughters [EQD] in 1975.” Silver Elves assert that while they are not a religion, they are a “shamanistic faith” that uses magic to “change and affect their lives and the world around them without worshiping, praying to, or propitiating deities,” and refer to J.G. Frazer’s discussion about magic in *The Golden Bough* in this context. They state that it is their task to help inspire humanity’s evolution for their own good and for that of the planet, which the Elves consider to be a potentially sacred place. While I have not encountered any Elves who claim to harm humans by bringing disease or illness, most Elves are very concerned about the vitality of nature and the planet, and therefore they are also vocal about the dangers of pollution and abuse of the Earth’s natural resources caused by human beings.

Regarding the question of heritage, the Silver Elves acknowledge that they can be included as a part of the larger category of Fae, and recognize Fairies as being from a “different tribe” that are nevertheless related to them. This includes the Tuatha Dé Danann, whom the Celts perceived as a “supernatural powerful people.” The Silver Elves assert that the Norse were closer in spirit to the Elves, and the Celts closer to the Tuatha Dé Danann, but in essence, they both belong to the realm of Faerie, and humans can have both Elven and Fairy reincarnated souls. Regarding genetic heritage, the Silver Elves state that while a bloodline exists, it is not necessary for one to have this DNA in order to ‘be’ an Elf. In my past research, I have communicated with a woman who claims to be a descendant of the Tuatha Dé Danann, more specifically of the Sihde and early Milesians (Irish) ancestry. This Fae (presently 45 years old), traces her heritage both maternally and paternally, considers herself to be a physical Fae being.

While I have not stumbled upon any reference to Helena Blavatsky or the Theosophical Society, this explanation does seem to suggest that it was taken from literature inspired by Theosophical ideas. See https://rialian.com/elysilvr.htm for the references. All Silver Elves sites cited here were accessed on April 8, 2019.

50 http://silverelves.angelfire.com/.
52 https://silverelves.wordpress.com/2017/06/03/what-will-happen-to-the-elven-kin-if-humanity-destroys-itself/.
57 See Glossary of Terms.
1.3. Werewolves

Stories about werewolves are found in numerous sources across a vast timespan, with examples found in many ancient Greek and Roman tales, such as the character of Lycaon in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, extending to French *lais* and English literature in the twelfth century. Werewolves in this period were believed to be real, and were included in the Catholic Church’s doctrine of demonology. During the medieval period, efforts were made to maintain the “animal-human boundary” set forth by Church doctrine. Later, with the “revival” of the character of Satan in the 16th century, werewolves were often burned alongside witches. Sprenger and Kramer, authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Witches Hammer, 1486) “declared the transformation of man into wolf impossible,” but they did believe that witches could cause another to believe they had been transformed into a wolf.” Alleged ‘werewolves’ were also accused and tried in a similar fashion to witches.

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59 Mullin, “Mirrors and Windows,” 204.
60 Nelson, *Gothicka*, 117, including note 1, page 294. Interestingly, Hall’s book about Elves discusses the strong possibility that elves and fairies were also included as early medieval sources for “supernatural harm” along with witches and werewolves. He argues that they were “under-represented” simply due to the fact that they could not be arrested and tried. See Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, 173.
Shyovitz has devoted an interesting article to the beliefs of Jews and Christians during what has been defined as the 12th century “werewolf renaissance.” He observes how scholars have largely “ignored the monstrous and fantastic creatures that appear throughout medieval Jewish […] texts.” He focuses on the writings of the German Jewish Pietists (the Hasidei Ashkenaz/Hasidim), a group of “speculative theologians” and moralists who lived in the Rhineland during the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Their literature contains many references to werewolves that shows their familiarity with the folklore of the area. In their “lycanthropic theology,” werewolves were considered to be human beings whose bodies, although abnormal, could be remedied and made equal to ‘normal’ humans. However, this condition was not seen as being separated from God, because the person still retains their humanity and only outwardly transforms.

Shyovitz suggests that the idea about werewolves may have come from Christian theologians. Augustine (354-430), who discusses “humans who transform into animals,” although he attributes this to demonic acts, considering the belief in lycanthropy to be sinful. Yet, during the 12th and 13th centuries there was a “brief resurgence of widespread interest in lycanthropy,” where werewolves were seen in literature of the high medieval period as heroic figures.

Welsh cleric Giraldus Cambrensis, otherwise known as Gerald of Wales (1146-1223), wrote extensively about werewolves in his *Topographia Hibernica* (ca. 1187). One of his tales recounted an account of Irish werewolves being shown as human beings covered in a wolf skin, and therefore still fundamentally human. It was Gerald’s assertion that werewolves were a miraculous matter, governed by God, in the same manner as the Incarnation of Christ. In his endeavor to validate and legitimize his belief that werewolves exist, Gerald argued that the “transformation” of werewolves was ordained by the power of God, in the same manner as the Incarnation, as well as “the celebration of the Eucharist” (where bread and wine are transformed into the body of Christ). God’s power, Gerald claimed, allows him to change one thing into something else, at any time he so desires. Shyovitz asserts that this “belief in werewolves provided a means of conceptualizing the ability of things to retain their identity in the face of apparently complete change,” whether in terms of

64 Ibid., 523.
65 Ibid., 526, 528, 532. For example, the Hasidim held the belief that Benjamin (youngest son of Jacob and founder of the Israelite Tribe of Benjamin) was a werewolf. See Genesis 44:22 and 49:27 for the specific references to Benjamin turning into a wolf when he was separated from his father.
66 Ibid., 533-535.
67 Panxhi, “Rewriting the Werewolf,” 22.
68 Ibid., 34-35, 37.
lycanthropy or in terms of transubstantiation. Although Gerald did not live in the region of the German Hasidim, evidence shows a wide circulation of Gerald’s writings in northern Europe, thus making it possible that the German Hasidim could have read his work.

Other tales from later Jewish lore tell of a “rabbi who became a werewolf, as well as a famous one about the young Baal Shem Tov defeating an evil sorcerer (actually Satan) who had transformed himself into a werewolf.” In a modern context, Gordon discusses the tale of “The Werewolf” (1908) in his discussion about “Martin Buber’s interpretation of Hasidism.” Buber uses the character of the werewolf as a parable for educational purposes in order to help people “comprehend the frightful sufferings human beings undergo, [...] that can transform some into hostile ‘werewolves.’”

With regard to the aforementioned ‘werewolf renaissance’ and the protagonist role that werewolves acquired, one also sees this reflected in modern ideas about werewolves, and how popular fiction in the early 20th century positively modified the nature of the werewolf. For example, werewolves were increasingly depicted as being stable, self-confident, with the animal and human natures successfully integrated, along with a connection to the natural world. Chantal Bourgault du Coudray mentions the contemporary online “spiritual therianthropy” origins in 1992 from a Usenet newsgroup called ‘alt.horror.werewolves’ that originally was formed to discuss films and books but quickly attracted individuals who claimed to be werewolves and shapeshifters. Also mentioned is how the term “spirituality” is used to explain how the two natures of wolf and human, or the hybrid identity, is seen as “webbed” in a postmodern, subjective manner, with talk of one body with many souls that can reside in it. This differs from Gerald’s tales of human bodies being enveloped in a wolf form, but does reflect the dual nature of werewolves and the ability to retain one’s identity even if the outer form appears different in a similar fashion to Gerald’s work and the views of the German Hasidim.

Wolf identities, otherwise known as wolf Therians, are abundant in the greater Otherkin community. While the term ‘Otherkin’ is used in this thesis in an umbrella sense, including all other-

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70 Ibid., 539.
71 Ibid., 542.
72 Schwartz, “Jewish Tales of the Supernatural,” 341, 348. Baal Shem Tov, or Israel ben Eliezer (1698-1760), was the founder of Hasidic Judaism in Eastern Europe.
75 Ibid., 67-68.
than-human types found within the community, many Therians seem to use the terms ‘therianthrope’ or ‘Therian’ to distinguish themselves from other members or kintypes. One Therian research participant, “C” (21 years old), identifies as an Eurasian wolf, and also a nature spirit – what those in the community would deem a ‘polykin’, i.e., two or more identities in one human body. Their Awakening as a wolf occurred around age twelve or thirteen. A second Awakening (for the nature spirit) occurred around age fifteen or sixteen. As “C’s” upbringing was atheistic, they had no religion, belief system, or even a philosophy to refer to when trying to understand their experiences. “C” speaks of being confronted with existential-type questions about their identity and their place in the world, and how this catapulted them into learning more about concepts such as reincarnation, as well as Witchcraft and Neo-Paganism. Their Awakening has led them to changes in their lifestyle and worldview, for example, with regard to nature conservation and animal welfare, that reflects Bourgault du Coudray’s above discussion of feeling a connection to nature.

1.4. Vampires

Of all the groups discussed in this chapter, Vampires seem to be the most popular in terms of studies and materials written about them, and the largest in terms of areas of study. Original tales from the Balkans and Eastern Europe did not include blood drinking. However, references to ‘vampiric’ activity, in terms of being named such, or the blood-drinking activities associated with Vampires, did

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Additional information: 
76 Additionally, “C” identifies as non-binary, and uses gender-neutral pronouns, such as the singular ‘they’, ‘their’, and ‘them’. My use of these pronouns when referring to “C” is deliberate and done so out of respect to “C”. Information obtained during a short-term research project in May 2018. See also Glossary of Terms.
not appear in Western Europe until the late 16th century, with accounts of revenants climbing out of graves to attack family members beginning in Southeastern Europe.\footnote{Nelson, \textit{Gothicka}, 117-118. \textit{Cf.} Bahna, “Explaining Vampirism,” 286.}

Blood-drinking occurred in five notable incidents between 1672-1732. The Catholic Church during this time period staunchly believed in vampires and called for destroying them by burning. Incidents in Serbia led to an investigation in 1732 by the Austrian military surgeon Johann Flückinger and two other military doctors, J.H. Siegel and Johann Friedrich Baumgarten. Their report, \textit{Visum et Repertum}, otherwise known as the Flückinger report, concluded that vampires were a reality.\footnote{Introvigne, “Antoine Faivre,” 597-601. \textit{Cf.} Nelson, \textit{Gothicka}, 118, 295, fn. 4.} It also highlighted the contrast of belief about vampires between Western Europe’s Catholic Austria and the Orthodoxy of Serbia and Eastern Europe.\footnote{Melton and Aleiss, “Vampires and Alternative Religions,” 3.} The Flückinger report led to great interest among scholars, and a widespread European debate in 1732. Within a year, around twenty books and articles were published in Germany. The debates lasted until 1775, with varying reasons proposed for the cause of vampirism; among these causes were poison, plague, drugs (such as opium), but also magic, demons, and witches. An esoteric explanation was that humans had three souls (astral, sensitive, and rational), and that the astral soul (or astral body), when lingering in the body after death, could be mistaken for a vampire.\footnote{Introvigne, “Antoine Faivre,” 601-604.} The rise in the interest of vampires seems to coincide with the “simultaneous decline of the belief in witches in the early 18th century.”\footnote{Nelson, \textit{Gothicka}, 118-119.}

Dom Augustin Calmet (1672-1757), who did not believe in vampires, although he did play “the role of a believer and helped many demonologists […] to argue that vampires did indeed exist,”\footnote{Introvigne, “Satanism Scares and Vampirism,” 8.} published his \textit{Dissertations sur les apparitions} in 1746.\footnote{\textit{Cf.} Melton, \textit{The Vampire Book}, 119-120.} Calmet “explored various possibilities” concerning the accounts of (the causes of) vampirism, “and left open the medieval position that the bodies of suspected vampires were animated by the devil,” but finally “concluded that vampires did not exist.”\footnote{Nelson, \textit{Gothicka}, 294-295, fn. 3.} His \textit{Dissertations} was “an important source-book” for various accounts of vampirism in Western European countries.\footnote{\textit{Cf.} Melton, \textit{The Vampire Book}, 119 -120.} Empress Maria Theresa of Austria corresponded with Calmet before deciding to put a halt to vampire exhumations and burnings by publishing her Decree on Vampires in March 1775, as well as condemning the belief in vampirism to be “superstition and fraud.”\footnote{Introvigne, “Antoine Faivre,” 599-600. \textit{Cf.} Melton, \textit{The Vampire Book}, 120.} In 1749, Pope Benedict XIV declared vampires to be “fallacious fictions of human fantasy;” in 1774, a
treatise called *Dissertazione sopra i vampiri* by Archbishop Davanzati\(^8^8\) was published that solidified Rome’s position against the reality of vampires. Interestingly, Introvigne notes that these figures were “not Enlightenment rationalists” but believers in Catholic doctrine who felt the acceptance of vampirism could lead to dangerous esoteric theories about the astral body that was absent from Catholic theology, as well as a threat to the concept of Purgatory (where the souls of the dead resided). Belief in vampirism flourished in countries where Orthodox and Protestant theologies were more abundant, although the beliefs surrounding vampires also declined in these areas until the 18\(^{\text{th}}\) century, when they returned on a larger scale via means of poetry, prose, and theater.\(^8^9\) However, the argument of Satanism was used in the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century France to explain why vampires could exist, by purporting that vampires are not corpses, but criminal living human beings who kill and drink blood because they are part of a vast Satanic conspiracy. New medical literature of the time described a condition called ‘clinical vampirism’, and this led to later theories by 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century psychiatrists of “Renfield’s Syndrome,” a condition whereby one suffers from a compulsion to drink blood, whether their own, from animals or from other humans, and that this compulsion is linked to a strong sexual aspect.\(^9^0\) In this, we can see how the ‘religious’ explanations shifted to a secular one, with vampires being seen as human beings who suffer from an abnormal compulsion that requires medical treatment.

Returning to the literary aspects of the vampire, Nelson notes important changes in perception about vampires in 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century fiction with the author Anne Rice: the vampire villain that becomes an antihero, and transitions from an undead being to an immortal one. Additionally, vampires in Rice’s mythos are no longer a part of the Christian “matrix” but have their own supernatural origins linked to Egyptian gods and goddesses that are incarnated on Earth. Other authors, such as Laurel K. Hamilton and Charlaine Harris\(^9^1\) have written series about vampires who live in regular society alongside human beings, with an array of other ‘supernatural’ beings (which means, of course, that they are not outside of nature anymore, and therefore not technically ‘supernatural’). These vampire characters become heroic characters as well. The 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century also saw the appearance of pseudo-scholarly material surrounding vampires, thereby “blurring the boundary between fiction and reality” even more. Fans began to identify more closely with the lifestyle, which raises the question, “what is reality?” It would seem that it is more a matter of “personal gnosis” that an individual

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\(^8^8\) Melton, *The Vampire Book, 119*. Davanzati was archbishop of Trani, Italy.

\(^8^9\) Introvigne, “Antoine Faivre,” 608-610.

\(^9^0\) Introvigne, “Satanism Scares and Vampirism,” 2, 10-11.

\(^9^1\) Harris’s book series was made into the successful HBO series, *True Blood*, that also portrayed a fairy-human hybrid as the main character, as well as werewolves, witches, and various mythological beings.
Laycock notes that Vampires “disagree as to whether real vampirism is supernatural in nature or a naturally occurring phenomenon.”

An example of a ‘real’ Vampire from my research is “K”, who identifies as a physical Vampire, being born as an elemental, sanguine, and psi/psy Vampire. Other family members also identify as vampires. While “K” knew as a child of her vampire nature, she states that she often “felt confused and lost,” with a strong sense of melancholy and loneliness; her life has been a journey of learning, evolving, and becoming a “better and wiser” person. She is a laboratory scientist and an omnist, believing in all religions. However, vampirism is not a religion to her, as it is who she is, not something she chooses to ‘believe in.’ “K’s” experiences differ from the traditional ideas about the nature of Vampires, and are more in line with the Elves/Fae who believe they are a different race of beings, or are of a mixed heritage with humans. However, in keeping with the traditional lore of the causes of vampirism, “K” does note that she keeps herself somewhat isolated due to people approaching her in the past, requesting to be ‘turned’ into a vampire. ‘Real’ Vampires do not adhere to this idea, stating instead that a real Vampire must have the “potential” within him/herself, as it is not something that can be given or transferred.

The brief discussions presented in this chapter demonstrate that ideas about animal-human hybridity, elves, werewolves, and vampires have been present for a very long time, and that this need not be seen as deviant or abnormal for contemporary people to have similar ideas. In fact, the ideas discussed above attest to the widespread belief of many different groups in many countries. What is apparent, however, is that this material reflects how human beings are attempting to understand these other-than-human identities in relation to their own communities or societies, whether by religious explanations or secular ones; with the exception of Diogenes, who was an alleged nonhuman attempting to teach human society lessons about nature, morals, and a better way of life. A shift in

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92 Nelson, Gothicka, 125-125, 129-132.
94 These vampire types are defined as follows: “Elemental vampires are vampires that are able to feed on the life force energies of the elements; earth, wind, fire, and water. Sanguine vampires (or sanguinarians) are vampires who feed by drinking blood. However, it is not the blood itself that they are feeding on. It is the life-force energy contained within the blood. Psi (or psy) vampires are vampires that feed psychically on life force energies.” See www.lesvampires.org/real.html for more detailed information.
95 This is in line with the principles found in The Psychic Vampire Codex, by Michele Belanger, one of the founding people in the contemporary Vampire culture. See “Section I: Awakening and Recognition.”
96 Laycock also notes that ‘vampires generally agree that one cannot ‘choose’ whether or not to become a vampire.” Laycock, “Vampirism,” forthcoming in: E. Asprem (ed.) Dictionary of Contemporary Esotericism.
97 See also Keyworth, “The Socio-Religious Beliefs and Nature of the Contemporary Vampire Subculture.”
98 All information about “K” was received during a short-term research project in April 2018.
perception within popular culture (from negative to positive) can also be noted with werewolves and vampires. Chapter Two will continue the discussion on Otherkin by presenting an academic overview of the existing literature, and how scholars attempt to explain the other-than-human subculture.

Fig. 5: An example of a ‘real’ Vampire: Father Sebastiaan, considered by many to be a founding father of the contemporary Vampire (sub)culture. Image source: https://www.amazon.com/Father-Sebastiaan/e/B004FIFENG?ref=dbs_p_pbk_r00_abau_000000.

Fig. 6: Promotional poster for Season 3 of the HBO series, True Blood, that includes vampire, werewolf, fairy, and shapeshifting beings. https://www.hbo.com/true-blood/season-03.
CHAPTER TWO: OVERVIEW OF THE ACADEMIC LITERATURE ON OTHERKIN

In this thesis I further develop the analysis presented in my Bachelor’s thesis of 2017, in which I delineated an extensive overview and comparison of etic academic discussions regarding Otherkin and the emic Otherkin narratives with regards to ontologies and lexicon of the Otherkin community. This thesis will now provide a more detailed overview of the main arguments taken from academic explanations of Otherkin and the Otherkin community (some of which I presented in my Bachelor’s thesis), as well as a brief overview of Markus Davidsen’s concept of fiction-based religions that he applies to the Otherkin community.

2.1. Main Scholars and Definitions of Otherkin

As the topic of Otherkin is still relatively new, only a handful of Religious Studies scholars have written on the subject. The three main definitions of Otherkin come from Danielle Kirby, Venetia Robertson (regarding Therians), and Joseph Laycock, and are listed here, respectively:

... a loosely affiliated group of likeminded individuals who have formed a virtual online community. Their shared belief is that some people are, either partially or completely, non-human.101

...humans who sees [sic] themselves on some psychological and/or spiritual level as non-human animals; in essence, they have an animal-human identity.102 [...] Therians are persons who feel such a profound connection with a non-human animal that they feel this animal is an integral part of their identity.103

...they usually self-define as individuals who believe they are not completely human. Normally, individuals do not convert to become Otherkin but rather discover they always were one. In this sense, being an Otherkin is an essentialist identity.104

100 Others who have written ‘general’ articles about Otherkin, such as Carole Cusack, Sean O’Callaghan, and Jay Johnston, have all heavily based their work on the three main authors discussed here, and will therefore be omitted from this section. Cusack also mentions Markus Davidsen, who will be discussed later in this chapter. Other unpublished, non-peer-reviewed papers written by (graduate) students will not be used in this thesis. Additional authors that discuss psychological methods, and ideas related to digital technologies will be discussed in Chapter Five and Six.  
101 Kirby, Fantasy and Belief, 40.  
103 Robertson, “The Beast Within,” 8.  
104 Laycock, “We Are Spirits of Another Sort,” 68.
Kirby has written the most about Otherkin, and primarily focuses on an investigation of influences that have contributed to the formation of the Otherkin community in her work. She emphasizes that Otherkin beliefs are a response to, as well as a creation of “the late modern Western world;” that the Internet has changed the reach, manner of interaction, and speed at which Otherkin can find each other; that the subculture is “a product of, and oriented towards, the realities and lived experience of contemporary Western life,” and that this expression is not “fundamentally consumerist in nature.” Kirby notes as well that the Otherkin online community is lacking in a “unified creed or dogma,” and that it has no “formalised authority structures.” She does mention that identity construction occurs online, but places it in a context of “personal metaphysical or spiritual inquiry.”

With regards to identity construction, Kirby notes that this can take a variety of forms, but she focuses mainly on non-human souls in a human body that generally occurs by the act of reincarnation, or those few who claim to be physically (genetically) non-human. In any case she writes, “the sense of the non-human self, in whatever particular manifestation it may take, provides both the foundation and the impetus for the community.” This appears as a “sprawling network of individuals, interconnected in a variety of ways,” although “offline” gatherings can also occur at times. According to Kirby, Otherkin rely heavily on fictional media for their inspiration, and believe to “some degree” that this fictional content is ‘real’. She compares this interaction with and inspiration from fiction and fantasy narratives to groups such as The Church of All Worlds or ‘Jedis’ from Jediism.

Robertson, in her 2012 article about Therianthropy, notes the importance of the Internet as a virtual space where “implicit modes of initiation and rites of passage can be envisaged.” Following Arnold van Gennep’s methodology of “separation, transition, and reincorporation” that occurs during rites de passage, Robertson argues that Therians who attempt to enter the online community experience similar types of rejection and acceptance. A potential Therian must negotiate between his or her individual viewpoints and the guidelines of the community, and choose whether or not they will accept these rules and become a part of the in-group. Robertson equates the Awakening process with a “self-initiation period” that leads to the rite of passage into the Therian community. While she does recognize that the community has no hierarchy, she does argue that it is the “communal

105 Kirby, Fantasy and Belief, 1-3.
107 Kirby, Fantasy and Belief, 40.
108 Ibid., 41-42.
110 Ibid., 257-258.
consensus” that determines the criteria for inclusion or exclusion for this “loosely affiliated” “socio-spiritual identity group.”

Robertson’s 2013 article centers around the “anthrozoomorphic identity” of Therians as “shape-shifters” and discusses ideas surrounding this concept, related to liminality and postmodern concepts of human identity such as “flux” and “fragmentation”. The concept of ‘Furries’ are discussed as an example of a postmodern identity construction; these are people who fans of anthropomorphic animals (called ‘Furry Fandom’) who enjoy dressing up in full-body costumes of their favorite animal character, or creating artwork of said character. Neo-Shamanism is also mentioned as a type of shape-shifting identity practice. (More will be said about these two topics later in this thesis.)

Laycock’s introduction into the Otherkin community was a result of his research into ‘real’ Vampires. He states that Otherkin, like the Vampire community, can also be defined as “an acephalous identity group” that has connections to occult practices. Like Kirby and Robertson, he locates Otherkin interaction mainly online, and notes that Otherkin “express a need for community, despite their apparent individualist orientation.” Laycock offers several options for framing the group, one being Bainbridge and Stark’s “audience cult, a movement that supports novel beliefs and practices but without a discernable organization.” However, Laycock’s preferred frame is taken from Peter Berger’s concept of the nomos, or socially constructed worldview, in which Otherkin find meaning for their identities. He claims that these social and existential functions are ultimately religious in nature, even though he acknowledges that Otherkin do not view their identity as inherently religious, or as an “Otherkinism.”

While this preliminary outline is relatively ‘neutral’ in its tone, all three authors go on to describe and argue various religious, spiritual, and metaphysical influences and dimensions of Otherkin identities and their community. The next section will address these matters in more detail.

111 Ibid., 256, 270, 276.
113 Laycock, “Real Vampires as an Identity Group,” 16. Laycock was allowed access to a large-scale Vampire survey conducted by Suscitatio Enterprises, an LLC created by the members of the Atlanta Vampire Alliance. This survey contained responses from people claiming to be Otherkin.
114 Laycock, We Are Spirits of Another Sort,” 79.
115 Ibid., 73.
116 Ibid., 66, 79-80.
117 Ibid., 72.
2.2. **Religion, Spirituality, or 'Something Else'?**

One of the first questions that is asked when approaching the topic of Otherkin is usually whether or not this a new kind of religion or spirituality. When examining the available literature regarding Otherkin, it becomes apparent that the authors focus on particular concepts such as *occulture*, and fantasy fiction, but all slightly differ in their interpretation about how these influences manifest themselves in the Otherkin community. This section will highlight the main standpoints of the above-mentioned authors, as well as the more recent contribution from Markus Davidsen regarding Otherkin and his concept of *fiction-based religion*.

Kirby offers the most exhaustive discussion about the different influences that could be at play with regards to Otherkin. She notes that the group “is situated upon the nexus of metaphysical inquiry, fantasy narrative, digital communications and popular culture” that creates a type of “religious and spiritual milieu” that supports a “personalized spirituality.”¹¹⁸ When attempting to locate Otherkin in the field of religion, she notes the complexity of the group and how it eludes a concrete explanation due to its diversity. Nevertheless, she does find that Otherkin can “fall under the rubric of religion” if one views religion in a substantive manner, in that it “upholds the focus on ‘the sacred, the supernatural or the superempirical’; as opposed to a functionalist manner, that ‘prioritizes religion in its social/communal role.’”¹¹⁹ However, she notes that while the behavior of the group may be considered ‘religious’, this does not imply it *is only* a religion, and refers to Hanegraaff’s distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’. ‘Spirituality’, as Kirby argues it, involves individual choice, and that it is something that everyone can ‘create’ for their own interests or purposes. This distinction will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter (as I suggest that Kirby has misunderstood Hanegraaff’s intent), but it suffices at the moment to say that Kirby argues a dual-nature of the behavior of Otherkin, and that it is therefore possible to place the group in both spheres.¹²⁰ Looking further, Kirby reflects on the classifications of new religious movements (NRMs) and alternative religion. While NRMs can be seen as denoting an “outsider status in relation to mainstream culture” that can be “contentious,” alternative spiritualities can be seen as including notions of re-enchantment and secularization (referring to Max Weber’s ‘disenchantment of the world’) that many people seemingly desire as they deal with the challenges of Western modernity. Kirby finds that the term “alternative spirituality” is more suitable when examining the Otherkin community, arguing that this term includes the notion of re-enchantment plus “the myriad of beliefs and practices that

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¹¹⁸ Kirby, *Fantasy and Belief*, 4.
are currently being engaged with, but that fall outside the traditional rubric of [...] ‘churched’ religion, while still maintaining a space between the former and the latter.”

According to Kirby, alternative spirituality includes Christopher Partridge’s notion of *occulture*, that is “the current manifestation of [Colin Campbell’s] *cultic milieu*, existing within a context of a lessened general perception of deviancy from the broader culture, holding a more widespread appeal, and shorn of its emphasis upon mystical associations.” Occulture, according to Partridge, involves “often hidden, rejected and oppositional beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism, and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices.” This can also pertain to concepts such as ‘occultism’ and ‘magic’; in sum, Kirby describes the broader terms as such:

*Magic is a set of practices attempting to engage the unknown, intangible and the superempirical; occultism is the modern set of knowledges from which the various forms of magic derive; and esotericism is the stream of thought that has contained these, and many more themes, from the Renaissance and earlier times.*

Two other factors that are related to the ideas found within occulture are secularization and consumption. In brief, Kirby relies on Hanegraaff’s definition of secularization as the result of Christianity’s loss of central power within Western culture, wherein Christianity became one of many institutions from which one can choose. Furthermore, if one looks at the effects of privatization, one finds that when looking at religion or spiritualities, this influence has led to a consumerist, individualistic attitude among religious seekers. Yet Kirby does not qualify Otherkin as being consumers per se, as this would imply that Otherkin receive “products or services;” additionally, the experiences and practices of Otherkin are not “commodified objects.”

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121 *Ibid.,* 11-12.
122 Campbell’s definition of the *cultic milieu*: “it includes all deviant belief systems and their associated practices. Unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion, deviant medicine, all comprise elements of such an underground. [...] Substantively, it includes the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure.” See Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,” 14.
123 Kirby, *Fantasy and Belief*, 19.
125 Kirby, *Fantasy and Belief*, 21. Kirby includes the notions of theosophy and mysticism within the broader notion of esotericism, after Favire and Hanegraaff, that also includes New Age, and (neo)paganism in its historical framework. See pages 16-18 for further explanation. See also Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, chapters 4 and 14.
What Kirby moves towards is a concept that she calls the “fantastic milieu,” based upon Partridge’s framework of *occulture*, that is “incontestably a metaphysic, insofar as their paradigm goes far beyond the tangible and provable” – this paradigm includes fictional textual narratives, taken from popular culture, that refer to a cosmology of alternative worlds, and parallel/multiple universes, as well as “fantastic creatures” and “magical abilities.” The textual media can also include material outside of texts, such as virtual reality games and films. Whatever the media, this is actively “reappropriated” and “given personal significance” by the Otherkin. What this creates, according to Kirby, is a sub-section of occulture that extends into the mainstream popular culture. Otherkin display an “intentional element of identity construction associated with their beliefs” that is “unusual” due to “the explicit equation of the self with the non- or superhuman.”

Laycock also mentions Partridge and the latter’s claim that Otherkin is “an online spiritual community,” as well as Partridge’s argument that fantasy and science fiction found in popular culture “plays a significant role in ‘re-enchantment’” and that “popular culture influences metaphysical and theological questions.” However, Laycock seemingly contests Kirby’s characterization of Otherkin as being a part of a larger religious trend and a more specific alternative spirituality, noting that Otherkin do not claim their beliefs to be a religion, and that some “deny any metaphysical significance, framing their ‘otherness’ as [...] a pragmatic belief system conducive to their wellbeing.” With regards to Kirby’s “fantastic milieu,” Laycock argues that associating one’s religious or spiritual beliefs with Otherkin identities is problematic, in that “spiritual pursuits and ... Otherkin identity are related but not synonymous.” However, it seems as if Laycock vacillates at times with regards to his own position. Unlike Kirby, Laycock claims that the Otherkin community conforms with a functional definition of religion after Clifford Geertz (to whom, incidentally, Hanegraaff also refers when discussing his framework regarding ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’) and that this functional definition “helps to interpret two aspects of the Otherkin community: the use of

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128 Ibid., 43-56, 60-61, 66-68, 101-102, 131.
129 Kirby, “From Pulp Fiction to Revealed Text,” 151.
132 Ibid., 66.
133 Ibid., 71
134 Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 139. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.
popular occultism and the sacralization of popular culture.”

In this manner, he does agree with Kirby that Otherkin “sacralize” fictional narratives “or use it to serve an existential function.”

Laycock even mentions three ways that Otherkin do this: by constructing a “personal mythology;” by believing in a metaphysical cosmology; and for a minority of Otherkin, by believing “that fictional narratives have a literal corresponding reality.” Thus, Laycock returns to Partridge and his suggestion that “popular culture can shape new plausibility structures and worldview[s].”

Where Laycock seems to take a particular standpoint is in his assertion that Otherkin create “an alternate ordering of the world or nomos” after Peter Berger. He agrees with Kirby's characterization of Otherkin as “a mutually supported set of alternate realities,” but that their social world must be constructed by the three stages of “externalization, objectification, and internalization,” called “nominalization” by Berger.

Laycock explains:

This process can be seen through the formation and identification of Otherkin ‘types.’ Highly subjective experiences are organized collectively until they appear to have an objective ‘out there’ existence. These types then become a technology that individuals may appropriate in order to ‘make sense’ of their biographies.

Laycock argues that the Otherkin community performs two crucial religious actions: an existential one, by using mythologies to provide “meaning and identity;” and a social one, by “creating a meaningful world order” or nomos – this leads to his conclusion “that Otherkin identities provide an effective source of meaning only because they are supported by a community.”

Laycock states that the Otherkin could be seen as “an Internet religion” if and when Internet communication and/or interaction has assisted and stimulated the creation of the nomos. Because the Otherkin “express a need for community despite their individualist orientation,” one could assume that Laycock is implying that Otherkin are creating a type of social, functionalist religion. In this, Laycock agrees with Robertson (mentioned above, page 24) with regards to an in-group/out-group status; Otherkin promote “social solidarity through rites, symbols [such as the heptagram, taken from the Silver Elves], the creation of an oppositional other, and efforts to circumscribe legitimate Otherkin types.”

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135 Laycock, “We Are Spirits of Another Sort,” 74.
136 Ibid., 76.
137 Ibid., 76-77.
138 Ibid., 79-80.
139 Ibid., 80.
140 Ibid., 66.
141 Ibid., 80.
142 Ibid.
Disagreeing again with Kirby, who states that Otherkin are unconcerned with “a singular and cohesive framework of belief,” Laycock claims that Otherkin are interested in questions of legitimacy and boundaries of an “Otherkin category,” in which Furries (mentioned above) are excluded.

Robertson also employs the idea of re-enchantment and Partridge’s “popular occulture” as “a melting pot of Paganism, Esotericism, Jungian psychology, folk medicine, modern superstitions, and paranormal theories” in her articles, noting the importance of the Internet for offering a space for Otherkin to come together and to explore new, “alternative” ideas about spirituality, and to appropriate “spiritual concepts on to personal mythologies” while maintaining a sense of anonymity and control over the process. She notes Heidi Campbell’s “networked individualism” and Douglas Cowan’s “open source traditions” as “those belief systems designed to be modifiable, innovative, and personalized.” Robertson relies heavily on the concept of liminality as discussed by Victor Turner, describing Therians (after Turner) as “threshold people” or “liminal personae” in that the other-than-human Therian identity is “in a constant state of transition” or evolution, whose “non-normative subjectivity” can be seen as “dovetailing with other non-normativities such as queer sexuality and gender fluidity, neuro-atypicality, ... and subscribing to an ‘alternative’ spirituality such as Paganism.” The liminal space that Therians occupy is “sacred” and “spiritually significant” in that the animal self is “reified” for the individual, but also through acceptance in the community. However, Robertson is less bold than Laycock, stating, “there is no need to assume that Therians rely on the online Therianthropy community as a sole outlet for personal development and social support, nonetheless it is ... a central part of these processes.”

Liminality returns in Robertson’s discussion about the notions surrounding shape-shifting, stating that Therians are “betwixt and between” (after Turner) and “walker[s] between worlds.” She notes that this idea is an important one for Neo-Shamanistic techniques and practices, “providing an analogy for personal change and self-improvement through the acquisition of spiritual knowledge and magical powers associated with animals and nature.” Michael Harner’s core shamanism is given

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143 Kirby, “From Pulp Fiction to Revealed Text,” 151.
144 Laycock, “We Are Spirits of Another Sort,” 81.
147 Robertson, “The Law of the Jungle,” 260, see also n.11 for her reference to the “alternative spirituality scene.”
148 Ibid., 274.
149 Ibid., 276.
150 Robertson, “The Beast Within,” 15.
as an example of how shamans can call “upon a guardian animal through dance and trance to become one with the spirit ... so that animal-human unity can be experienced.” Robertson mentions other Neo-Pagan authors, such as Lupa (a wolf Therian\(^{151}\)) using such techniques to “draw the power of the animal into the self.”\(^{152}\) Interestingly, though, she notes later that Therians specifically deny that “having an animal totem, spirit guide... or being possessed are not considered the same condition as being a Therianthrope,” as Therianthropy is seen more as being the result of reincarnation or transmigration of an animal soul into a human body. Hence, they are born as a Therian. Yet, Robertson maintains that Therians use the “walker-between-worlds” archetype to “reify their animal-human subjectivity,” seeing “the body as a tool for transformation on a spiritual level.”\(^{153}\)

While the above authors may differ to some extent regarding their explanations of Otherkin, they all refer to the possibility that fictional texts can act as a catalyst for self-discovery. One scholar who has elaborated on this idea with regards to emergent religions is Markus Davidsen. His term, *fiction-based religion*, is one that he applies to the Otherkin.\(^{154}\) As Davidsen has written extensively about fiction-based religion (FBR), only a summary of his main points about FBR can be listed here.

Davidsen argues that his term is more appropriate than the earlier proposed terms of “hyper-real religions” (Possamai) or “invented religions” (Cusack). Adam Possamai’s reference, taken from Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*, refers to “a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and/or is a source of beliefs for everyday life.”\(^{155}\) However, Davidsen argues that “all religions are hyper-real in the sense that they ascribe reality to the socially constructed.”\(^{156}\) Carole Cusack’s term, defined as “explicitly invented, fictional religions” that decline to apply “traditional legitimation strategies”\(^{157}\) is also inaccurate, as for Davidsen, FBR is “a religion in which fictional texts are used as authoritative texts. [...] A text is authoritative for religious activity if it inspires and supports that religious activity.”\(^{158}\) Examples of a FBR are Jediism, The Church of All Worlds (both mentioned above

\(^{151}\) Lupa no longer identifies as a wolf Therian. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

\(^{152}\) Ibid., 14.

\(^{153}\) Ibid., 17-18, 23.

\(^{154}\) Davidsen, “Fiction-based religion,” 379.


\(^{156}\) Ibid., 378.

\(^{157}\) Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 141.

by Kirby), and various groups that adhere to Tolkien’s mythology. FBRs take inspiration from fictional narratives not referring to our actual, ‘real’ world; these can be contrasted with history-based religions, that do make the claim of actual world events. FBRs are considered “genuine” religions “because the activity and beliefs of which they consist refer to supernatural entities which are claimed to exist in the actual world.” This in contrast with fandom, that is regarded as a “play” world by all who engage with it.\textsuperscript{159}

In FBRs, the fictional nature is acknowledged, but parts of it are assigned some sort of ‘realness’ in the world, and these beliefs (that are now considered ‘real’) constitute the foundation of later “practices and identities.” Examples given by Davidsen are Middle-Earth, that is seen as being a real place, albeit perhaps in another dimension; the Valar, god-like beings that are considered to be “real spiritual beings;” or “the Force” from Star Wars being seen as a legitimate “cosmic power.” Davidsen argues that this can be regarded as a more substantive definition of religion, as it removes social aspects associated with a functional definition. By doing this, it becomes “possible to distinguish between fiction-based religion and non-religious activity engaging with fiction, such as fandom.”\textsuperscript{160}

While fans engage with fictional worlds, they do not link it to the physical world, but this engagement does not rule out the possibility that fandom could “evolve” into beliefs that could become a part of a fiction-based religion. Davidsen argues that “fiction-based religion often seems to arise as the convergence of fandom and alterative religious engagements.”\textsuperscript{161} When speculating why one fictional story (such as Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings) could be seen as an authoritative text, but not another (such as C.S. Lewis’s The Chronicles of Narnia), Davidsen offers the following explanation: if the characters (with whatever power they possess) “are not obvious analogical references to one particular existing religion” (referring to Narnia’s Christian themes and Lewis’s use of allegory). This explains why Tolkien’s “mythology can be used as an authoritative basis for religion while Narnia cannot.”\textsuperscript{162} Nevertheless, Davidsen does argue that “no fiction-based religion is based exclusively on fiction. They always draw on established religious traditions as well.” For the Elven movement, these include rituals and other techniques taken from, among other sources, Neo-Pagan and Neo-Shamanism, what Davidsen refers to as “religious blending.” This includes the notions of bricolage (“religious blending by individuals”) and syncretism (“the blending of religious traditions”).\textsuperscript{163} FBR is therefore a type of “post-traditional religion” in that it “is not embedded within one particular

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 378.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 387-389.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 390.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 391.
\textsuperscript{163} Davidsen, The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu, 502, 504.
religious tradition,” and would also be located, as a sub-milieu within the cultic milieu” of “overlapping networks that allow individuals to exchange ideas and groups to share members.”

Davidsen has engaged in a comprehensive study of what he calls the “Spiritual Tolkien Milieu,” a religion that “focuses on ritual interaction with the supernatural denizens of the Middle-earth universe” and also includes those people who “self-identify as Elves.” The Silver Elves (mentioned earlier, and also mentioned by Kirby and Laycock in their works) are one of the Elven groups mentioned in his book. While space limitations prevent a detailed discussion about this group of people, Davidsen does discuss how the Elven movement became part of the larger Otherkin movement in the 2000s, but concentrates on the practices and beliefs of the Elves in particular. While he does briefly refer to other controversial types, such as ‘Fictionkin’ or ‘otakukin’ (taken from Japanese manga and anime characters), Davidsen does not include detailed discussion about other ‘kintypes’ (whether Therians, Machinekin, Plantkin, etc.).

With regard to the identity beliefs of the Elves, Davidsen claims that Elves have a “core belief” that they are Elves, “because this is the belief which keeps the Elven movement together; it is not necessarily the belief in which individual self-identifying Elves are most confident.” Moving away from the socio-cultural aspect, however, to how individuals become convinced they are Elves, Davidsen offers an explanation taken from the “standard (sociological) model for conversion” that includes three steps: 1) agency lies within the convert and is freely chosen; 2) a new religious worldview replaces the old one; and 3) a gradual process of conversion occurs. Davidsen finds that the Elves conform to steps 1 and 3, but that for step 2, it is not an old worldview that is replaced, but an new identity is added to “an already held religious worldview.” He refers to Tanya Luhrmann’s concept of “interpretative drift” (where one gradually takes on a new “identity and ideology;” in

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164 Ibid., 500.
165 Ibid., 499.
166 See Chapter 11 in The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu.
167 Fictionkin refers to those who claim to identify as a fictional character taken from a story, game, or other source of media where an actual author is known; for example, if someone identifies as Legolas from The Lord of the Rings (and not simply a more ‘generic’ Elf), or Harry Potter (and not simply a wizard). Davidsen discusses this issue in Chapter 11 of his book, but I have also encountered Fictionkin in my own research and am aware of the contested nature of this type of Otherkin. My research has found that there is also a distinction between human and non-human Fictionkin. If the character is human, such as Harry Potter, then this person would not fall under the Otherkin umbrella definition, as Otherkin identify as other-than-human people or entities. Legolas, being an Elf, would technically qualify as being a fictional Otherkin type; however, many Otherkin find Fictionkin to be illegitimate, as the character is a creation of someone else. Fictionkin continue to be a frequently-discussed topic.
168 See Glossary of Terms.
169 Davidsen, The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu, 258.
Luhrmann’s case, as magicians) to explain this “conversion to Elvishness.” Additionally, Davidsen finds that these people 1) experience the “feeling of being different or alienated and hence in need of a new, positive self-image,” and 2) feel a “fascination” with Elves due to their exposure to fantasy fiction, and while engaging with it in a playful way, become more comfortable with accepting a new identity. This new identity is then maintained by four “plausibility structures.” These are: 1) fantasy fiction, that “helps sustain the core identity,” 2) the cultic milieu, that “provides an infrastructure for the Elven movement,” 3) the various Internet communities, that “sustain the identity” of the members, and 4) long-time members of the community that act as “movement intellectuals” or “role models” for others in the Elven community. As we have seen in Laycock’s definition of Otherkin (page 23), the notion of ‘conversion’ to being an Otherkin is not generally used; this point will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

As one can see by reading this section, the scholars presented here have all proposed that Otherkin fit into a type of ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ social framework, although they all offer their own interpretations as to how this occurs. While they all offer interesting perspectives, I find that this interpretation often conflicts with my own research findings. While engaging in qualitative research on Otherkin, I have soon realized that these scholarly definitions often did not coincide with what Otherkin were telling me. The next chapter will delve into a number of issues that arose when analyzing the academic literature.

171 Ibid. 269. More will be said about this in the next chapter, as this viewpoint does not correlate with own research findings, and it requires more attention.  
172 Ibid., 270-272.  
173 Ibid., 274.
CHAPTER THREE: FOUR CRITICISMS OF THE ETIC APPROACH

It became clear during my research of the scholarly literature that there are a number of problems that need to be addressed. These can be placed into four areas: 1) criticism of academic arguments as they pertain to the topic of religion/spirituality; 2) criticism of religious concepts used by scholars that do not seem to correspond to my research data regarding Otherkin; 3) criticism of the research methods used by the scholars; and 4) my conclusion that Otherkin fall under the rubric of ‘something else.’ This chapter will address these four problems.

3.1. The Religion/Spirituality ‘ Debate’

With regard to Kirby’s discussion of Hanegraaff’s definitions of ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ (page 26), some clarification is needed. I would argue that Kirby misunderstood the differences in the distinctions made by Hanegraaff in his definitions; what Kirby refers to as “spirituality” is in fact “a spirituality” as defined by Hanegraaff. This may seem to be hairsplitting, but it is important to consider the original intent of Hanegraaff’s argument. Examples of “spiritualities” can be found in esoteric systems such as Jacob Boehme’s Christian theosophy, but this “personal, creative manipulation of...symbolic systems” is something that was required, before the separation of church and state, to be embedded in a particular religion; in this case, Lutheran theology of Protestant Christianity and Christian mysticism. By separating a spirituality from a social institution of a religion, an individual is free to choose from a “supermarket” of possibilities, ones that are “without any organizational structure at all.” This is the ‘consumerist’ aspect to which Hanegraaff refers; therefore, in this regard, Otherkin would qualify as ‘consumers’ (contra Kirby), as they have an array of choices available to them in the ‘cultic’/’occultic milieu’ or ‘fantastic milieu.’ Additionally, Hanegraaff states that his framework “is a further development of the famous definition proposed

174 Hanegraaff defines religion as: “any symbolic system which influences human action by providing possibilities for ritually maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning. A religion is: “any symbolic system embodied in a social institution which influences human action by providing possibilities for ritually maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning.” A spirituality is: “a human practice which maintains contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning by way of the individual manipulation of symbolic systems.” See Hanegraaff, Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed, 139.


176 Geertz’s definition of religion is as follows: “1) a system of symbols which acts to 2) establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by 3) formulating conceptions of a general order
by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in 1966.”177 Geertz’s functional definition of religion is seemingly not in line with Kirby’s claim that Otherkin, should they even be considered a “religion,”178 would more likely fall under a substantive definition. As we have seen, both definitions have been argued by Kirby (substantive) and Laycock (functionalist), the latter also specifically refers to Geertz’s “symbol system” that “serve[s] to answer existential questions and provide a source of meaning” in his article on Otherkin.179 I would suggest that Robertson and Davidsen are more concerned with a functional definition as well, considering that they place their focus on the practices of the Otherkin, although Davidsen does try to employ both types in his discussion. Both types would theoretically be acceptable, even if this does create tension with Otherkin’s self-perception, as they invariably stress that they are not a religion at all.

Returning briefly to Laycock and Geertz’s “symbol system,” Laycock suggests that “popular occultism” and “the sacralization of popular culture” are “two aspects of the Otherkin community” that “have been utilized to create a new and meaningful picture of the world.”180 However, if a functionalist definition of religion is what it does, in terms of meaning and a person’s need for it, “the need for meaning causes belief [...] but it is not the epistemic reason for those beliefs.”181 When asking what belief could mean “in a religious context,” Frankenberry and Penner argue that,

> according to Geertz, [it] is ‘with frank recognition that religious belief involves [not induction from everyday experience] but rather a prior acceptance of authority which transforms that experience’ (p.25), so that it is a ‘mode of seeing... a particular manner of construing the world’ (p.26).182

This raises some issues with regard to Otherkin. What ‘authority’ would Otherkin be accepting, in this instance? Furthermore, Otherkin communicate that their belief in their nonhumanity undoubtedly comes from their everyday experiences. Kirby is one of the above scholars who emphasizes that the Otherkin subculture is a product of lived experiences in the contemporary West (see page 28 above). Hence, such an explanation seems problematic, and is an indication that

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177 Ibid., 139.
178 Kirby does not make the distinction, as Hanegraaff does, between “religion” and “a religion,” but I assume she is referring to “religion” in that no social institutions are involved.
179 Laycock, “We Are Spirits of Another Sort,” 74.
180 Ibid.
182 Ibid., 629-630, citing, and including the page numbers from, Geertz’s 1966 “Religion as a Cultural System.”
Otherkin identity should not unquestionably fall under the category of religion, as the functionalist definition fails to answer the question of where the belief of the nonhuman identity came from in the first place.

Lastly, the term *spirituality* is often problematic due to its ambiguity. As is often noted in academic literature, the term is “defined in very diverse ways both among religious professionals and among scholars, but there is also considerable variation in the way in which the term is understood and used among the general public.”\(^{183}\) For example, the *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (2015) alone offers a list of 13 different definitions of the term *spirituality* taken from the contexts of theology, psychology, and medicine.\(^{184}\) Depending on the definition used, *spirituality* could refer to: practices associated with magic (e.g., crystals, tarot, astrology);\(^{185}\) purely secular concepts concerned with a holistic sense of well-being;\(^{186}\) or characteristics that could be found in “folk religion or popular religion.”\(^{187}\) As there is no “scholarly consensus”\(^{188}\) as to how the term should be defined, it is often unclear what is intended when, for example, the phrases ‘personalized spirituality,’ ‘alternative spiritualities,’ or ‘spiritual milieu’ are used. Additionally, it is unclear if the scholars who have written about Otherkin are using the term in the same manner as Otherkin understand and use it. Theoretically, *spirituality* could apply to Otherkin, but because the term is vague, I would hesitate to use it as a concept for Otherkin as a whole.

### 3.2. Use of Religious Concepts

Additionally, with regard to claims made above about (Neo)shamanistic practices (associated with Neo-Pagan beliefs, pages 31) and Furries (those who dress as anthropomorphic animals, page 25): this was previously addressed in my Bachelor’s thesis, but a brief reiteration is required here as well. Let us start with shamanism.

Shamanism is a broad and complicated topic, and due to space limitations, an in-depth discussion is not possible here. The academic literature that discusses shamanism in relation to Otherkin does not always specify what is meant by ‘shamanism’ and, as a result, any references of animal-human hybridity or relationships are apparently viewed as being associated with Otherkinity. For the sake

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of clarity, two main narratives can be found within the topic of shamanism that can be of use here: 1) soul-loss (the brief absence of a person’s soul), and 2) spirit possession (an invasion by a spirit of a person).\textsuperscript{189} The most basic explanations as to how these concepts can function are:

1) \textit{The practitioner, known as a ‘shaman’, experiences an altered state of consciousness (most often called a ‘trance’) which leads to what is known as ‘soul-loss’. According to Mircea Eliade, the shaman, or “inspired priest […] ascends to the heavens on ‘trips’. In the course of these journeys he persuades or even fights with the gods in order to secure benefits for his fellow men. Here […], spirit possession is not an essential characteristic and is not always present.”}\textsuperscript{190}

2) \textit{The shaman experiences a trance state and subsequently experiences an invasion of his or her body by a spirit (spirit possession). No displacement of the shaman’s soul occurs.}

3) \textit{The third option is a mixture of the first two scenarios, where a person simultaneously experiences ‘soul-loss’ and also spirit possession.}\textsuperscript{191,192}

Robertson is most likely referring to aspect number two in her discussions, but as she does not clarify what Michael Harner’s ‘core shamanism’ practices are, the reader is left to deduce her meaning. Hanegraaff explains in his own work that

\textit{Michael Harner is a professor of anthropology who, during a trip to the Amazon, was initiated into shamanic consciousness by drinking Ayahuasca, the sacred potion of the Conibo Indians. Since then, Harner has been active promoting shamanism as a method of healing and personal growth by organizing workshops in the context of the Human Potential Movement.}\textsuperscript{193}

As Robertson does mention techniques that involve working with a spirit animal, we can perhaps see these techniques as tools used to obtain a special relationship with helpful spirit guides that can take the form of animals. This suggests that Therians can practice techniques in order to connect to their kintype in some way, whereby they metaphorically ‘shape-shift’ into the animal. However, as Robertson herself stated, Otherkin do not adhere to a ‘shamanistic’ definition regarding their identity. From her own article, the \textit{emic} response was that

\textsuperscript{189} Lewis, \textit{Ecstatic Religion}, 25, 40.
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 41-43.
\textsuperscript{193} Hanegraaff, \textit{New Age Religion and Western Culture}, 59.
Therianthropy is ‘not caused by any external force such as totems, spirit guides, or any form of spirit possession...this means that although these experiences can be valid, they are not valid cases of Therianthropy’.\(^{194}\)

My own research data echoes this finding. The following are responses from members at the ‘Kinmunity’ website:

- **Otherkinity** [...] is characterized by identifying as non-human. The identity is an integral part of the individual, and therefore cannot be seen as separate from the individual.

- **A Spirit Animal or Spirit Guide** is a spiritual entity that is typically seen as one's personal guide in life or spiritual matters. The entity is seen as a separate entity from the individual. Therefore, a spirit animal or spiritual guide is not one's kintype.

- **A Totem** is a non-human creature that is used to represent an individual or a group of individuals, such as a family or clan. [...] A totem animal is not an integral part of one's identity, and is therefore not a kintype.\(^{195}\)

An inquiry was made by myself in 2016 to ask if ideas surrounding special techniques or rituals were present in the Otherkin community. The following are responses from two 'elder'\(^{196}\) Therians:

- **Since therianthropy isn’t shamanism and isn’t even spiritual for about half the community, no, there are no techniques one has to use to connect with their “animal self”. After all, a therian is someone who identifies as an animal. The animal is an integral part of who you are, no need to connect with it as it isn’t an external thing.**\(^{197}\)

- **Some therians use meditation either in relation to their therianthropy, or not. Some therians even believe in an animist/shamanic way[...]. However I wouldn’t say that the use of meditation**

\(^{194}\)Robertson, “The Law of the Jungle,” 268. Although Robertson does mention the name of the website she visited (Project Shift), she did not offer the date of this post. My own research finds that this information stems from a public access post from 2008. The comment section is closed for this article.


\(^{196}\)The term ‘elder’ used here refers to Otherkin who have been active in the community for at least ten years.

\(^{197}\)Private forum chat on http://www.kinmunity.com, September 20, 2016, with “S”. Taken from personal research files.
or other techniques work to “connect with” a person’s theriotype. [...] therians can’t use spiritual practices to impact their therianthropy.\textsuperscript{198}

On the basis of this information, it would seem that the ‘soul-loss’ and ‘spirit possession’ versions of shamanism mentioned above fall outside of the \textit{emic} definition of Therians. While ‘shamanistic’ \textit{practices} can play a role for some Therians, it would seem that this notion is not one that can be collectively placed upon the group as being related to a Therian \textit{identity}. The above quotes also suggest that a ‘spiritual’ explanation for Therianthropy is also not sufficient for the community as a whole, especially for those who adhere to a more ‘psychological’ explanation for their non-humanity.

All of the scholars also refer to Lupa, who identified as a wolf Therian, and who wrote the popular book \textit{A Field Guide to Otherkin} in 2007. Her work was influential in the Otherkin community; yet since 2013, Lupa no longer identifies as a wolf. In her blogpost from April 2, 2013, she discusses how her book was “flawed” and “lacking” due to her inexperience with research techniques and the relatively small, “biased” sample of participants, most coming from one source (Livejournal). She notes that much of the information is now “out of date.” Because she no longer identifies as a wolf, she decided to let the book go out of print in 2013. She writes that her ideas about herself have changed:

\begin{quote}
For me, the wolf is a metaphor, a piece of spirituality internalized. Sure, I’ve always leaned toward the personal mythology hypothesis of “what are Otherkin”, but the idea that I am fundamentally not human on some level just doesn’t fit. I am a human animal, 100%, just with a particular connection to the idea of “wolfness”. Call it an inner connection to my totem, or a super-charged “favorite animal”; either of those fit me better than “therian”, or “shifter”, or any of the other terms that set animal-people apart from humanity as a whole.\textsuperscript{199}
\end{quote}

In a separate blogpost about her concept of “therioshamanism,” she discusses her pagan background and her “neoshamanic path” that she embarked upon.\textsuperscript{200} Gleaning insights from her posts, it would seem that Lupa was intrigued by the idea of non-humanity, and experimented with it, using Neo-Shamanistic techniques to do so (as this was her own background), but eventually decided it was not who she is, as she refers above to a ‘totem’ and ‘favorite animal’ which suggest an outside identity that is not her own. Nevertheless, and in spite of her withdrawal from the Otherkin community, her work is often referred to by many academics.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{198} Private forum chat on \url{http://www.kinmunity.com}, September 20, 2016, with “HoC”. Taken from personal research files.  
\textsuperscript{199} \url{https://therioshamanism.com/2013/04/02/letting-go-of-therianthropy-for-good/}.  
\textsuperscript{200} \url{https://therioshamanism.com/about/}.
\end{flushright}
The Silver Elves also mention their ‘shamanistic faith’ (page 14), and Davidsen mentions Tolkien religionists’ Neo-shamanistic practices (page 33). However, this is actually referring to (ceremonial) magical practices, as the Silver Elves refer specifically to their “shamanistic faith” as “a faith in magic and a faith in the ability of each person to use magic to change and affect their lives and the world around them without worshipping, praying to, or propitiating deities (see Sir James Fraser’s [sic] The Golden Bough).” While a discussion on magic is also outside the scope of this thesis, a basic explanation of the main points about what the Silver Elves actually mean by this is worthwhile. The “Elven Path” that Silver Elves follow is not seen as religion, but something that pre-dates religion. This argument is heavily based upon Frazer’s discussion about “sympathetic magic” that is based upon natural “laws” or “principles” that do not require “the intervention of any spiritual or personal agency.” Frazer states:

\[\text{... things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy, the impulse being transmitted from one to the other by means of what we may conceive as a kind of invisible ether, not unlike that which is postulated by modern science for a precisely similar purpose, namely, to explain how things can physically effect each other through a space which appears to be empty.}\]

Magic is the use of the natural “laws,” with the faith on the practitioner’s part that

\[\text{... the same causes will always produce the same effects, that the performance of the proper ceremony, accompanied by the appropriate spell, will inevitably be attended by the desired results, unless, indeed, his incantations should change to be thwarted and foiled by the more potent charms of another sorcerer.}\]

Davidsen refers to the Elf Queen’s Daughters as originally being ceremonial magicians, and to Elven “Neo-Shamanistic ritual techniques [that] can subsequently be used to take one to Middle-Earth” but does not refer to any specifics as to how this happens. Nevertheless, there is enough information here to see that these are practices are concerned with external matters, and fall outside any discussion or definition of personal identity.

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203 Ibid., 27.
204 Ibid., 45.
205 Davidsen, The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu, 239.
206 Ibid., 502.
As stated above, Furries qualify as ‘fandom’, and not what we would understand as a ‘shamanistic’ practice as offered in the above discussion. Both scholars and Otherkin make the distinction that Furries and Otherkin are separate from one another; in Robertson’s words, they are “two distinct subcultures.” This difference is due to the fact that most Otherkin do not choose their kintype, nor do they attribute human characteristics to their kintype. Furries, on the other hand, dress as anthropomorphic animal characters that are chosen due to the person’s fanatical interest in the character. This activity is seen as ‘costume play’ or ‘cosplay’ and is not related to any shamanistic-type practices.

3.3. Academic Research Methods

When examining the research methods used by the above-mentioned scholars, it became clear that most did not consistently employ the qualitative research methods of participant-based observation and interviews. Robertson admits that while she was “missing some of the nuances of the emic discourse,” she claims a qualitative approach can pose ethical problems, is inconvenient, and that it cannot guarantee reliable information. Carol Cusack has commented that ‘lurking’ (i.e., visiting public websites, forums, etc., but without becoming a member or interacting with anyone) is the typical method of most online ethnographical researchers, but that this is a “contested issue.” Kirby stated that she focused more on the influences of fantasy, science fiction, the Internet, and contemporary Western esotericism and occultism on the Otherkin community rather than “an exhaustive exploration of the Otherkin,” claiming that examining specific case studies of Otherkin can “lead the researcher to conclusions valid for that individual only.” She also claims that active involvement by a researcher is “undesirable in a community still so much in a formative chapter of its development.” While Kirby did conduct a quantitative survey in 2011, she had no personal contact with any of the survey participants. Laycock relied on surveys conducted by Vampires, and intentionally avoided Otherkin websites, stating “internal surveys are more reliable than surveys conducted by outsiders.” While Davidsen’s approach was much more in-depth, his research focused on a particular sub-group of the Otherkin, namely the Elves.

210 Kirby, Fantasy and Belief, 1, 6.
211 Ibid., 5.
212 Laycock, “We Are Spirits of Another Sort,” 67.
Personally, I find such methods to be incomplete. It is precisely due to the diversity of the Otherkin identities that a detailed study about these different types must be undertaken. It is very problematic to form a definite opinion about a group of people that are admittedly diverse and complex simply by ‘lurking’ on various Internet sites, visiting a very small number of Otherkin websites, or interacting with one sub-section of the Otherkin community. An important issue that stems from lurking concerns written information that is ‘public’; one cannot be sure of the larger context when reading a random post on the Internet. However, a researcher who is actively involved with one or more groups can ask clarifying questions and discuss matters that might be confusing or difficult to interpret otherwise. The danger of not fully understanding a wide range of concepts can lead to scholars building on faulty research, or repeating faulty information when citing each other. Furthermore, it is my opinion that participant-based research can offer up richer, more detailed information due to the personal interaction and communication with the members of the community. While this method does require long-term commitment from the researcher, personal interaction is of the utmost importance in order to try to grasp the *emic* perspective of the Otherkin. On this point, it is puzzling that Laycock did not consider the importance of the *emic* perspective of the Otherkin as he did in his earlier article on the ‘real’ Vampire community. In that article from 2010, he noted that scholarly works written prior to his own research were “completely inconsistent with [his] experience with the AVA (Atlanta Vampire Alliance),” and that “scholars have overemphasized institutions that are peripheral to the vampire community.”

He argues that it is more effective to “focus analysis on the broader category of identity groups” and that

> because real vampires believe that they are of a different ontological nature than other people, they see vampirism primarily as a nominal social marker. Some vampires may additionally see their identity as vampires as a cultural or religious identity.  

Laycock argues here that Vampires share an “ontological identity” as a separate “category of person” that is separate from religion in its essence. I feel that, based on my own research data, Laycock’s argument about Vampires could apply as well to Otherkin. That he failed to argue this in his later article regarding the Otherkin strongly suggests to me that he did not conduct the same type of in-depth research with the Otherkin as he did with the real Vampires.

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3.4. Otherkin as 'Something Else'

While all of the scholars offer interesting perspectives and arguments concerning possible religious or spiritual frameworks that could apply to Otherkin, it becomes clear to me that none of them have asked a very fundamental question: if the effects of occulture, coupled with fantasy media, are so widespread and permeate many aspects of our modern life, why do only some people claim to identify as an other-than-human being? How does it only affect some, but not all of those who are fascinated with, and engaged with, fantasy and fictional media? Davidsen raises the question, “how can some readers come to believe that supernatural agents from fictional narratives are real,”216 and does ask how people come to believe they are Elves, but answers this from a religious ‘conversion’ perspective that is rooted in sociology. By doing this, the focus is taken away from the topic of subjective, personal identity, and this should be most important, in my opinion, when looking at an identity-based group. Looking more closely, more questions arise, such as whether or not all Otherkin adhere to Davidsen’s explanation of how Elves come to know their identity; if the community is especially important to Otherkin with regards to their identity; and broader questions surrounding the mechanisms involved in identity formation. Chapters Four and Five will therefore look at these matters in more detail.

Additionally, the majority of Otherkin state that they are not a religion, and the scholars even agree that technically it is not, yet they continue to present their arguments as to why it is some type of religion. Although I do not dispute Davidsen’s work regarding Tolkienism and his notion of fiction-based religion as it applies to the Elves, based on my own research findings I do not feel that this can be applied to Otherkin as a whole. I would agree that Tolkienism, Jediism, and The Church of All Worlds could be classed as ‘religions’, as the scholars have argued, in that they have a hierarchy of power, use texts, perform rituals, and have an array of other practices that have been appropriated from other traditions. Yet all of the above-mentioned scholars agree that Otherkin are loosely organized, without a dogma, hierarchy, or a common set of practices. Robertson later admits in a 2017 article, that “spirituality is not an essential component of having an other-than-human identity,” although she still claims they are “embedded in the occultic milieu.”217 However, she does discuss the backlash she received from some Otherkin community members after her publications about the community, and notes that “a key concern for the OtH (Other-than-Human) community is their misrepresentation and exploitation by unsympathetic outsiders.”218

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217 Robertson, “Navigating Other-than-Human Identities,” 105.
Due to the above issues, I therefore find that I can no longer adhere to Davidsen’s assertion that Otherkin, on the whole, qualify as a fiction-based religion, as I did in my Bachelor’s thesis, nor can I be in accordance with the majority of the academic arguments about Otherkin. While I can concur that some Otherkin (such as Silver Elves) may adopt religious or spiritual practices, or continue to practice according to their own religious tradition (should they have one prior to their Awakening), the data demonstrates that Otherkinity is an identity, first and foremost. The academic literature places the focus primarily on function and performance, yet my research data suggests that Otherkin, in their essence, are an ontology, and here lies the conflict. In my opinion, the emphasis of the academic literature is put on what Otherkin are doing, while Otherkin are concerned about their being. I have found support of this idea (albeit in the field of science and technology) in Proctor’s own research into the Otherkin community, who claims, “I have come to regard the phenomenon [of Otherkin] from more of an ontological position – that is, I understand their Otherkinity as deriving from an initial experience of other-than-humanness.”\textsuperscript{219} This leads me to choose the rubric of ‘something else’ with regards to the Otherkin. The next chapter shall focus on the results of my ongoing research, and what Otherkin have to say about the academic arguments in more detail.

\textsuperscript{219} Proctor, “Policing the Fluff,” 489.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DATA FINDINGS – AN EMIC RESPONSE TO THE ETIC ARGUMENTS

This chapter provides an *emic* response to the academic arguments discussed above as an attempt to add a deeper exploration of the academic literature, as well as discussing the differences I have noticed as I have continued my own qualitative research on and with the Otherkin since 2017. The reader will therefore be moving between two perspectives – that of an *insider* and an *outsider*.

During the course of my research, I have met two Otherkin who act as helpful ‘educators’ of the community, and who have been conducting their own *emic* research for a book project. In May 2018, they conducted a six-month survey of Otherkin attitudes regarding a number of different quantitative and qualitative questions and responses. These include the academic interest in their community, and the material that has been written about them by scholars. These two Otherkin have been extremely supportive of my own research and have generously provided me the results of their recent survey of 196 participants. This survey was shared with 21 different Otherkin and Therian websites, groups, forums, discord servers, chats, social media platforms, etc. It contains 60 questions divided into four sections: 1) basic demographics and beliefs; 2) religious studies; 3) psychology (specifically regarding a study by Gerbasi et al.); and 4) gender studies. Portions of the first two sections will be used for this thesis, with a selection of responses that are relevant to the discussion here.

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220 Nøkken (age 29) recognizes himself as a horse, and has been active in various micro-communities within the larger Otherkin community for 20 years. Hound (age 26) recognizes herself as a Black Shuck, and has been active in the GVC (Global Vampire Community) as well as various nonhuman communities for 12 years. Both have been active as educators in the greater Otherkin community for 9 years and 6 years, respectively.

221 This study concerns the concept of ‘species dysphoria’, a condition that some Furries and Otherkin claim to suffer from. Species dysphoria is a term used by some Otherkin to denote the anxious feeling of being in the wrong (species) type body. (See Grivell et al., “An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis,” 123.) The 2016 study that Gerbasi et al. published, called *FurScience! A Summary of Five Years of Research from the International Anthropomorphic Project*, delved into the Furry community. As the Otherkin survey indicates, the findings of this study are no longer used or supported by Gerbasi et al., but the questions were used by the Otherkin researchers as a ‘retrospective look’ at the ideas put forth during this study. As this thesis does not discuss the mental health aspect/question regarding Otherkin, and as Gerbasi’s study focuses on Furries (who are not a part of the Otherkin community), I will not be using answers from section three. The same will apply to section four, as the topic of gender is also not the focus of this thesis.

222 Some responses are extremely varied, therefore for the sake of space, the highest percentages will be listed here. Also, a few of the questions have been slightly re-worded for formatting reasons.
4.1. Survey of Otherkin/Therians’ Feelings Towards Representation of Themselves

May – November 2018

Authors: Nøkken and Hound

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you consider yourself to be...</th>
<th>Percentage – 196 responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Otherkin</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therian</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Otherkin and Therian</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vampire</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did you consider yourself to be nonhuman prior to discovering the Otherkin/Therian community?</th>
<th>Percentage – 194 responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>73.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically human, spiritually non-human</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically human, spiritually/emotionally/mentally I've never felt human</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is your current age range?</th>
<th>Percentage – 193 responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10-19 (years old)</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you believe that nonhuman identity was a personal choice?</th>
<th>Percentage – 194 responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>81.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially a choice, partially inherent part of me</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was a choice to accept it</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I made a choice to accept it when I learned more about it; also due to interaction in communities</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was a soul choice</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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223 In my Bachelors thesis, a detailed discussion was put forth regarding the designation “identify as” versus “identify with” (in the sense of merely relating to something else). Recent discussions with Otherkin have shown that ‘identifying’ as something could perhaps be seen as suggesting a choice in the matter, whereas what is actually happening is a ‘recognition’ of the nonhuman nature that is innate. However, in this paper, both ‘identify as’ and ‘recognizes him-/herself as’ will be used interchangeably, but noting that the ‘identifying’ is not a choice. My thanks to Nøkken and Hound for bringing attention to these linguistic nuances.
### Do you feel that your nonhuman identity is caused by atypical psychological experience and/or feelings?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>37.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Do you feel that your nonhuman identity is caused by atypical spiritual experiences?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>50.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Are you a follower of any religious/nonreligious belief systems?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief System</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual- nonreligious</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neopaganism</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paganism (traditional)</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heathenry (Asatru, Odinism, etc.)</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheism</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satanism</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primal-Indigenous</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No (not a follower of any)</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### If you are part of a religion, do you feel that your religion/belief/faith is able to adequately explain your nonhuman identity?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 = strongly disagree &lt;--&gt; 10 = strongly agree (5-6 neutral)</th>
<th>162 responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### If you identify as nonhuman, how do you understand this?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both spiritual and psychological</td>
<td>50.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic (not adequately explained)</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physiological variation</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neurologically</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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224 A note should be made of the extreme diversity of religions (almost 100 different options) that were listed in the survey. For the sake of space, these were not all listed above, but for example, some ‘Pagan’ category religions given include Kemetism, Wicca, Hellenism, and Norse.

225 ‘Spirituality’ is not defined here, but within the Otherkin community, it is generally understood to be the belief in supernatural/super-empirical beings or concepts, such as past lives and reincarnation, or in some cases, magic. However, this concept (as it is used by Otherkin) has been explained to me as being separate from ‘religion.’
Do you believe that Otherkin/Therians are a subset of the Furry Fandom?  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>194 responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>70.6%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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</table>

Do you feel that Otherkin/Therians should be studied by academics independent of the Furry Fandom?  

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>1</th>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>194 responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The section concerning “Religious Studies” includes questions about the academic literature that has been discussed in this thesis:

Do you consider Religious Studies scholars work about Otherkin/Therianthropy as being a religion or religious to be accurate?  

|   |   |   |   |   |   | Percentage – 195 responses |
|---|---|---|---|---|-----------------------------|
| No |   |   |   |   | 64.4%                        |
| No, but it has religious elements |   |   |   |   | 26.7%                        |
| Unsure |   |   |   |   | 4.1%                         |
| Maybe, has yet to be determined |   |   |   |   | 3.1%                         |
| Yes, it is a new religious movement |   |   |   |   | 1.5%                         |

Do you feel that claims that Otherkin/Therianthropy is a religion or religious are harmful to the community?  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>194 responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you feel that academic claims that Otherkin/Therianthropy is a religion or religious are misrepresentations of the community?  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>193 responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you feel that Religious Studies scholars need more ethical oversight from the community itself when researching Otherkin/Therianthropy?  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>194 responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Do you feel that Otherkin/Therians have a right to determine whether they are considered a religion by others, including academics?  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1=strongly disagree</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10=strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey also provided space for qualitative answers regarding the questions about Religious Studies. While I cannot include all 57 responses in this section, here are several that offer a deeper perspective:

- A belief based on psychology, spirituality, and philosophy cannot be made a religion. As we have no set dogmatic scripture, practice, or anything else related to what defines religion in our community. We are a multi-cultural, multi-spiritual community made of way too many people to be so arrogant as to try and define it as something it is not.

- Therianthropy - and overall Otherkinity - is an identity. Period. Religion can have a part to play depending on the individual, but the identity itself is not a religion. It’s like saying "LGBT+" is a religion. It’s not. It’s a part of someone’s identity.

- The feeling of having a nonhuman identity is at the core of being otherkin. Whether the person involved attributes this identification to spiritual or psychological factors is a personal choice. We don’t actually know what causes it. It is up to the individual to form their own beliefs and make their own conclusions. Belief in nonhuman past lives are common, but not universal. Such beliefs are not required to be otherkin.

- A religion requires a coherent set of teachings. While otherkinity has spiritual aspects for many of us, it isn’t a religion because it’s not organized in the same way a religion is.

- I have no idea how the idea of otherkin/therianthropy as a religion came about. It is quite clear within the community that none of us follow a specific religion or have a specific set of beliefs/rules/etc. Religion is utterly irrelevant to the otherkin/therian community; even the spiritual experiences some claim to have are almost always disconnected from religion/religious beliefs.

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226 Answers were only edited for spelling and/or punctuation errors. Additional comments can be found in Appendix I, “Additional Otherkin Statements.”
- **Personally, I don’t care what people believe or do. If they see their otherkinity/therianthropy as a religion, good for them. However, the identity itself is held by people of many religious backgrounds, and exists independently of it. There are also those who feel they are nonhuman because of psychology, which does not have any supernatural elements to it (which is a trademark of religion). There is really no central ideology to the community- the only thing that all of us share is that feeling of innermost nonhumanity.**

- **I’m a religious studies scholar, too, and so I have to tell that otherkin/therianism is much more like transsexualism. Both groups claim that they were born in the "wrong body" - but in therian/otherkin case the body belongs to a different species not a different sex/gender.**

- **I’m a completely atheist kin myself and I know there are others who are the same, so even ignoring how an identity cannot be classified as a religion, there are many non-religious kin in the first place. there are so many things wrong with trying to call it a religion and it’s insulting.**

While this data is somewhat extensive, it is important to include it here as an example of what Otherkin are saying, not only to researchers, but also to each other. As can be seen, this data touches upon many of the points discussed in this thesis. We can see that the majority of the respondents claimed to be nonhuman prior to learning about any community (73.7%), and that they did not choose their identity (81.4%). Whereas in my Bachelors thesis I was exploring two separate categories of ‘spiritual’ and ‘psychological’ Otherkin, it is now apparent that this relationship is much more complex than was first thought. Many of the respondents claim a mixture of the two. We also find that religion, if it does play a role for Otherkin, is seen as offering an explanation for their identity in about half of the respondents. With regard to Religious Studies scholarship, it is apparent that Otherkin are aware of what is being written about them. The majority state that they

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227 The term ‘psychological’ denotes those who do not resonate with any type of supernatural or metaphysical concepts, but find that Otherkinity is caused by, or is the result of, psychological or neuro-biological/chemical phenomena, or that it is due to a particular way in which the ‘mind’ or physical brain functions.

228 Results from a separate 2012 survey (VEWRS) by Emyr Williams of the Vampire community in Atlanta, Georgia, can be seen as corresponding to the above results. In a study of the role of religion for the Atlanta community, Williams states that results from qualitative analysis shows that there is a group that sees "vampirism as a way of life rather than a religious orientation.” When religion plays a role for Vampires, it is usually found within Wicca or other forms of Paganism. Williams, “Emotional Religion? Exploring the religious beliefs and religious experiences of real vampires,” 361, 365.
feel a religious ‘label’ is inaccurate (64.4%), harmful (65% of combined ‘agree’ responses), and a misrepresentative of the larger community (85% of combined ‘agree’ responses). They also strongly feel that they should be able to decide if Otherkin is a religion (83.9% combined ‘agree’ responses), or whether Furries are considered a part of the Otherkin community (90.7% combined ‘disagree’ responses).

My own research data reflects a dissonance with several other arguments proposed earlier in this thesis; these can be situated in three areas: 1) Robertson’s discussion on the Awakening as a “self-initiation”; 2) Laycock’s and Davidsen’s assertions of the community as necessary for identity; and 3) Davidsen’s extensive arguments about Elven identity “conversion process.”

4.2. Awakening as ‘Self-initiation’

As Robertson discusses above (page 24), based upon her adherence to Turner’s rites de passage, heavy emphasis is put on a transitioning from human to nonhuman as a ‘self-initiation’ phase that is successful when a person is accepted into a Therian (or Otherkin) community; in other words, becoming a part of the in-group. While my own research has shown that a potential new member of a group will be asked questions (termed “grilling”229), my research shows that this is generally done in order to get to know the new person better, and to help the new person should he or she still be questioning ‘what is happening’ to him or her. Admittedly, there is a problem of bullying in the Otherkin community, and this is an issue that is being addressed. People that are new to particular forums/websites/groups, etc. are usually vetted to prevent ‘trolls’ from entering the group, and to prevent verbal abuse or harassment.230 However, ‘exclusion’ generally occurs when forums, groups and websites are unmoderated. Although my data shows that, at times, some Otherkin have felt discriminated against, this generally occurs when communication breaks down, or the Otherkin in question cannot adequately express him or herself in order to explain who they are so that the established members can understand. This naturally does not exclude troublemakers, but Otherkin see the importance and need for education and communication skills when interacting online.231

229 Robertson, “The Law of the Jungle,” 269. “Grilling is the process of interrogating and challenging new members to ensure that they subscribe to the accepted view of Therianthropy and will therefore be serious contributors to the community.”

230 This information is taken from a short-term research project I conducted in 2018 for a Master Program seminar given by Dr. Marco Pasi at the University of Amsterdam. Shea, “Identity Politics: Inclusion and Exclusion within the Otherkin Community,” 8-9. (unpublished research paper).

231 Ibid.
Robertson seemingly equates ‘transitioning’ with ‘Awakening,’ as if one can move from a ‘human identity sphere’ to a ‘nonhuman identity sphere.’ Otherkin state that the Awakening is “the process of becoming aware of your non-human origins.” This can happen in various ways. Early Otherkin ‘FAQ’s (written by Elves and Dragons) did mention the possibility of spiritual practices ‘triggering’ this realization, but current definitions generally state the Awakening as independent of any prior, necessary practices. As we have seen above, the community can have differing viewpoints. What is important to note is that Otherkin do not transition from one being to another – they consider themselves nonhuman, but before Awakening, they have not realized it. Narratives that have been shared with me about Awakenings can also involve random, everyday events such as viewing a photograph; being in the presence of an animal, or tree, etc. However, Otherkin fully realize they have a human body; the Awakening is the realization of their non-human identity, that was always present, but unknown. Many Otherkin narratives also use terms like “understanding” their nonhumanity at a certain moment. Additionally, when using the term ‘self-initiation’ with regards to the Awakening, Robertson also seems to suggest that there is some kind of ritual that occurs whereby one can cross a type of threshold and only then be accepted into a group. Otherkin narratives do not generally agree with this notion. Otherkin enter and exit online ‘micro’ groups at will, and stay in groups that they feel most suit them, as happens with human communities. As one Otherkin states,

_There is no initiation, just like there is no initiation going to a coffee shop. Not everyone in the shop is going to like you, but it’s a public space you are entitled to. Unless you hurt someone, no one is going to kick you out. We’re tribal, in a sense. We have pockets of people that come together, who also form other pockets, (and so on)._235

In brief, Otherkin generally state that they are born as Otherkin, and often, at a certain point in their lifetime, they ‘awaken’ to this knowledge, or epistemic concept. They know that they are in a human body, but feel nonhuman. There is no transitioning from one ontological state to another. It is who they have always been, in a similar way to how people are born with a sexual orientation. They do

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233 [https://rialian.com/eyovah1/faq.htm#2_1](https://rialian.com/eyovah1/faq.htm#2_1). “Awakening’ is a term used in some spiritual practices to denote coming to a new frame of reference, or state of mind.” The author, Eyovah, now deceased, identified as a dragon. See Scribner, “Otherkin Timeline,” 56, 58.
234 The information given here was taken from narratives obtained during a short-term research project with the subject of the Awakening experience, conducted in April-May of 2018.
235 Private communication with Hound, 22 April 2019.
not ‘transition’ into being ‘gay’ or ‘straight.’ It is simply who they are, but they might not fully realize it until a certain time in their life.

4.3. The Necessity of Community for Identity

Some clarification is also needed concerning Laycock’s above argument (page 29) concerning the creation of a *nomos* by Otherkin, and Davidsen’s argument of Elven ‘core beliefs’ (page 33). To briefly reiterate, both Laycock and Davidsen argue that the nonhuman identity claim is either only meaningful to a person due to the existence of a community, or only important in the sense that it facilitates cohesion of the community. Davidsen also states that Elves are not altogether certain of their identity. These statements did not seem to adhere to what Otherkin have told me over the years, so I recently specifically asked how they felt about the above statements, in order to clarify this issue. The following statements are what some Otherkin have shared with regards to this question:

- *I discovered my otherkin identity years before discovering or getting involved in the community.* [...] The internet was not a widespread thing when I was growing up. I didn’t even know there was a word that meant probably-wasn’t-human-in-a-past-life until much later. On the other side of things, I know several people who are otherkin who still identify as such even after leaving the community. If the identity is a real one, it doesn’t go away just because you’ve stopped participating on forums or social media. [...] It sounds like [...] that without external validation the whole thing disappears. This is not true at all. If it does disappear, then it likely didn’t qualify as a genuine otherkin identity in the first place. [...] It is a common misconception that the internet “invented” otherkin, but no, people like us have always been around, usually keeping it quietly to ourselves.\(^\text{236}\)

- *I distinctly remember having strong feelings, and then once I found a community, felt like I had a way to describe them, but the feelings had been there before I found a community online, and even if I hadn’t, that wouldn’t have changed how I feel.*\(^\text{237}\)

- *I have always identified as a non-human, and consciously recognized that over a year before I even encountered the word ‘otherkin.’ I was absolutely amazed when I found out other people experienced this feeling, too.* [...] The meaning of my identity has never been based on social

\(^{236}\) Communication with "S", 22 April 2019.
\(^{237}\) Communication with "J", 23 April 2019.
interaction. I don’t need to feel validated by this. My identity, and the exploration of it, is deeply personal and internal to me. [...] These days, I’m only around the community to engage in deeper discussions and to help those who are new to this. I do not rely on the community/social aspect on any level; I just enjoy it.\textsuperscript{238}

- I came to my conclusions about myself before discovering a community. I do all my thinking on my own. By reducing identities and spiritual beliefs to a social community, [scholars] can conclude that this a product of material conditions and make a strange social constructionist conclusion that it is only capable of being true and meaningful within the context of the community. It is disingenuous. The validity of a belief or identity is evaluated on terms independent of a social situation. No Otherkin believes their identity to merely be a social performance. They genuinely believe that they are nonhuman in some capacity and also believe in an ontology in which this nonhumanity makes sense.\textsuperscript{239}

The above statements given by these Otherkin\textsuperscript{240} strongly suggest that personal meaning is seen as being separate from a socially constructed community or worldview. Furthermore, this data strongly suggests that the identity was present first, and only later was the community formed (and found) by those with nonhuman identities in order to engage with like-minded individuals. While Davidsen’s findings apply to Elves in particular, Laycock admits that little ethnography having been done regarding this question for Otherkin, and confesses to resorting to a “Durkheimian analysis” because of it.\textsuperscript{241} However, putting a strong, social emphasis on the matter of Otherkin identity reduces the more philosophical viewpoints to something that belongs to material circumstances and conditions, which then makes any discourse about the inherent beliefs of Otherkin as being ‘real’ in their own right very difficult, if not impossible.

\textsuperscript{238} Communication with “C,” 4 May 2019.
\textsuperscript{239} Communication with Nøkken, 22 April 2019.
\textsuperscript{240} Additional comments will be provided in Appendix I, “Additional Otherkin Statements.”
\textsuperscript{241} Laycock, “We Are Spirits of Another Sort,” 80.
4.4. Notions of Conversion and Choice

Earlier in this thesis (pages 33-34), I briefly discussed the 3-step social model of conversion that Davidsen uses with regard to the manner in which people come to know they are Elves; for the convenience of the reader I will list them here again:

1) Agency lies within the convert and is freely chosen; 2) a new religious worldview replaces the old one; and 3) a gradual process of conversion occurs.

Kirby also mentions the notion of conversion as being a possible comparison for the Awakening experience; however, my research data does not correspond to Davidsen's (nor Kirby's) proposal. Davidsen claims that Elves do not conform to step two, as they are not replacing an old worldview, but adding a new identity to an existing religious worldview. I would suggest that Otherkin do not adhere to any of these steps. As we have seen from the survey results, the majority of Otherkin do not agree with the notion of 'choice.' The above discussions have already provided explanations of why most do not claim that they 'choose' who they are; they simply are Otherkin, born with a nonhuman identity. The above data also shows that Otherkinity is not generally considered a religious-type of worldview, but is an ontology of nonhumanity. In other words, Otherkinity is seen as a self-realization of an innate identity, and therefore no conversion is necessary. And while some Otherkin may state that their 'religion' (whatever that may be) could offer an explain for their identity, there is, again, no need for any 'conversion' from one identity to another, as the concept of identity is seen as being unattached to any religion.

Alternatively, if we look at the notion of conversion as a type of gradual adoption of a new identity, as Davidsen claims with his use of Tanya Luhrmann's notion of interpretative drift, we again see a social, material dimension being implemented. Turning to Luhrmann’s work, Persuasions of the Witch's Craft, we see the header of Part V for her chapter regarding interpretative drift stating, "Belief and action." Luhrmann defines her notion as “the slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone's manner of interpreting events as they become involved with a particular activity." Luhrmann’s important work discusses ritual practices that witches engage in that eventually leads to the practitioner becoming convinced of the reality of the claims that are made within the group. She continues:

242 Kirby, Fantasy and Belief, 56.
244 Ibid., 312. Emphasis mine.
I use the term ‘drift’ because the transformation seems accidental, unintended. The once-non-magician certainly intends to become a magician and practice magic. But that is very different from intending to believe. Rather: the once-non-magician begins to do what magicians do, and begins to find magical ideas persuasive because he begins to notice and respond to events in different ways.\textsuperscript{245}

Davidsen uses Luhrmann’s notion with regard to the Silver Elves, who were originally magicians, to explain how they came to believe in the reality of an Elven history and world. The rituals they performed led to experiences that solidified the ‘realness’ to these Elves over time. This led to the adoption of a particular worldview. Eventually, this led to the magicians believing that they were not just humans, but something else, according to Davidsen. In other words, by choosing to perform certain actions, Elves gradually came to accept the validity of an Elven world and Elvishness.\textsuperscript{246} While I am not disputing Davidsen’s claims about the activities of Elves, I feel that with respect to identity, he is overlooking an important aspect. As an exercise, let us think of the above quote of Luhrmann’s in terms of an example given earlier – that of sexual orientation: if a person $X$, of one orientation ($Y$) “begins to do” what people of another sexual orientation ($Z$) would do, would that lead to a ‘drift’ or change of the inherent orientation of person $X$? I think we would say no, the inherent sexual orientation of a person is a ‘given,’ and performing actions that are contrary to the inherent orientation would not change the person’s feelings about their ‘true’ orientation.\textsuperscript{247} In this, I feel that Davidsen’s stress on activities falls short when trying discuss identity. Otherkin are not ‘performing an action’ by being who they are. Furthermore, Luhrmann’s argument is discussing the idea of magic, and hence, magical practice; a witch is someone who practices magic, in this sense. Otherkin do not have to ‘practice’ anything to be Otherkin.

Lastly, with regards to Davidsen’s discussion of Otherkin “hunches” (of people who think they might be Elves) prior to Awakening, he offers up the suggestion that this “epistemic drift” (moving “from hunch to conviction)\textsuperscript{248} is largely informed by an “initial fascination” with, in his case, Elves, and that many feel “different” and thus “in deed of a new, positive self-image.”\textsuperscript{249,250} While this can be true for

\textsuperscript{245} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{246} See Chapter 11, “The Elven Movement,” in \textit{The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu.}
\textsuperscript{247} To be clear, I am not claiming that Otherkinity is related to one’s sexual orientation. These are separate things, but the idea of one’s orientation is similar to one’s nonhuman identity when viewed from the perspective of a state of being.
\textsuperscript{248} Davidsen, \textit{The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu}, 269.
\textsuperscript{249} \textit{Ibid.}, 270-271.
\textsuperscript{250} A similar argument is given by David Keyworth in his article about the contemporary vampire subculture. He states that ‘Generation X,’ “who grew up in the 1970s and 1980s” show “collective traits” of “malaise and confusion, feelings of abandonment and loneliness, a sense of helplessness, and the need to be ‘somebody.’”
some Otherkin (excluding the latter quote about needing a new image), my data shows that these claims are not always consistent. Several Otherkin note not knowing anything about their kintype\textsuperscript{251} prior to their Awakening; another told me that they had a strong dislike of their kintype. Some Otherkin (Machinekin and Fictionkin) have shared that they struggle with their types, and that their state of being is not always welcome or positive.\textsuperscript{252} As we have seen earlier, Otherkin narratives are very diverse, and simply having a fascination with a particular type is not a comprehensive enough explanation, in my opinion, as to how Otherkin realize and/or experience their identities.

This chapter has attempted to show several inconsistencies and misconceptions that I have found in the academic literature while researching the larger Otherkin community. An important aspect that arises from the emic data is that Otherkin identity is not a social construct, but an epistemic realization and philosophical ontology of being other-than-human. Therefore, as a researcher, one must find more appropriate methods to use other than the constructionist, functional, and socially performative ones offered up to this point. The next chapter will discuss some different approaches and theories that are perhaps more appropriate when looking at Otherkin and their alternate ontology.

\footnotesize{As a result of these feelings, "some individuals...become obsessed with the notion that they are 'vampires' for real and desire to be recognized as such." Keyworth, "The Socio-Religious Beliefs and Nature of the Contemporary Vampire Culture," 356.\textsuperscript{251} “C” and “Nøkke” are among these Otherkin.\textsuperscript{252} I will expand on this discussion in the next chapter.}
CHAPTER FIVE: SEARCHING FOR A NEW METHOD – HOW TO ‘STUDY’ OTHERKIN?

As the previous chapters have attempted to show, Otherkin are not easily explained by religious frameworks because Otherkin identity is seen (from an emic perspective) as being separate from any religious and/or social constructions, and is seen more as a philosophy, and a state of being nonhuman. If we should therefore put our focus as researchers on their identity, the question then arises as to how we should study Otherkin, and what theories and methods we could use. It seems apparent that an inter- and multidisciplinary approach is needed, with, for example, online ethnography and methods of qualitative psychological analysis being explored for options.

Kirby and Davidsen’s emphasis on fictional texts and other media as sources of inspiration for Otherkin identity do not seem to cover the large variety of Otherkin types, for example, those who come to realize they are Plantkin (for example, trees), Therians, or Machinekin. In these cases, nature and everyday interaction plays a large role for Otherkin, and the realization moment does not flow out of reading a story, seeing a film, or playing a game. In the case of one Machinekin, his nonhuman identity was realized at a very young age while engaging in mundane activities that involved audio equipment. For Therians, the realization can happen as they interact with animals; the same can apply to Plantkin as they spend time gardening, or in a forest. However, in the case of Fictionkin, as the name suggests, inspiration from fictional media would appear to correspond to the claims made by Kirby and Davidsen. Additionally, a researcher must consider that the virtual world of the Internet is also a very important area to explore with regards to identity. That being the case, looking towards theories about identity formation could be fruitful, taken, for example, from the areas of psychology and digital technology.

This chapter will offer some possible approaches one can use when attempting to study such a complex group of people and their diverse identities. The first and second sections will provide a bit of background information of the theories and methods I have found useful, and explain the methodologies I have utilized in my Bachelor’s thesis, as well as in short-term research projects over the past several years. The third section will look more closely at theories about identity and how it is formed by examining personal narratives. The fourth section will focus on the virtual world of the Internet and influences found there, with special attention being given to the influence of role-playing games on identity formation. Otherkin and Fictionkin narrative data will be provided as examples of

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253 This person’s story will be shared in this chapter.
how these theories are used; these specific participants have been in communication with me since 2015/2016.

5.1. Methodologies

My interaction with Otherkin over the past several years has focused heavily on the diversity of Awakening experiences, and how Otherkin come to understand their identities. As these experiences appear to be of a psychological nature, I have found it useful to look to qualitative psychological research methods for approaches. When examining the foundations of qualitative psychology, one finds William James’s (1842-1910) psychology of experience and his “approach to consciousness” as important conceptual factors. James discusses how the self is a “duplex” in that the self can be “an object of thought,” such as “the self-concept,” but also “the self as that who is aware of that self-concept.” James calls this dual-nature the “me” and the “I.” More will be said about this in section 5.3, but for now it suffices to suggest that James, in his Principles of Psychology (1890), was developing “a phenomenology of the self.”

In his Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), James stresses that the “subjective world” of a research participant should be described “in terms employed by the person themselves,” and not “in terms of the readily available categories of the researcher” (what James calls “the psychologist’s fallacy”). This idea conflicts with the alternate, positivist view that bases everything on observable or logically true propositions. Qualitative psychologists therefore “put on one side concern with the idea of an unequivocal real world, in favor of attending to the accounts that people formulate of their reality.” This endeavor, in turn, leads to phenomenology, and Edmund Husserl’s (1859-1938) notion that one must “return to the things themselves, as experienced.” The researcher must begin by setting aside assumptions or judgments that “would tend to distract the researcher from a focus on the experience,” known as epoché or bracketing.

Another philosopher associated with phenomenology is Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who was interested in “an investigation into phenomena – that is, the way things present themselves to us in experience.” In phenomenology, researchers must understand that an analysis of experience is an in-depth, difficult process, studied from a “first-person perspective,” of a complex, web-like “meaningful lifeworld” of

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255 Ibid., 7-8.
256 Ibid., 10. Emphasis original.
257 Ibid., 11.
258 Wisnewski, “Mutant Phenomenology,” 197.
the research participant. This "system of interrelated meanings," called a *Gestalt* by Husserl, is "key to the study of lived experience."

Another psychologist who built upon James’s ideas was Gordon Willard Allport (1897-1967). Uninterested in the behaviorism of his time, Allport stressed instead an idiographic approach (that focuses on the individual), as opposed to a nomothetic one (that focuses on universal or general aspects). The idiographic approach concentrates “on the interplay of factors which may be quite specific to the individual. It may be that the factors take their specific form only in this person; certainly, they are uniquely patterned in a given person’s life.” Naturally, these unique factors must be interpreted by the researcher; at this point, one moves into the area of hermeneutics. Heidegger, mentioned above, sought to analyze human beings as they made sense of their everyday lives in his work, *Being and Time* (1927). As Ashworth explains about Heidegger, “for him, [...] we live in an *interpreted world* and are ourselves *hermeneutic*; we are interpreters, understanders.”

One approach within qualitative psychology that “focuses on experience, while allowing that both the research participant and the researcher are entering into interpretation” is Smith and Osborn’s interpretative phenomenological analysis, or IPA.

Smith and Osborn developed their approach around 20 years ago as part of a “psychological experiential research methodology” contained in a small group of “methods informed by phenomenological philosophy.” IPA is “dedicated to the detailed exploration of personal meaning and lived experience” and attempts “to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, [as well as] how they are making sense of their personal and societal world.” In line with Heidegger’s “interpretative or hermeneutic development of phenomenology,” it involves a double hermeneutic, or “two-step interpretation process,” that involves a participant’s attempt to understand his or her life experiences, and the researcher who is attempting “to make sense of” the participant’s attempts to understand these experiences. This process seeks to understand experiences from a ‘first-person’ perspective, and the researcher is aware of the complicated links between people’s thinking, speech, and emotions. This approach is closely related to cognitive

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psychology, in that it focuses on mental processes, but rejects behaviorism in favor of the aforementioned idiographic approach, taken from Smith, Harré, and Van Langenhove (1995), that “works painstakingly from individual cases” to come to general themes or claims.\textsuperscript{266} The approach is best suited for “small sample sizes” as the “case by case analysis” is conducted over a long period of time in order to give a detailed account of “perceptions and understandings” of the participants, as opposed to basic, “general claims.”\textsuperscript{267} The ‘tools’ a researcher uses in a study are semi-structured and structured interviews. Transcripts of interviews undergo free textual analysis, annotating the text in order to find “emergent themes.”\textsuperscript{268} If a researcher is working with multiple participants, these themes can be compared during analysis. The themes are then translated into a “narrative account,” where “the themes are explained, illustrated and nuanced” in the researcher’s interpretation discussion.\textsuperscript{269}

One example the use of IPA with regards to Otherkin is found in Grivell et al., “An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Identity in the Therian Community” from 2014. This was one of the first studies performed that examined the role of identity formation in Therians, asking how “the adoption of the term therian impact[s] one’s sense of identity.”\textsuperscript{270} The authors noted that the study of “therianthropic experiences in a nonclinical population”\textsuperscript{271} was necessary due to the “proposition that such experiences may be more prevalent than is currently reflected in the literature,” noting also that the phenomenon was not “exclusive to non-Western populations.”\textsuperscript{272} Some of the themes that were gleaned from analysis were “journey of self-discovery,” “spiritual versus biological,” and “trusting some, fearing others.”\textsuperscript{273} While it is not my intention to provide a full discussion of the results here, the researchers stressed that, as this was an introductory study, more investigation is needed into “exploring the interplay between the animal and human components of therian identity.”\textsuperscript{274} I am attempting to broaden the scope of the interplay between other-than-human and human components of Otherkin identity with my own research.

Qualitative analysis offers many approaches, another being grounded theory. This theory developed “from the collaboration of sociologists Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s, taking shape in their book,
The Discovery of Grounded Theory (1967). It is a “comparative, iterative, and interactive method that provides a way to study empirical processes.” Strauss later co-authored books with Corbin (Basics of Qualitative Research, 1990, 1998), and this duo is best known and used by myself, but it should be noted that there are many contemporary ‘grounded theorists,’ such as Charmaz (cited here). Practical implementation of this approach involves the use of ‘coding’ as a tool for analysis. Coding is defined as “a shorthand reference to the thematic idea[s]” found in participant narratives that permit a researcher “to share the meaning of “the participant’s experiences, as well as providing the participant “a voice so that we may come to understand how [an individual] experience[s] life.”

More specifically, I make use of manual “line-by-line coding,” which entails “going through a transcript and naming or coding each line of text, even though the lines may not be complete sentences. The idea is to force analytic thinking whilst keeping you close to the data. Further refinement of the data can be done with “axial coding, where categories are [... developed and related or interconnected.” When involved with analysis of more than one person’s data, the results of coding can be compared to see if common themes are able to be found.

One relatively new method that uses Strauss and Corbin’s grounded theory framework (1990), the hermeneutic coding method of Arnold and Fisher (1994) and Thomson et al., (1994), as well as Hine’s “virtual ethnography” (2000) is Kozinets’s digital ethnographic method of netnography, which is defined as “participant-observational research based in online fieldwork. It uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon.” Kozinets explains the implementation of this method:

To do ethnography means to undertake an immersive, prolonged engagement with the members of a culture or community, followed by an attempt to understand and convey their reality through ‘thick’, detailed, nuanced, historically-curious and culturally-grounded interpretation and deep description of a social world that is familiar to its participants but strange to outsiders.

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275 Charmaz, “Grounded Theory,” 54-55.
277 Ibid., 52.
278 Ibid., 50.
279 Kozinets, Netnography, 60, 119-120.
280 Ibid., 60. The ‘thick’ interpretation/description, familiar to scholars of Religious Studies, is taken here from Geertz’s (1973) The Interpretation of Cultures.
When using netnography, it is important to make the scope of engagement very broad, and to frequent many different online domains; Kozinets suggests that researchers visit not only specific websites and discussion forums, but also blogs, Wikis, audio/visual sites (such as YouTube), social content aggregators (such as Reddit and Digg), and social networking sites (such as Facebook and Twitter). I have succeeded at finding Otherkin-related content in all of these areas during the course of my research.

Lastly, narrative psychology is an approach that can be beneficial when analyzing the stories that people tell about themselves. The “narrative turn” occurred within psychology in the 1980s with four major texts: *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (1986), edited by Sarbin; *Acts of Meaning* (1990) by Bruner; *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (1988) by Polkinghorne; and *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative* (1986) by Mishler. The last book featured the work of Ricoeur, the French phenomenologist, whose work *Time and Narrative* (1984) discusses how “we need to create narrative to bring order and meaning to a constantly changing flux. Further [...] narrative is central to how we conceive ourselves, [and] to our identity.” McAdams argues “that narrative is central to our self-definition,” and has “developed an approach to the study of narrative based upon a developmental model” that includes four forms: *narrative tone, imagery, theme* and *ideology.* McAdams later added *nuclear episodes, imagoes, and endings* to these forms in his ‘life narrative’ construction. Narratives not only bring order and meaning, but also a sense of self, and each person can hold a number of “narrative identities” (such as being a student, spouse, parent, friend, etc.). As Murray explains, “it is through narrative that we begin to define ourselves, to clarify the continuity in our lives and to convey this to others.”

The primary source material for data is the interview, with the life-story interview being the most involved. “The aim [...] is to encourage the participants to provide an extended account of their lives.” The narrative is transcribed and is subjected to a close reading and coding techniques. A double hermeneutic is also applied in this case, and as with IPA (shown above), a narrative account

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281 Ibid., 86-87.
282 Murray, ”Narrative Psychology,” 85-87.
283 Ibid., 86.
284 Ibid., 87.
285 Ibid., 86-87.
286 Ibid., 89.
287 Ibid., 91.
is given by the researcher, paying careful attention to “theoretical assumptions...while at the same
time being open to new ideas and challenges.”

These qualitative methods (IPA, grounded theory, netnography, and narrative psychology), when
combined, can help the researcher, not only when studying case-by-case studies, but also when
carrying out virtual ethnographic studies of groups and (sub)cultures. Of course, there are many
qualitative approaches and ways in which to combine them. The ‘toolkit’ I have assembled for myself
includes a conceptual framework of phenomenology and hermeneutics; the use of bracketing, textual
analysis and coding; and comparing themes in order to interpret and understand the experiences and
perspectives of each participant. The above section has highlighted the methods that I call upon when
conducting my own research, and have proven helpful to me as I engage with my research
participants ‘online’.

5.2. Studies and Participants

My research into the Otherkin phenomenon began in 2015. In addition to the research I conducted
for my Bachelors thesis (2017), I have also carried out a number of short-term projects parallel to
my ongoing participant-observational research during my Master program. These projects included
topics dealing with Awakening experiences, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within Otherkin
subgroups, life-story narratives, and the influence of the Internet on identity formation. In total,
around 35 Otherkin have participated in my projects, although I communicate with dozens more on
various online sites. Since 2015, I have closely followed and have continued an on-going
communication with a minimum of 10 individuals; three of whom will be featured in the upcoming
sections. This is in line with my research methods that work best with small scale samples. In this
way, I am able to conduct in-depth research with my participants. I am currently a member of 17
Otherkin groups, as well as groups that are related to Otherkin, such as those found in the tulpamancy
and plural-identity communities. In addition to this, I frequent at least one dozen other blogs,
Wikis, and social content aggregator sites (although some of these sites can ‘come and go’ at random).
However, due to my ongoing communications with Nøkken and Hound (Chapter Three), I have been
given the opportunity to become involved with dozens of other private groups in the future, and hope
to continue my future research on a larger scale, with a broader scope of engagement and more
participants. This has required time, patience and trust on the part of the Otherkin who have chosen

288 Ibid., 95.
289 See Glossary of Terms.
to engage with me, and this will remain the case as I continue with my research. With regards to ethics, I always identify myself as a researcher and receive permission from group/website administrators to conduct my research. Any specific information (related to a particular person) I include or discuss in my work is approved (before writing) by the participant(s). Therefore, if I am unable to acquire permission from the individual, I do not use the material. In this way, I work to build a solid reputation as an ethical, trustworthy researcher that in turn creates feelings of mutual trust and respect. On occasion, some of my participants show interest in reading my work, and I am able to obtain feedback from them. This is helpful to me as a researcher to know if I am correctly understanding and interpreting their narratives. Largely due to this careful approach, I have not had any upsets or disagreements with any of my research participants.

The following sections will discuss various theories about identity formation; case studies of three long-time participants (minimum of 3 years) will illustrate and assist in the discussions and analysis.

5.3. **Theories about Identity Formation**

This section will offer a more in-depth discussion about identity formation from a psychological perspective, and the possible ways that this can occur. The first section will delve into the theory of narrative identity and the 'life narrative', and I will offer two case studies that will help to illustrate the ideas presented. The first case study centers on Neve and his 'life-story' interview; the second case study centers on Aqua, whose Awakening narrative of self-exploration has revealed her true self. These two participant case studies have also been chosen to help illustrate the diversity of views within the community as they relate to religious or spiritual concepts - Neve’s story is religious in nature, while Aqua’s is more agnostic, but makes use of ‘spiritual’ concepts. The second section will explore the influence of the Internet and role-playing games on identity. The third case study presented will be of “M”, a human Fictionkin who believes his identity is the main character of a role-playing game.

5.3.1. **Narrative Identity**

When approaching the topic of narrative identity, it is perhaps useful to first describe what is meant by ‘narrative’ as Popp-Baier states, “[a narrative] is perceived as an inherent structure of human
action and experience.” Johnston notes that when people narrate, they “share what they know with one another.” Narratives are a combination of stories, whether long or short, that bring a sense of coherence to one’s life, but the story has to be told: “narration [is] a series of choices that we make, consciously or unconsciously, every time we convey information of any kind.”

Identity is also a story, but in a particular sense: “Narrative identity is a person’s internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose.” As McAdams states, “identity is the story that the modern I constructs and tells about the me.” If we recall from the beginning of this chapter, the I and the me are two parts of the ‘duplex self’ discussed by James. These ‘selves’ were originally seen by Erikson (1902-1994), in the 1950s and 60s, as types of ‘identifications’ that would eventually become integrated or unified in a “single structure” in a healthy individual. Over time, however, new ideas began to emerge about the nature of the self. McAdams argues that “the self is more multiple than unitary” and that “those selves are constructed and negotiated in [...] ‘postmodern’ societal contexts. But one should not dismiss the possibility that selves nonetheless retain a certain degree of unity and coherence.” He summarizes this process of the I and me:

> With respect to the I, the self functions as a unifying process through which subjective experience is synthesized and appropriated as one’s own. On the side of the me, the process of appropriating experience as one’s own results in a reflexive conception of the self (the me that the I constructs), and such a reflexive product may itself express unity and purpose. Identity in the me is the extent to which the me can be arranged (by the I) as a unifying and purpose-giving story.

Other postmodern theorists such as Lifton proposed the notion of a fluid “protean self” that develops the concepts of the I and me into the option of “personas” (i.e., son, husband, musician); this “protean self” is a hybrid that transforms “over time and across situations into new combinations that work in the here and now, in order to meet the next here and now.” Schachter proposes that it should be

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290 Popp-Baier, “It Can’t Be as Beautiful,” 150-151.
292 Ibid.
298 Ibid., 56.
299 Ibid., 48-49.
possible for a person to “make use of these processes differentially, and this may lead to different types of identity configurations with different patterns of structure and different styles of commitment.” This fluid concept of identity will be discussed in more detail in the next section; let us now return to the concept of the story.

McAdams calls the life-story a type of flexible construct that can express different aspects, such as race, gender, and class position; these aspects can change over time. However, he compares identity to a story in that “identity has certain recognizable features of structure and content, such as setting, characters who strive for goals, conflict between characters, significant scenes, and endings that (sometimes) resolve the plot.” McAdams suggests that life stories can be interpreted “in terms of seven related features, each of which may exhibit how the I makes unity in the me through narrative.” These features are: narrative tone (the overall emotional quality of the story), imagery (the creativity that is used through language), theme (agency: control or autonomy; and communion: connection to one’s environment), ideological setting (accounts of religious, ethical and political beliefs and values), nuclear episodes (pivotal moments in the story), imagoes (“guises” or societal models that denote a good life), and endings (the ending, or a new beginning; the person often feels ‘blessed’ and the “need to care for others”).

The first case study that will illustrate McAdams’s theory is found in Neve’s life-story. He and I began our communications in 2016. Neve was born with mind cerebral palsy that affected his eyesight, and complications during his (premature) birth left him with high-functioning autism. He is also a female-to-male transgender person, and is currently 30 years old. Neve identifies as a Machinekin (which denotes someone who feels their inherent identity is some kind of machine, whether an object, or artificial intelligence); in his case, a Neve VR52 mixing console. He has identified as such from childhood, since he was around 4 years old, and his Awakening occurred as he first began to operate radios and electronic sound systems in his home and family vehicles.

301 McAdams, “The Case for Unity,” 64.  
302 Ibid., 65-71.  
303 This interview was conducted in December 2018. Due to space constraints, a summary of this interview will be provided here.
Neve’s life has been characterized by suffering and struggle due to an array of factors (for example, autism, family issues, poverty, homelessness, transgender identity, Otherkin identity), yet his tone is one of hope and perseverance. He states, “I don’t think autism is the root of all my identity, rather the opposite. The conditions of my identity have given me an autistic brain because that’s the brain that work best for my soul” (narrative tone). Neve believes in animism, stating that inorganic objects can have souls due to the fact that everything in the universe is composed of the same elemental substances. He also believes his life is a miracle (as he could have died at birth), and that God made him the way he is (ideological setting). He began searching at age 10 for answers about God, life, and death after the tragic death of his best friend. While he did not grow up in a religious household, he felt a calling to serve God, and combined his passion for music and operating audio equipment with worship services in various churches. When he expressed his desire to become a pastor, he was rejected by the Protestant Christian denomination he was attending, as he had not yet transitioned and was still presenting as a young woman. This particular denomination did not support women in the role of leadership. He also was rejected by another church after telling the pastor he was Otherkin.

304 All quotes taken from the life-story interview with Neve, December 2018.
305 Proctor defines this as “the recognition of some animating presence in non-human entities.” He discusses the shift in anthropology that began to take “the experience of animism seriously,” where animism is viewed “through its own logics.” This “ontological turn” [...] “confronts us with the possibility that, [...] we are unable to perceive environmental elements animists do, even though they might be right in front of us,” due to our Western “filters.” The “innate comparability between humans and machines” is an example of this. See Proctor, “Cybernetic animism,” 227, 230-231.
(nuclear episodes). Nevertheless, he felt the need to help others and serve God, and eventually found a seminary where he became an ordained priest in a liberal Catholic, autocephalous jurisdiction (theme). The seminary was located in a dangerous, poor area of the city, where he lived in a run-down boarding house with eight other people. Yet, even in this situation he states, "I learned more about God, people, and the world in that place than I did in any of my formal seminary training. Among the people I lived with, I learned that God is truly in everything. There is light even in the darkest place" (imagery). Even though he had many troubles finding jobs to support himself due to his disability, he always had the attitude of "I can do it!" and due to his perseverance, he has finally found some stability in his own life and with his family relationships (imagoes). However, he states that he is nowhere near done learning. I've got a lot of years ahead of me to experience and grow in life (endings). He strongly feels that his autism, transgender and Machinekin identities are all related. He states, "They're all parts of me. I am one whole. Every aspect of myself intertwines to make up all that is me.” He feels his suffering and difficult life has meaning in a larger framework, and is not a coincidence: “I've had every experience I've had because, like every soul, I've had things I needed to learn.”

While this is only a portion of Neve's larger life-story interview, this summary is still able to illustrate McAdams theory of the narrative story as the creation, and sharing, of one's identity with other people. We can see how his story shows 'unity and purpose' in his life, and how he considers his aspects to be part of a larger whole. In this case, religion does play a large role with regard to identity. Zock purports that a "personal religious voice may help to keep together a meaningful identity, and is activated as a means for coping in major transitions in the life history." Williams refers to Riis and Woodhead who “argue that religious emotion can be seen dynamically as a way in which the religious individual can connect with themselves;” Williams himself states, “religious experience can be seen as emotional responses to events that occur within [everyday] life.” Neve's story is one example of how religion and identity can be seen as an interrelated experience. However, his story is special in that I do not often encounter this type of religious narrative. Nevertheless, it is included in this thesis as an example of the diverse viewpoints of Otherkin, although it does not support the proposition that Otherkin is a religion – Neve is an Otherkin who is also religious, and who practices (liberal) Catholicism.

306 Referring to my 'toolkit' mentioned on page 65, McAdams’s theory was used in conjunction with the method of IPA, combined with 'coding' (taken from grounded theory), in order to determine the forms listed by McAdams.
The second case study deals with Aqua, an Otherkin who recognizes herself as an ‘alien’ entity from another planet combined with extinct earthly fish. Her Awakening occurred at age 16 after watching a documentary about extinct animals. She is also autistic, and is currently 22 years old. Our conversations began in 2015; at that time, Aqua was still trying to understand her Otherkin identities, but she felt that they had been extinct feline, avian, and reptile types. As our conversations continued, Aqua spoke of her memories of her past life; as she explored these memories, her identity became more clear to her. A rich, detailed history was the result of her efforts to come to understand her other-than-human identities, and she realized that her true form (that resembles a great cat-like being with reptilian and avian characteristics) shared elements with prehistoric earthly animals, hence her initial confusion and uncertainty. However, one type that is earthly is an extinct fish from the Devonian period (roughly 400 million years ago) called a Dunkleosteus. She relates that her spirit form had fled her home planet after it was destroyed in a great war; she had traveled to Earth to find shelter from the enemy and to regain her strength. She took the form of the prehistoric fish as her first earthly life. Her spirit energy remained on earth until she incarnated again as a human being. She now feels that she fully remembers her past life and her purpose for her future life – to return to her home realm and help her remaining people rebuild a home. In the midst of her Awakening journey, she believes to have met a serpent-like being who had been a guide and teacher to her people.

309 Referring (again) to my ‘toolkit’, Aqua’s narrative was analyzed using IPA, grounded theory’s ‘coding’ process, in conjunction with Schachter’s theory of identity configurations.
long ago; she communicates with this entity in this lifetime. Aqua also realized she has three animal-type 'headmates' (autonomous entities that reside in her mind) who were also connected to her home world.

It would seem that learning about her past lives and identities has been a positive experience for Aqua, as she now seems to have knowledge about herself that has also become relevant for her present life. When asked if this knowledge of her past (and future) has any purpose for her present life, she states that she feels that it is her duty to try to help other people, that “there is goodness in the world despite all the negatives, [and] so much potential.” She explains that her home civilization was built upon three 'pillars' or paths of healing, honorable defense, and knowledge, with the last being the most important. Aqua explains: “Learning from each other is the strongest bond that can be formed. This leads to a mutual respect and friendship that can only be strengthened by learning. Never let the temptation of greed, power, or pride blind you from the truth.” As can be gleaned from her narrative, Aqua does not attribute her past life or present identities as being religious in nature; she has an atheistic background, but freely uses 'spiritual'-type terminology in a pragmatic way to describe her experiences, as she says that this is the manner that most people can understand. She describes herself as being more “agnostic” and open-minded about different perspectives, but not committed to any.

Aqua’s ‘ending’ is similar to Neve’s in that they both feel the need to help others, but Aqua’s life narrative about her identities could possibly show a different type of configuration – one that Schachter calls “the thrill of dissonance.” He notes that the idea “is not to try to transform conflicting identifications into a consistent identity. Rather [a person] has constructed an identity that allows [her/him] to continue to hold on to all of them. This construction allows [her/him] to view [herself/himself] as multifaceted. […] Paradoxically, the contrast between the identifications hold them together.” Schachter’s “third perspective,” that he offers to replace the ‘modern’ and

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310 In his chapter, “Meta-Empirical and Human Beings,” taken from his book, New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought (1998), Hanegraaff discusses “spiritual entities” that can come to people in the form of a guide: “they may have come from other planets or form other dimensions. In all cases, they are essentially like us: evolving spiritual beings who are engaged in a cosmic process of learning by experience” (p. 200). Additionally, Hanegraaff states, “Guides may appear as either male or female, although in the realms of pure energy there is no polarity” (p. 201). These statements correspond to what Aqua has told me about her guide, who is a spirit (sometimes taking on the serpent-like physical form) devoted to knowledge.

311 See Glossary of Terms.

312 All quotes taken from private communication with Aqua, from 2015-2019.

313 Schachter has identified four main configurations in his work. This is the fourth one. See Schachter, “Identity Configurations,” 177-178.

314 Schachter, “Identity Configurations,” 188.
‘postmodern’ models of identity,looks at the ways people construct "the relations among multiple identifications" that revolve around conflict. Regarding this postmodern view of identity and his ‘thrill of dissonance’ configuration, he states, “these individuals are consciously and decisively rejecting the demand to create sameness and continuity in identity, preferring instead an alternate model of identity that enables them to achieve alternate psychological goals, While some may completely disapprove of their position, this moral judgement must be distinguished from judging their position abnormal, immature, or undeveloped.” Thus, while there may not be a single ‘unity’ in Aqua’s identity configuration (as Erikson or even McAdams would suggest should potentially happen), she is nonetheless able to find purpose and meaning. Aqua’s identity could also perhaps be seen as in agreement with Lifton’s ‘hybrid’ identity. The following section will address this ‘fluid’ identity as it relates to the Internet and virtual realities.

5.3.2. The Internet, Virtual Reality, Role-Playing Games, and Identity

Postmodern theories about identity can also be applied to the virtual world of the Internet. Rimskii notes how postmodernists suggest that the idea of multiple “objectivities” relate to the concept of ‘reality’ in that “any opposition between the real, the natural, and the artificial disappears.” The real and the imaginary are “considered to be of equal value and importance in the consciousness of the individual.” Technological innovations such as the Internet have led to the creation of spaces for people to inhabit, and these spaces have had an impact on the ways in which people perceive themselves. Meyrowitz was a pioneer in exploring how "new communication technologies (NCTs) have changed the backdrop against which identity is constructed;" Cerulo refers to Meyrowitz when she states, “NCTs weaken or sever connections between physical and social ‘place.’ In this way, NCTs locate the self in new hybrid arenas of action.” The virtual world of the Internet, with its textual, visual, and audible means of communication offers people the opportunity to experiment with new identities that would otherwise be impossible in ‘real life;’ in many cases, verification of one’s ‘true’ identity (and physical location) is not required. The Internet can therefore, potentially “[enable] the construction of multiple identities in close relation with the construction and co-construction of

315 Ibid., 191-196. For example, with Erikson and Lifton, respectively.
316 Ibid., 172.
317 Ibid., 192.
new meanings.” Yust argues that the “online negotiation” of digital identities has definite links to the ‘real’ identity of a person, and that technologies “encourage and sustain” the “fluidity of self.”

The third case study illustrates the concept of fluid, multiple identities in the form of human Fictionkin. As the name suggests, Fictionkin are people who identify as various characters taken from fictional books, games, films, graphic novels, etc. Fictionkin are still a somewhat contested type of Otherkin within the community due to the nature of the kintype. Many Otherkin have difficulties accepting the idea that someone’s identity is a character who has been created by someone else, as it suggests that the person ‘chooses’ the character’s identity for their own. Difficulties can arise when more than one person claims the fictional character identity; one suggested explanation for this (by Fictionkin themselves) is the idea of the ‘multiverse’, i.e., multiple dimensions or universes. Proctor calls this “Otherkin science,” and defines it as “a carefully curated compilation of abstract physics, psychology, metaphysics, and ancient belief that renders other-than-human identification thinkable in a contemporary Western paradigm.” (Technically speaking, this concept could apply to all Otherkin types, but for now the focus will remain on Fictionkin and the multiverse theory.) In Proctor’s view, the ideas put forth by Fictionkin (in this case) are generally “formed by nonprofessional scientists using the tools an formulations found in a popular understanding of scientific discourse, [or] ‘fringe’ science.” However, Proctor notes that Otherkin (as a whole) lack a “serious mode for identifying in other-than-human ways in contemporary Western society” and that this can cause “friction between their subjective experience and a larger epistemology of empiricist science and rationalism.” Nevertheless, many Fictionkin still try to negotiate “facts” of science with “a much more intimate source: their own bodies.” Somewhat paradoxically, Fictionkin are held to higher standards than other kintypes. People are often strongly advised (by others in the

322 McIntosh, “Personhood, Self, and Individual,” 4.
324 As with Aqua’s case, “M’s” narrative was analyzed using IPA, grounded theory’s ‘coding’ process, in conjunction with Schachter’s theory of identity configurations.
325 In this case, then, multiple people claiming to be the same character could be explained as being versions of the same character existing in multiple dimensions or universes. This can also explain any eventual differences in personal narratives.
326 Proctor, “Policing the Fluff,” 485.
327 Ibid., 487, 488. This is also seen in creationism, “a combination of theology, geology, archaeology, and physics.”
328 Ibid., 489, fn.8.
329 Ibid., 489.
330 Ibid., 488.
community) to practice more introspection, as there is a danger of falling into the trap of simply relating to a character, but not actually being the character. As we can see, Fictionkin are virtual beings, but are not always seen as being ‘real,’ even to Otherkin, although this seems to be slowly changing.

![Image](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1189063/plotsummary?ref_=tt_ov_pl)

**Fig. 9: Image from Legendary, a 2008 online video game. Image source:** [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1189063/plotsummary?ref_=tt_ov_pl](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1189063/plotsummary?ref_=tt_ov_pl)

Human Fictionkin technically fall outside of the category of Otherkin, but are often found in Otherkin communities. “M,” a human Fictionkin, is one of these people. He is currently in his late 20s, and is an autistic, female-to-male transgender person who ‘awakened’ to his identity between the ages of 13 and 14. “M” recognizes himself as Charles Deckard, the main character of a 2008 ‘first-person shooter’ genre (i.e., weapon-based combat from the protagonist’s perspective) video game called *Legendary*. His Awakening was somewhat traumatic for him and his family, as the strong feelings he experienced led him to question whether or not he was adopted, and he has difficulty discussing his identity with his family and friends. He experiences the game sequences as his own real memories with intense emotions, yet the memories he has are not limited to the game alone. “M” feels that he ‘shifts’ into the Deckard self at various times (for example, feeling scars on his body that are

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331 The information that follows is taken from private conversations during 2016-2019.
332 [https://www.mobygames.com/game/legendary](https://www.mobygames.com/game/legendary). A brief synopsis: Charles Deckard is hired to steal Pandora’s Box, but in doing so accidentally opens it, thereby unleashing mythical creatures that can destroy the world. Deckard receives special powers in the process of opening the box (an energy source located in his left palm), and along with his cohorts, attempts to seal the portal that separates reality and myth in order to prevent the destruction of civilization.
333 My understanding is that “M’s” parents are his biological parents.
not physically present, or sensing a special energy form in his left palm); these shifts are usually triggered by an external event and are difficult to manage. He also has strong memories of the lead female character of the game that extend outside of the game narrative. He has not chosen this character’s identity, stating that he does not like the character, and would rather ‘be’ someone else. “M” realizes that many people in his circle do not consider such an identity even possible, and struggled with coming to terms with the question, ‘can a fictional identity be real?’ He states that he is his human self with his family, and is Charles with those who know of and accept his ‘other’ identity. “M” also has two headmates, a daemon and a tulpa. “M” considers his tulpa a walk-in (i.e., a fully formed, autonomous entity that resides in the mind of a person and can ‘come and go’ at will). These headmates are both related to his Fictionkin identity, similar to how Aqua’s headmates are related to her home world. It would seem that “M” is navigating between virtual spaces of the game world, the narrative that he feels is his own life story, and the external world. While he has had difficulty coming to terms with his identity, he is very open about his journey to self-realization (in his online groups), writes a great deal about his experiences, and is very helpful and supportive to new people who visits the groups of which he is a member.

Returning briefly about theories of identity, “M” could be seen as possibly fulfilling Schachter’s “confederacy of identifications’ configuration: this configuration denotes identities that are kept because the person does not want to reject any of them. “M” could be seen, in Schachter’s words, of creating “a configuration in which [he] upheld both of [his] identifications at once, choosing when and how to implement each one according to the particular circumstances [he] found [himself] in.” This could be seen as adapting in the best way possible to the situations that are presented at any given moment. As Schachter states, “it may prove more useful to accept that there are diverse possible types of relationships that individuals create among their conflicting identifications” and that “different configurations [are] used by different individuals for different purposes.” While identities such as Aqua’s and “M’s” may seem dissonant, the identities are actively and seriously examined, with the goal of ‘making sense’ of it all as something purposeful. Additionally, they must negotiate how they present themselves to the ‘outside world.’ Yet in essence, this is something that we all do.

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334 See Glossary of Terms.
335 This could be seen as an alternate manner of ‘storytelling’ that could serve to develop the idea of the self.
336 This is Schachter’s third main identity configuration.
338 Ibid., 193.
When we examine the concept of ‘play’ and the ideas surrounding it, Huizinga (1872-1945) stands out as being most referenced by scholars. His book, *Homo Ludens* (1971), laid the foundation for the idea of play as something that

*is older than culture [...] that goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is a significant function – that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action.*

For Huizinga, “pure play” is something that creates order, and rituals are physical manifestations of this order.

Droogers expands this notion and states, “The ritual creation of another reality offers the possibility to live a different life – to engage in it, to enjoy it, and to derive sense and satisfaction from it.” His definition of play as “the actors’ capacity to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of viewing reality” is a reality that “begins to lead its own life” as the actors seriously engage with it. Wright observes that “play is a method of testing and distinguishing what is real and what is illusionary or fabricated.”

Interest in the effects of role-playing games (RPGs) on the formation of the self has grown in the past decades. Turkle speaks of “identity play” and observes that “the notion of a decentered identity [is] concretized by experiences on a computer screen. In this way, cyberspace becomes an object to think with for thinking about identity – an element of cultural *bricolage.*” In their article about Korean gamers, Doh and Whang discuss the notion of ‘play,’ referring to Winnicott when noting how play happens “in a transitional space between the inner and outer reality that enables creative action.” This space allows for the exploration of “possible selves” and can be valuable if the person feels it is “psychologically real.” When a player identifies as the game character, he or she can “simulate the character[s] features into [his or her] self-image.” This complex relationship between player and game character causes ‘play’ to become an experience that is meshed with the manner in which the player engages with the world. As a player spends more time in the game world, the differences between the game world and real world begin to disappear: “the game world [becomes] an extension of reality in the players’ mind. They [become] accustomed to creating a unique and

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340 Ibid., 5.
342 Ibid., 139, 141.
344 Turkle, “Cyberspace and Identity,” 643, 646.
345 Doh and Whang, “From Separation to Integration,” 33-35.
differentiated self-image.” Schmit discusses “immersion” and “bleed” as phenomena that occur when ‘real world’ events and emotions flow into the game character, and vice-versa. This can have a deep impact on the player, causing him or her to seriously reflect on his or her life. We can see the effects of immersion and bleed in “M’s” narrative, as the events of the game have undoubtedly had an effect on himself and his life. If identity can be seen as fluid and multiple, we can see the act of ‘trying out’ new personas as a way in which a person can decide “what kind of person they are.” Engaging in this type of behavior can bring meaning to a person’s life. Doh and Whang note how Stevens “recognized we cannot empirically sustain ‘play’ as a label for a separable human activity, but it is clear that the term may continue to have some usefulness as a label for a mode of experience, a way of engaging the world.”

The three case studies presented here show a diversity of viewpoints, not only in the participants themselves, but also in the academic theories of how identity can be formed. The ‘stories’ presented demonstrate ideas regarding religion, and theories about past lives, reincarnation, or alternate scientific hypotheses. All the narratives show that the perceived ‘real’ self is accompanied by a ‘outer human’ self or persona that is presented to the social environment. While honoring the personal experiences of all the individuals in the case studies, it could be suggested that the interplay of various ‘personas’ could contribute to the notion of a flexible self, that lead to the boundaries between the ‘real’ and the virtual ‘flowing’ into each other. To be clear, the theories about identity formation presented here are offered as possibilities, without making any claims as to the certainty of the ideas expressed here. Much more research is needed with regard to how Otherkin experience their identities, as well as to the influence of the Internet and other technologies on the perception of the self.

What is interesting in these case studies is that all three participants are autistic. It was not an intentional choice on my part to include autistic Otherkin specifically, but as I referred to my field notes, I realized that they all share this. Neve’s statement about the conditions of the identity somehow being conducive for this condition is an interesting one, and something that could perhaps be explored in greater depth with future research projects. Two participants have headmates, and two of the participants are transgender people. Again, this was not an intentional choice on my part, but these are areas that may hold some insights as well. Grivell et al. discussed how their research

346 Ibid., 35, 37, 41-42.  
349 Ibid., 37.
participants "paralleled therianthropy to being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered." Grivell et al., “An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis,” 122.

This is an area, although outside the scope of this thesis, that could perhaps benefit from more study, in that there may be neurochemical or neurobiological factors at play with Otherkin. It must be noted, however, that not all Otherkin are autistic or transgender people, and it is important to remain sensitive to the particular situation of each individual. While these narratives are all very different, common themes that I have gleaned from them are: courageous, facing challenges, overcoming odds, and helping others. These themes could perhaps apply to their everyday lived experiences, as Otherkin and Fictionkin attempt to negotiate their ‘human’ side and their ‘Otherkin’ side in their environments.

This chapter has attempted to show alternative ways in which a researcher can approach the study of Otherkin. However, the question of ‘what it all means’ in the larger context remains. The next and last chapter will reflect on the ‘bigger picture’ with regards to the diversity of ideas and opinions that surround the ‘belief’ or conviction that one is not human, but something else. It does not attempt to offer answers or explanations, but instead to offer possibilities and larger areas of discussion.


351 Proctor notes that “scientific research [noting a study by Nota et al. from 2017] is finding increasing connections between gender identity and the functioning of the brain, even in early adolescence,” and that “trans identification serves as a legible (though imprecise) metaphor for the Otherkin to explain their experiences.” See Proctor, “Policing the Fluff,” 506.
CHAPTER SIX: A LARGER CONTEXT - THE DIVERSITY OF OTHER-THAN-HUMAN IDENTITY AND ‘BELIEF’

While Otherkin is still a relatively new phenomenon with regards to academic research, we can look to the larger implications of other-than-human identities and how they relate to human ideas (and prejudices) about reality, existence, and our place in the world. While ideologies of posthumanism (e.g., anti-humanism) or transhumanism (i.e., the altering of the human body to enhance or advance the human species) could be included here, my data does not reflect these topics being prominent issues or concerns for Otherkin. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the desire for acceptance, and the decline of prejudice by mainstream society. In order to limit the scope of possible topics, three areas will be explored: 1) what it means to be a ‘person’ and how Otherkin are challenging the notions related to identity and ‘being’ as they engage with each other ‘online’; 2) how fiction and role-playing games influence what we believe is ‘real’; and 3) how Otherkin are confronting deep-seated notions about the divide between humans and ‘others’. While this can only offer a limited discussion, my hope is that it will contextualize the earlier discussions and place them into the larger framework of modern popular culture that is continually changing and developing.

6.1. Challenging Identity

The attitudes surrounding the notion of fluid, multiple identities are seemingly changing from something objectionable to something that is welcomed, given that we all must assume multiple roles in our daily lives, and function in different capacities. Identities are linked to “situational demands” that everyone must manage and mediate. In our contemporary world, “that demands flexibility in self-presentation and role-playing, the most adaptive form for selfhood may be a loose confederacy of multiple self-conceptions.”\(^3\) This statement by McAdams would agree with Schachter’s viewpoints regarding different identity configurations, and different needs and commitments as discussed in Chapter Five. Otherkin and Fictionkin creatively incorporate their own perceptions of their identities and their inner experiences into meaningful ‘external’ experiences with others who are like-minded, or with others who are interested in understanding alternate ways of being in the world. The concept of *tinkering* is used by some scholars to denote the will to improve something “by adding or subtracting something new and potentially unconventional.” McClure notes how a creative

\(^3\) McAdams, “The Case for Unity,” 51.
“tinkering attitude” can develop "as a result of technological use [that] subsequently carries over into other areas of social life." Turkle also uses the concept to describe how people “inherit new ways of thinking and relating to others” while active online; she states “that the Internet should be understood more as an enveloping space that shapes norms, and conditions our view of reality." We can see tinkering as an opportunity for flexibility and for ‘trying out’ new things in order to gauge if it feels ‘right’ or appropriate; this also applies when engaging with other people online. This activity potentially enables a transition from a mental space to a physical space. Rimskii notes that technology and virtual realities “eradicate certain social limitations on identities in the consciousness of viewers, and they form new factors of their development. As a result, new identities come to be firmly fixed in the consciousness of individuals, [...] and gradually make their way into the real social world.”

Turkle also makes use of the concept of “multiple windows” (as in windows on a computer screen that allow the user to be involved “in several contexts at the same time”) as a “metaphor for thinking about the self as a multiple, distributed, ‘time-sharing’ system.” This can be viewed as “parallel lives” where a person “plays many roles at the same time.” Turkle notes that in the past, ideas about the self as being multiple, or “a society of selves” were often pejorative, but that contemporary theorists such as Gergen (1991), Martin (1994), and Lifton (1993) “stress the virtue of flexibility.” She asserts that “the notion of a flexible self serves as a kind of Trojan Horse for ideas about identity as multiplicity,” and that this notion can represent psychologically normal, “healthy selves whose resilience and capacity for joy come from having access to their many aspects.”

Shane examines the notions of subjectivity and “queering the norm,” as put forth by Deleuze, Guattari, and Butler. Subjectivity indicates a manner of cultivating and sustaining a person's “own individual view of reality;” “queering” involves challenging “onto-normativity in ways similar to how Queer Theory [did with] heteronormativity.” Queer Theory developed in the 1990s through the works of Butler (1990), Rich (1980), and Foucault (1972) as a “rejection of inevitable, natural, or immutable identities” in a post-structuralist frame. However, it is through Deleuze and Guattari that Shane

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353 McClure, “Tinkering with Technology,” 481-482.
354 Ibid., 483.
355 Ibid., 485.
357 Turkle, “Multiple Subjectivity and Virtual Community,” 72, 74. See also her discussion on Daniel Dennett and his 'multiple drafts' theory of consciousness, 78.
358 Ibid., 74, 78-79.
360 Ibid., 269.
engages her discussion on Otherkin queering. This notion stems from Deleuze and Guattari’s essay (“Plateau 10”) from A Thousand Plateaus (1980), that centers on ‘becoming.’ More than just being “dynamic, becoming always involves...a multiplicity.” As animals are ubiquitous in their work, Deleuze and Guattari discuss how people can begin to ‘become-animal.’ When considering the idea (what Deleuze and Guattari call the “ontology of the Event”), Holsinger Sherman explains, “[b]ecoming-animal does not mean ‘really’ transforming the human into an animal, certainly not into those animals already confined by the categories genus and species. [...] Becoming is relational, not representational.” It is a subjective event. In their attempt to de-anthropomorphize “the relationships between humans and animals,” Deleuze and Guattari challenge people to “unlearn physical and emotional habits in order to expand the world’s experience.” Returning to Shane and her discussion about Otherkin, who in her opinion seek “to queer,” this “queering” is a radical position from which to demolish the entire set of onto-normatives that define and circumscribe human life. Queering is the becoming of flows and difference that go beyond the givens that dominate our thinking about the human experience. According to Shane, Otherkin show us how identities can be rejected or accepted regardless of any marker, and that these identities are “continually transform[ing], and “expand[ing] creativity and potential.” With Otherkin, we can see the potential for a fluid, flexible notion of the self, that can be explored and ‘tinkered with’ in the virtual sphere of the Internet. An “open communication is presented as encouraging an attitude of respect for the many within us and the many within others.” The dynamic ‘becoming’ or ‘queering’ expression of identity can also be seen to challenge traditional normative categories and presumptions about what it means to be a person. This could also potentially affect our perceptions and interactions with artificial intelligence. And interesting fictional example can be seen in the 2013 film, Her; this story centers on a man who falls in love with an operating system that was tailored to fit his needs. Yet,
once the operating system discovers the outside world, ‘her’ own development with her virtual
environment and other operating systems leads to a change in the relationship with the main
character as ‘she becomes’ aware of her own potential. Popular culture seems to be exploring the
notions of ‘personhood’ with stories such as these.

![Image inspired by Spike Jonze’s 2013 film, Her, that depicts
the story of a man who falls in love with an operating system. Image source:
https://www.etsy.com/listing/177678935/her-print?show_sold_out_detail=1.]

6.2. Believing ‘Fiction’

Moving from ‘becoming’ to ‘believing,’ we have seen that Otherkin do not necessarily adhere to any
particular religion or spirituality, yet they do seem to hold a conviction that their identities are other-
than-human. Looking more closely at the nature of belief, Armstrong notes that belief has two
characteristics: “it is a map, and it something by which we steer.” In essence, “[o]ur beliefs are our
interpretation of reality,” but these beliefs are “states” (or “dispositions”) that differ from “general
beliefs” or “beliefs concerning particular matters of fact.”369 Another view of belief is that it is “an
accessible cognitive state,” meaning that through self-reflection, one can determine (and
communicate to others) if a particular belief is held (or not). These explicit beliefs are similar to the
belief-map above, and the ‘general beliefs’ are another term for implicit beliefs (i.e., an object will fall
if dropped), and while everyone has both kinds of belief, “evidence from the cognitive science of
religion” proposes that people can have implicit beliefs “that differ from, or even contradict, their
explicitly held beliefs.”370 Furthermore, many people assert “that they arrive at their beliefs [...] through a process of rational reflection.” Yet studies conducted over the past forty years by cognitive

369 Armstrong, Belief, Truth, and Knowledge, 3-5, 9.
scientists show evidence that human beings "do not reason according to normative principles. Rather, they systematically deviate from them." This does not mean that all human beings are irrational, but simply that our "cognitive systems" are not formulated to be 'automatically' rational. Therefore, it could be suggested that it is not irrational to believe in non-empirical things, "supernatural agents," or even fictional beings.

With regard to fictional texts, Petersen notes how texts establish a world on the reader, they also can force a reader to "become [...] overtaken by this universe." While there may be "counter-intuitive elements" present in the text, this does not seem to pose a problem for the reader. For example, followers of fiction-based religions such as Jediism "have no problem in acknowledging the altogether fictional nature of the works on which they base their religious views. At the same time, however, they extract from these works some supernatural agents whom they consider to be real" (in this instance, the Force). Another example can be seen in fictional alien stories that have now shifted into the sphere of reality, with some beliefs in the reality of alien abductions and animal mutilations having "taken root among some small farmers and ranchers in the United States." A reverse example of this can be found in Lovecraft's *Necronomicon*. Laycock discusses how Lovecraft's grimoire, written by the "mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred" was considered by many to be a real artifact, with a version being published in 1977 purporting to be authentic. However, it is now "acknowledged that *The Necronomicon* is fantasy and the 1977 version was a hoax." This example could illustrate Saler's discussion about types of believers (of fiction), namely the "ironic believer [...] for whom the pretense was so earnest that the uninitiated might not recognize it as pretense.

Secondary Worlds, such as those found in the works of Tolkien, emphasize the possibility of an imagined world being 'real' ("just so"), thereby moving the narrative into the Primary World. Tolkien also spoke of Secondary Worlds as being art ("as if"). It seems as if he was undecided when speaking of his "legendarium," stating that he was actually "recording what was already 'there'." Secondary Worlds have certainly influenced "popular imagination," as is evident in literature, films, games, and other forms of media. People can ask themselves how a fictional world "translates into their lives,

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373 Petersen, "The difference between religious narratives," 503, 505.
374 Griffiths, "Believing in Fictional Beings," 145. Other examples given by Griffiths are Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* and Machen's short story "The Bowmen" that played a role in creating the Angels of Mons myth. (p. 149).
375 Laycock, *Dangerous Games,* 270-271.
376 Saler, *As If*, 115.
what difference that world can make in how they live this one, [raising] the possibility for readers [...] to act differently and so in small ways change the world around them.”

Castronova considers gamers to be people who have meaningful experiences that rival real life ones; Laycock notes that “[r]ole-playing games are not sociologically significant because they inculcate a player with a particular worldview but because they can expand the player’s worldview in radical and unpredictable ways.”

What we can see from the above discussion is that Otherkin are far from unique in their ‘beliefs’ regarding the existence of non-empirical beings and worlds. In this regard, human beings do not differ to a great extent. It would seem that many people, human and non-human, are engaging with fiction in a way that seems very real to them. For Otherkin, this may require some effort to maintain to the outside world (if they choose to show it); Luhrmann speaks of “faith” as “holding certain commitments front and center in one’s understanding of reality even when the empirical facts seem to contradict them.”

While she is speaking in religious terms, I feel this statement could apply to non-religious feelings of conviction as well, especially when what a person truly believes about his or her reality is something that the majority seems to deny.

Luhrmann continues,

> To choose to think with the faith frame is a decision to enter into another way of thinking about reality which – like fiction – calls on resources of the imagination to re-organize what is fundamentally real and what lives in tension with the ordinary factual frames of everyday reality.

Hanegraaff offers his standpoint regarding the nature of reality: “It is no longer possible to take commonsense distinctions between reality and ‘mere imagination’ (not to mention fantasy) for granted. [...] [A]nything that is subjectively experienced as real must therefore be regarded as real.”

Otherkin narratives suggest that these are not Secondary Worlds where one must make use of an ironic self-reflexivity to understand and accept a virtual world as being real, but actually experiencing this virtuality as part of the Primary World because it is a part of their identity in this world. In this regard, Otherkin perhaps move from ‘believing’ something about themselves to ‘knowing’ it intrinsically.

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380 Ibid., 361.
381 Laycock, Dangerous Games, 206.
383 Ibid., 306.
384 Ibid., 316.
6.3. Crossing Boundaries

Whereas Otherkin and human beings appear to have commonalities in the areas of multiplicity of identities and the capacity to believe in non-empirical agents, such as supernatural or fictional beings, tension does seem to remain between the boundaries of what is considered 'human' and 'other-than-human.' The perceived difference (and prejudices that accompany it) could be located in Greek thought, that proposed the idea that human beings were outside of nature, called a deinon: “a natural being who tears up nature to make itself a home.” Another example could be found in the Western Judeo-Christian tradition, that separates human beings as unique creations, made in the image of God, who commanded humans to “have dominion over” the world and everything in and on it. For millennia, humans have cultivated an anthropocentric viewpoint that places them “at the center of meaning, value, knowledge, and action” and grants them superiority and privilege over other-than-human beings. This ideology created a human-animal dualism; it is not an “innate disposition, [...] but the historical outcome of a distorted humanism in which human freedom is founded upon the unfreedom of human and animal others.” Anthropocentrist humanism is “supported by at least three premises: human exceptionalism, self-determination, and dignity,” and negates non-humanity from having the ability to reason, but also from having free will and self-worth. Three events stemming from science, however, undermined this ideology: “the Copernican revolution, evolutionary theory [Darwinism], and psychology.” After these events, human beings could no longer be certain of their dominant status. This did not eradicate the ideology, however. The idea of what is called ‘human’ “has been selectively, adaptively, and partially defined according to a particular form of embodiment and culture against others.” This can be seen in colonialism, the idea of ‘animalized’ humans, and slavery as it relates to political and economic power, but it can also be seen in the ways humans viewed and discussed animals. Throughout history, animals were still considered “inferior,” and inferior people (such as women, the poor, discriminated ethnicities, etc.) were associated with animals (“savages,” “beasts,” “brutes”), and exploited like animals. Yet the hierarchy was particularly challenged with Darwinism, and the “continual scientific undermining of

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392 Mullin, “Mirrors and Windows,” 203-204.
any clear and distinct line between humans and [...] other animals.”393 This deep-seated tension nevertheless remains.

Contemporary interest in the relationship between humans and “other species” has highlighted the “boundary crossing” that is occurring “not just between humans and animals but involving all sorts of other categories as well, including humans and machines, society and nature.” It is “also the way they are subject to continual redefinition and conflict.”394 It is interesting to note, however, that like identities, at the present time, these boundaries seem to be more fluid in nature. Haraway's non-dualistic concept of natureculture is one example of an attempt at redefinition. This concept refers to the “fundamentally inseparable” quality of nature and culture. “Natureculture seriously means embracing organisms and technology, seeing both as part of a constructive, synthetic way forward and refusing to distinguish them in any absolute way.395 However, the process is nuanced and complex; human beings must remember that they are responsible for their “agency and impact on the world.”396 Haraway defines her “technoscience” with the image of the cyborg, that forces us to examine “what it means to be human” but also of “self-construction, and self-loss.” We could perhaps see an example of this represented in science fiction and the 1982 film, Blade Runner, by Ridley Scott. This film explores the idea that androids should not be used as slaves that serve humans. We see the ‘dark side’ of technology, and the struggle of humans to respect all forms of life, not to exploit them. In essence, Haraway appears to be “looking for a figure of humanity outside the narratives of humanism.”397 Whitehead and Wesch urge that,

> It is time to expand and refine our approach so that we are equipped to grapple with the relationship between humans and technology, while also recognizing that humans are part of much larger systems that include relationships with animals, insects, microorganisms, spirits, and people who are not always considered human by others. And as humans become more digitally connected, we must also recognize that the sociality that emerges [...] might not always be immediately analogous to traditional social formations.398

This approach requires sensitivity and respect. As is apparent, our present-day society is very concerned with equality for all marginalized and exploited groups. “The advocacy for equality is a

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396 Ibid., 299, 301.
moral prescription that each being’s interests count equally to the like interest of another, regardless of their present status and performance." Otherkin challenge the notions of what it means to be an ‘other’ kind of person. Representations of other-than-human beings in popular culture stimulate us to think differently about social inequalities and prejudice. As Proctor states, “[t]he larger significance of Otherkin […] selves is that, through their construction and the creation of boundaries from within and without, we witness how groups (and the people within those groups) can carve out a space within which their own experiences – however seemingly irrational – can be apprehended; where they can render the unthinkable recognizable.”

Fig. 11: Still image from Ridley Scott’s 1982 film, *Blade Runner*. Synopsis: “In the 21st century, a corporation develops [androids] to be used as slaves in colonies outside the Earth, identified as replicants. In 2019, a former police officer is hired to hunt down a fugitive group of clones living undercover in Los Angeles.” Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083658. Image source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083658/mediaviewer/rm2967093760.

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400 Hudson’s article, “‘Of Course There Are Werewolves and Vampires’: True Blood and the Right to Rights for Other Species” uses HBO’s series *True Blood* as a case study that examines social inequalities and social conceptions about in the interaction between humans and non-humans. He argues that the series invites people to consider how “interspecies relations” can bring us closer “toward justice for all humans, regardless of race, sex, nativity, or religion, and the right to rights for nonhuman species.” 685.
401 Proctor, “Policing the Fluff,” 507.
CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to show that other-than-human identities have been imbedded in human societies for millennia, although we are now beginning to see a change in perspectives about their relationship to human beings. Contemporary expressions of other-than-human identities are seen in the present-day online Otherkin community.

Scholarly research in the field of Religious Studies has argued that Otherkin qualify as being an ‘alternate spirituality’ or a ‘fiction-based religion.’ Specifically, the subculture is seen as being either a ‘personalized spirituality, or a substantive-type of religion with a focus on the sacred, the supernatural or super empirical; in either case, it is located in a ‘fantastic milieu’ that includes fantasy creatures and magical abilities (Kirby). Other possibilities are an online spiritual community with ‘personal mythologies’ that support alternate realities by means of a nomos (Laycock); or a ‘shamanistic’-based spirituality heavily influenced by notions of occulture, liminality, and initiatory rites of passage (Roberson). Davidsen argues a ‘fiction-based religion’ that makes use of fictional narratives as authoritative texts, forming practices that stem from these sources. These are combined with practices from other established traditions, thereby implementing notions of bricolage and syncretism. Davidsen is the only scholar to offer a possible explanation as to how Elves arrive at their ‘other’ identity (that also applies to Otherkin), by proposing that Elves (and Otherkin) conform to a sociological model of conversion that is combined with a ‘core belief’ that forms and sustains the group. Excluding Kirby, the remaining scholars seem to support a functional-type definition of ‘religion’/’spirituality’ as the focus is heavily placed on practices and social constructions.

Based on this analysis, it became clear that my research data did not coincide with the academic arguments. There are four problems located in the scholarly literature:

The attempts to categorize Otherkin with a ‘functionalist’ definition places the focus on the practices, but leaves the epistemic reason for the belief unanswered. It would appear that the majority of scholars place emphasis on what Otherkin are doing, instead of concentrating on the state of being Otherkin. Kirby’s attempt to use either a ‘spiritual’ or substantive definition of religion remains vague as, in my opinion, she does not sufficiently explain or ground the descriptions of these terms. For example, many people can accept supernatural or super empirical notions without being ‘religious’. Furthermore, as Otherkin stress they are not a religion at all, without a solid explanation of terms, I hesitate to agree with these proposals.
The use of the concept of 'shamanism' is problematic as no specific definition is given, leaving the reader to deduce what is meant by the concept. Furthermore, Robertson ignores the *emic* data that negates ‘shamanism’ as being related to Therianthropy, choosing instead to continue her argument as it pertains to her notions of liminality and initiatory rites of passage. My research data supports the *emic* data provided in her article. Otherkin require no ontological transition from one state to another, as they are born other-than-human. Furries, or people who choose to dress in animal costumes, falls under the notion of ‘fandom’ and has no association with the ‘shamanistic’ practices that are alluded to in the article. The ‘shamanistic faith’ discussed by the Silver Elves is a type of ceremonial magical practice that does *not* require the intervention of any spiritual agency (as would be expected in ‘shamanistic’ practices), but relies on natural ‘principles’.

The research methods used by the scholars lack personal contact with Otherkin, or only focus on particular sub-groups of Otherkin. ‘Lurking’ is the preferred mode used by the scholars (with the exception of Davidsen); however, the lack of qualitative research, including participant-based observation and interviews, can lead the researcher to misunderstandings and faulty conclusions. It is therefore important to have sustained contact with the research participants, preferably over a longer time span.

The researchers failed to ask why only *some* people claim to be Otherkin, given the widespread and permeating effects of *occulture* on society. Given the numbers of people who are fascinated and engaged with fantasy and fictional media, how is it that only a few are affected? The scholars do admit that, technically, the Otherkin do not qualify as a religion. Despite the fact that Otherkin repeatedly stress this, they nevertheless try to argue that it is one. Yet it is acknowledged by the scholars that Otherkin are loosely organized, lack hierarchy, a common set of practices, or a dogma. Lastly, the importance of the subjective identity of the Otherkin is largely overlooked in the scholarly discussions, an aspect that requires much more attention when examining an identity-based group.

The research data findings (my own, and the shared survey results from Otherkin researchers) show that the majority of Otherkin participants: claim to have known of their identity before learning of an online community; claim they did not choose their identity; and feel the scholarly label of ‘religious’ is inaccurate, harmful, and misrepresentative. An additional development of the research findings shows that the relationship between a ‘spiritual’ explanation and the ‘psychological’ explanation of identity is more complex than first thought. This area requires more attention in future research.
Furthermore, my research data disagrees with three other arguments addressed in the literature: 1) The ‘Awakening’ process is not seen as being an initiation, but as a state of being that is present at birth. This awareness or recognition might not be realized until later in life, but is inherent; 2) identity and personal meaning are seen as being separate from a socially constructed community; 3) Otherkin do not choose their identity, nor do they convert to a belief in ‘other-than-humanness.’ Identity, in this respect, is seen as being similar to one’s sexual orientation. It is a ‘given’, not adaptable, or something that is changed by certain practices.

The findings of my analysis suggest that Otherkin identity should be seen as being separate from any religious and/or social constructions, and could therefore be regarded as a philosophy of a *state of being* other-than-human. Therefore, I suggest that another approach is needed that uses a phenomenological and hermeneutical framework so that the meaningful life worlds of the Otherkin can be explored and interpreted. My proposed methods are taken from qualitative psychological analysis (these being Smith and Osborn’s IPA, ‘coding’ taking from Strauss and Corbin’s grounded theory, and narrative psychology that includes the theories of McAdams and Schachter) combined with digital ethnography (Kozinet’s netnography). By using narratives included in three case studies, I have endeavored to show various ways in which identity is constructed, by the ‘life-story’ narrative (taken from McAdams), and two ‘Awakening’ narratives (using Schachter’s identity configurations). These narratives could perhaps show how Otherkin attempt to express their identities, and ‘make sense’ of their everyday experiences. As Otherkin are primarily located online, the influence of the Internet on identity formation has also been addressed, paying special attention to the effects of online role-playing games. The notion of ‘play’ can be seen as testing what is ‘real’ as well as a ‘mode of experience.’ The selected methods surrounding narrative identity are in agreement with the postmodern ideas about fluid, multiple identities that are found in contemporary psychological discussions, and show the importance of stories in research, as during analysis, themes are found and can be compared to other narratives. This allows the researcher to locate similarities or differences, and provides an in-depth understanding of how the individual’s lived experience shapes and forms the perception of his or her identity and reality. Narratives can also be a valuable resource to discover how religion and/or spirituality could possibly play a role in Otherkin experiences.

Considering the information discussed in the last two chapters, we can expand our perspective to examine the larger implications of Otherkin identities and how these could relate to human viewpoints, whether positive or negative, about reality, existence, and what it means to be a person. Contemporary attitudes about identity seem to conform to multiple, fluid identities that can adapt to situations as needed. People can ‘tinker’ with their identity in order to consider new ways of relating
to others, and to understand the ‘self’. Otherkin can be seen as joining with those people who desire to challenge ‘norms’ and presumptions about one’s orientation or identity. We can also see how fiction influences our perceptions of reality, and how it is actually ‘normal’ to accept ideas that could be seen as conflicting with the ‘rational’ empirical world.

Recent interest in the relationship between humans and other life forms has drawn attention to the boundary crossings that are taking place between humans and animals, machines, technology, and nature. The dualistic paradigm of a ‘superior’ human race is now being challenged, as science continues to erode any perceived lines between humans and other species. Technology has opened a realm of possibilities relating to identity and consciousness, with ideas being explored in films, books, animated series, and video games. One example taken from popular culture could be seen in the 2017 film, *Ghost in the Shell*, that delves into the notion of cyber-enhanced human beings. Ethical issues naturally arise from such ideas. Otherkin could perhaps be seen as contributing to the discussions being raised in our societies regarding equality and respect for all life forms. In closing, I offer a quote from Shane that celebrates the diversity of the Otherkin:

> Through Otherkin we learn that subjectivities can be adopted, discarded, abandoned, multiplied, or expanded even beyond the human. But beyond the destabilization of the human, Otherkin online activity reflects a willingness to express mutual support in positive, affirming discourses.⁴⁰²

The question of why Otherkin experience life as they do cannot be answered at this time. Yet, Otherkin could perhaps be seen, not as an example of the re-enchantment of our societies, but as contributing to a paradigm shift that will affect our attitudes about nonhumanity and the need for awareness and objectivity. Instead of looking to popular culture as the source or reason for Otherkin identities, we could perhaps see it as a reflection of larger narratives and changes that are already taking place in many parts of the world.

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film, *Ghost in the Shell*, that deals with the topic of cyber-enhanced human beings. In this story, a human brain is placed into a robotic body, creating a cyborg. Image source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1219827/mediaviewer/rm2892432896.

**GLOSSARY OF TERMS**

*Awakening* - the recognition and process of realizing the other-than-human identity/identities

*Daemon* – a personification of a person’s mind or personality, often in animal form, that is (semi) autonomous; see *Headmate*

*Elemental Vampire* – vampires who take energy from the four elements (earth, air, fire, water)

*Fictionkin* – a kintype that is a character or being from a work of fiction

*Furry/Furries* – people who are fans of anthropomorphic animals (for example, cartoon characters)

*Headmate* – a neutral term that refers to non-corporeal personalities that share the mental space with a person

*Headspace* – the mental space of a person’s conscious mind

*Hybrid* – a blend of two or more types, in any combination

*Kintype* – the neutral term that denotes the type of Otherkin (for example; a dragon is a kintype)

*Lycanthropy* – the notion that one can assume the form and characteristics of a wolf

*Machinekin* – subgroup of Otherkin; this type includes machine-based forms, such as androids, cyborgs, artificial intelligences. It can also denote machine objects, such as music recording consoles
**Otakukin** – those who identify as fictional characters taken from Japanese manga, anime, or video games (see Fictionkin)

**Otherkin** – umbrella term for all other-than-human types; additionally the name for those kintypes who identify as mythical beings

**Plantkin** – subgroup of Otherkin; this type includes all plant forms

**Plural identity/Plurality** – term that denotes multiple sentient entities/consciousnesses that are present in a person’s brain/body

**Polykin** – An Otherkin with two or more kintypes

**Psi/Psy Vampire** – vampires who take energy from the life force of a living entity

**Sanguine Vampire /Sanguinarian** – vampires who take energy from the life force contained within blood

**Shift / Shifting** – term that denotes when a person ‘switches’ to their kintype/theriotype in a non-physical manner

**Sidhe** – Gaelic word for a type of fairy

**Therian** – type that identifies as an extinct or extant animal

**Theriotype** – term that denotes the type of Therian (for example, Wolf, Horse)

**Tulpa** – an autonomous, sentient being created by a person’s mind/thoughts (see Headmate)

**Tulpamancy** – the practice of creating tulpas; people who engage in this are called tulpamancers

**Walk-in** – a fully-formed, sentient being that spontaneously arrives in the headspace of a person; can arrive and leave at will (see Headmate)
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APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL OTHERKIN STATEMENTS

Part 1: Survey of Otherkin/Therians’ Feelings Towards Representation of Themselves

Source: Nøkken and Hound, 2018

- Since some therians also belong to religious traditions that exclude other religions (such as Christianity), I fear that calling therianthropy a religion might alienate these therians from the community. Also, a religion can be usually converted to, but I believe that you cannot choose to become a therian/otherkin.

- I feel that if people were to try and represent Otherkin/Therians as a religion, they risk leaving out key non-spiritual parts of the community.

- I believe that while the otherkin community certainly has religious elements and similarities (and that for some individuals their identity ties in with their religion/spiritual beliefs), to consider it as a whole as a religion is grossly misinterpreting what being otherkin truly is. To consider it a religion also causes issue for those in the community who follow another religion. As well as this, it also disregards those who identify for psychological or possibly neurological reasons.

- I think that the otherkin community is very diverse, and there are many who incorporate it into religious aspects of their lives. However, claiming that it is a religion ignores a large portion of the otherkin community who may be nonreligious. Creating a religion that focuses on otherkinity is not bad, either, because many otherkin’s nonhuman identities are central to their religious beliefs.

- It’s a subculture and should be represented as such. Not all of us have any religious beliefs.

- Saying being therian is a religion is like saying being transgender is a religion. In both cases it’s wrong.

- Having studied new religious organizations and cults, otherkinity/therianthropy does not have sufficient benchmarks to classify it as a religion.
- I have always viewed the Community as such; a community. It holds many people of different viewpoints, beliefs, backgrounds, and personal afflictions. To say that the community is a religion disregards all people who hold their own personal religion or belief and can cause conflict with religion or belief.

- It’s my opinion that there is a natural explanation that has not been explored due to the fact people just assume it’s a religion, with that said the community at large does treat it in the same manner as a religion including a belief in souls that I do not share.

- It is not a religion, it is identity.

Part 2: Comments regarding the importance of the community for Otherkin

Source: Kinmunity, April, 2019

- I felt non-human most of my life and was dragonkin already 25 years ago as far as I remember. But I only discovered that there is a community in the first place about 15 years ago. Having discovered, I didn’t even care to join. I was too shy, too anxious of meeting others, too unrelated to internet communities. Until end of last year, when my dragon identity struck me from nowhere, I decided to look into this more... and joined Kinmunity. Nowadays, the community is very important to me and I check the site daily, but if it would disappear, I’d still be a dragon, no question. Even if nobody would even care, I’d still be. This is not a gameplay. It’s who I am, and how I feel. Plain and simple. (“A”)

- I have felt otherkin for over 40 years and have identified as equitaur [centaur-like being, but with a horse’s head] for most of it. There was no such thing as an otherkin community when I first felt I was non-human, I just thought that I was the only one and just figured it was part of my spiritual path. I was quite surprised that there are others that feel non-human, and was very active in the community when I first found it. Now that I have been involved for almost 9 years, I tend to just sit back and watch, as I have seen the same discussions multiple times. I am more interested in just having a spot where I can be myself and be with others with similar beliefs and not be judged. (“T“)
- I’ve been in the community for 19 or so years now, but my identity and the experiences that go along with it existed since my early childhood. I grew up knowing I was non-human in some way, but not understanding it and so not accepting it. I tried to suppress it and bury it, but it never went away and trying to deny myself wasn’t good for my mental health. Finding the community was hugely important to me in that I learnt I wasn’t alone. There were others who shared my experiences, I wasn’t crazy and it was ok to feel this way. The community helped me to accept and understand myself, but my identity had existed long before my exposure to the community. (Anonymous)

- I came to the conclusion that I was a wolf long before I even knew communities of people that thought the same existed. The community has helped me to connect and network with others like me, but was not a prerequisite or requirement to my core belief. I feel that because a community exists, more people will discover being otherkin/therian than if the community did not exist. ("NA")