POSTHUM/AN/OUS: IDENTITY, IMAGINATION, AND THE INTERNET

A Thesis

By

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ABSTRACT

POSTHUM/AN/OUS: IDENTITY, IMAGINATION, AND THE INTERNET

(May 2010)

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The Furry, Otherkin, and Otakukin are Internet fan subcultures whose members personally identify with non-human beings, such as animals, creatures of fantasy, or cartoon characters. I analyze several different forms of expression that the fandoms utilize to define themselves against the human world. These are generally narrative in execution, and the conglomeration of these texts provides the communities with a concrete ontology. Through the implementation of fiction and narrative, the fandoms are able to create and sustain complex fictional personas in complex fictional worlds, and thereby create a "real" subculture in physical reality, based entirely off of fiction. Through the use of the mutability of Internet performance and presentation of self-hood, the groups are able to present themselves as possessing the traits of previous, non-human lives; on the Internet, the members are post-human. The members no longer need to suffer through the society of humans around them: they can reclaim their past lives and live out a posthum/an/ous existence.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

The Carnival of Community

I

Lives Never Lived

In part, our personal identities are tied to the communities to which we belong.

Collections of people, whether entire cultures or small groups, are part of the process of

knowing ourselves and where we are in the context of the rest of the world. We thus

produce artifacts, such as literature, that reinforce particular aspects of our beliefs and

devalue others. In this fashion, being human is dichotomously collective and separatist,

in that we have to choose which groups we belong to, and which ones we reject.

Membership in communities inherently *inscribes* our identities with distinct traits that

originate with the values and traditions of the group and are maintained through texts.

The inclusive nature of groups has created an interesting phenomenon in the

manner that communities have specific notions of who and what is part of the

community and also what is alien from it. As James Kellas notes, "All nationalisms are

partly inclusive and partly exclusive" (91). Literature, language, and other codified

means of communication help to cement these mores. For example, the Navajo have a

term in their native language, "*Diné*," which translates to "the people." This strict

delineation has many correlatives in other languages, as it performs an exceedingly

useful task: separating the community who natively utilize the term from everyone else.

Conversely, the Japanese utilize the word "*gaijin*," a catch-all meaning "foreigner" for

any and all people who aren't Japanese (though the usage is currently primarily applied

to white Westerners). This also serves a similar purpose, as it provides a convenient (though pejorative) tool to identify those who don't share in the culture's history and traditions. Communities who utilize these terms naturally place themselves in a positive opposition to the rest of the world, identifying themselves as the only ones who "get it." That is, *they* are the true possessors of humanity, and all other human identities are essentially derivative from that cultural baseline.

However, all communities delineate validity in similar ways, in that joining a community implies the agreement that it is more appealing, and therefore somehow superior to, other groups of people. Inherently divisive, the experience of group membership is balkanized into an ideological competition between conflicting notions of humanity; each group that somehow justifies their position in context of all others must intrinsically proclaim the superiority of their particular philosophy counter to others. "People imagine nations, and their membership of these, because their minds are trying to make social constructs out of their relationships with other people... An ideology is usually seen as a system of ideas, different from knowledge or sicence because it is not 'true'... nationalism is an ideology which builds upon the idea of the nation and makes it the basis for action" (Kellas 27- 28). Each individual in each community is forming their humanity in conflict with other notions about the "correct" nature of humankind. In this fashion, it could be said that all human communities are essential in forming a structure of distinctly *human* identity, justifying the "human-ness" of the people who compose them.

Of course, the method by which this humanity is expressed is largely in the physical performance of the roles that the culture demands upon its members. Judith

Butler has extensively researched this phenomenon of performative behavior, and in her book *Undoing Gender*, argues that the notions of gender that we possess are cultural constructed and culturally maintained; the communities exert a shaping power on the bodies of their members, and the "reality" of gender in our world expresses these constructions and assumptions. Indeed, from gender-roles to religious ritual, human activity is largely informed by the demands of our communities, and in order to "properly" belong to these cultures, our bodies and our performances with our bodies must reflect the expectations of the community to which we belong. Elizabeth Freeman writes that "recognition is based upon identity: it asks the needy to abstract their needs into a name that grants them legal personhood and the privileges attending to it" (299). However, in some very interesting and very new contexts, the necessity of the performing, physical body is becoming less intrinsic and is being replaced by the ability to interact with others sans physical contact and communication.

In the age of the Internet, the concept of groups has been changed dramatically by the ability of people to contact and organize within a virtual medium. This phenomenon has altered the base structure of a community: no longer does the physical body need to be present in order to perform the rituals and actions that define membership within a group. Instead, the main mode of communication is through text and description, ideas performing the functions that were once demanded of the body. On the surface, this phenomenon could indicate that the physical traditions and ritualistic performances of groups are being challenged and weakened by the existence of Internet cultures and communities. This is true, but only to a point.

The Internet has the potential to subvert the performative requisites of cultural membership, but while the body may be removed, the *raison d'être* of community remains: to distinguish itself and its ideology from other competing or opposing organizations. This essentially means that members must continue to perform their required roles in order to meet the demands of the community, albeit through textual communication. In this sense, the Internet does not offer much of a challenge to the hegemony of human identity. What is truly subversive about Internet groups isn't necessarily the potential freedom they offer from the performance of humanity, but the fact that the groups are divested from the body. Without the constraints of the body to limit the creative freedom of people, the limitations on what the body can achieve and thereby perform are exceedingly expanded from the physical. The mind is now the instrument through which performance is expressed.

Since the physical body is essentially removed from the equation, the mind must now attempt to express through text the performative actions that define the person's identity. We see many examples of this in the mainstream culture of the Internet: the widespread use of emoticons such as ☺, which is used to convey happiness or approval. The textual emulation of a physical feature like a smile is indicative of how important these gestures are to us in the real world, and so we will continue to do so in the virtual. However, what are we to do with more complex actions? These are given up to textual descriptions, as is the body that is performing these actions, and this fact is vital: persons using the Internet also possess the ability to present the idea of their physical form in any way that they desire. The beautiful can become ugly, the fat can become skinny, races can be transposed, and gender is rendered infinitely mutable. This

freedom of presentation directly affects the performances of the people utilizing the Internet: instead of innately performing the requisites of their group and community, people have to actively interpret *how* and *what* and *who* to perform in order to achieve the desired identifying outcome. This process complicates and undermines the role of performance for the individual since the performance is no longer second nature to the performer.

What this allows is the freedom of the individual to analyze, critique, and potentially reject some of the performative demands of a particular group. Furthermore, this also enables and empowers individuals who might be disenfranchised in the physical world. People who physically can't or outright refuse to participate in cultural performance are often ostracized, disadvantaged, and otherwise maligned by the dominant culture. The field of Disability Studies has long analyzed the impact of negative cultural stigmatization of the inability of disabled persons to fulfill all the roles required by society. The discrimination suffered by disabled people is endured by others who also fail to fulfill arbitrary societal roles, making these individuals outcasts from the larger cultural throng. Through the use of the Internet, people can become anyone else, potentially freeing them from the negative stigma that might be applied to them; it also gives individuals disillusioned by or angry at the current hegemony a place to gather and coexist without the pressure or discrimination present in mainstream society.

While the Internet provides the opportunity for a person to emulate an ideal member of mainstream society, it equally allows individuals to reject wholesale the world that maligned them and perhaps instead embracing the bodies or personalities

that failed them. The Internet provides a gathering point that is infinitely malleable on the individual level, and therefore any individual can present anything he or she desires as his or her identity. This subverts the typical dynamic of the group providing humanity to its members; instead of seeking to participate in the humanity of the rest of the world, groups on the Internet can potentially choose to reject wholesale the idea of the "human" being the baseline for what is "good."

Indeed, divorced from the physical constraints of a world that has consistently rejected or manipulated individuals in the name of humanity, it isn't hard to imagine people who might want to distance themselves from all things human by forming groups and identities based on ideological structures that aren't supported by the limitations of physical reality.

The Internet provides the vehicle by which these goals can be achieved; without a body, the concept of belonging to a group and performing the roles required is no longer intrinsically tied to the actions of the human body. This process allows disenfranchised people to seize upon identities that are counter to the dominant hegemony and reposition themselves as being on the ideologically correct path by rejecting the conflict-based human experience and ironically situating their ideology against the rest of the world's communities. By positioning themselves against all that is human, some of these groups are redefining the very notion of "The People" so as to not even include the human person. "The idea of a nation can be considered as both natural and a product of the imagination" (Kellas 27.) This phenomenon indicates that perhaps a community could be entirely imagined.

The object of this thesis is to engage in and describe three different communities that engage in community behavior that deviates from and challenges mainstream culture. Each of these communities is primarily based on the Internet and their members consistently identify with an identity that is not human. These communities often express discontentment with their human body or existence and instead idealize the conception of another state of existence. Interestingly enough, many members justify their beliefs by stating that they must have once *been* the creature that they identity with so, believing their past lives to be the one where they were once happy and accepted, as opposed to the sham of their human existence. In order to understand their current lives, they must acknowledge the death of their previous existence.

In essence, the current self is a posthumous shell of the original, superior life. These communities reaching out for a reality that has never existed; yet, through the Internet, their dreams have been born in the virtual world. Through the use of the mutability of Internet performance and presentation, the groups are able to present themselves as currently possessing the traits of their previous, non-human lives; on the Internet, the members are post-human. The members no longer need to suffer through the society of humans around them: they can reclaim their past lives and live out a posthum/an/ous existence.

II

Identity in Masks

Bakhtin describes the carnivalesque as an institution of society that inherently undermines the dominant cultural narrative. Usually, the instances of carnivalesque are

regulated to carefully controlled events, such as an actual carnival, or a festival or fair, where the participant has the opportunity to adopt a variety of cultural roles that heretofore would be denied to them. These roles can be subversive to the dominant culture, but because of the nature of the carnival, such rebellions and deviances are tolerated and even encouraged as part of the festivity. With the freedom of the Internet, there is essentially a constant carnival happening. The fluidity of identity and personality are constantly being reinterpreted and re-deployed in a variety of contexts, and so the individual finds his or herself in a carnivalesque setting; the fans are free to adopt whatever mask they so choose, and in doing so, challenge whatever dominant narrative they desire.

A particular group of Internet communities is unique in the ability to keep its subculture and a social structure intimate to itself in opposition to the mainstream: fandoms. The fan culture exists as an affront to the media and mainstream culture; while fans draw upon material that originates in media, the fandoms "own" and reappropriate mass produced culture for personal, fannish interests. Fans are essentially creating a carnivalesque atmosphere within their communities through the appropriation of original material. Fans infinitely create and produce original interpretations of the original media, thereby giving it a life that runs counter to the ur-product itself, and often to counter to the original producer of the media. Fan cultures are also famously accepting of new members and new ideas, provided that the new member has sufficient knowledge to participate in the specialized discourse of fandom. John Tulloch writes in "We're Only a Speck in the Ocean: The Fan as Powerless Elite" that, "fans' particular competence is their intimate and detailed knowledge of the show;

consequently any producer or script editor who needlessly breaches the continuity and coherence of that knowledge is 'insulting their intelligence'" (282). A powerful and exhaustive knowledge of the original media is necessary to participate in a fandom, and such information is much more detailed and complex in content that a few hours of perusal and research on the Internet would leave someone very ill-prepared to participate in a fandom.

The social theory of Bakhtin points out the power that society has over the individual, but when the person can choose which rules to follow and which to flaunt, the individual enters the state of the carnival, where the single person can be whatever he/she so decides. While Bakhtin's medieval carnival presents a controlled rejection of normal values, the Internet allows any user the freedom to reject those same values at any time he/she desires, with little constraint. The Internet has its own rules, of course, but they are so few and vague that it might as well be a lawless place, not necessarily requiring the control and pressures that are commonly placed upon individuals in the real world. A person is freed from these constraints when he/she logs on; the individual only has to follow the specific social rules that apply at that particular moment and in that particular community. The role of the social individual within a society is more powerful, as the individual is now deciding which rules to obey and which to deny, with few repercussions. Fandoms provide the space for this freedom, and with a structure inherent in their composition that creates a positive place for cohesive and ordered immersion. As Matt Hill notes in *Fan Cultures*, "fans expect adherence to established tenets, and narrative 'back stories'"(28), and while these expectations are usually thrust upon the production team making the fan-object, the community of a fandom, as shown

above, corresponds to these expectations, allowing people to participate in the group of

fandom as active, involved participants in a universe that consistently conforms to the

desires and assumptions of the fans.

Thus, fandoms can occupy a unique place in the spectrum of the Internet; they

are at once able to be all-inclusive, and yet also demand a certain set of attributes and

knowledges in order to actively and effectively participate in the community, since it is

vital to intimately understand the original material in order to subvert it. Henry

Jenkins, author of *Textual Poachers,* a seminal work on fan culture, notes that fandom is

a "participatory culture," (96) wherein individuals come together and express

themselves through a variety of practices. The creative freedom that exists within a

fandom lets fans create and contribute to a fantasy world that is subsequently

expanded, through their additions and expansions, far beyond the original content. In

this manner, fans can not only reappropriate the show for themselves, but separate

participation in the fandom from those who don't share the same level of high intensity

interest.

The fan groups that I investigate in this project are known as the Furries, the

Otherkin, and the Otakukin, and while many similarities exist between each fandom,

every one of the groups is uniquely positioned in their relationship to their fan material,

and each group draws from a variety of fan material in order to form a cohesive unit.

The reason these groups were chosen is that Furries, Otherkin, and Otakukin constitute

distinct fandoms and in many ways have embraced the fiction of their fandom's focus to

an extent not seen in other fan groups. Members of these fandoms adopt the personas

of characters and present these personas on the Internet as if the user was actually the

persona demonstrated to the rest of the fan community, and each community focuses

on the presentation and interpretation of a different kind of fan-object.

Furries, as a group, represent their Internet personas as anthropomorphized

animals and animal hybrids. So, a Furry could be a fox, for instance, or a wolf/bear.

Otherkin, as a group, identify with creatures that have never existed in the "real" world,

such as griffons, dragons, elves, and myriad other beings drawn from fantasy literature

and media. Lastly, the Otakukin identify most closely with their personality characters

from Japanese cartoons, known as anime. While there are certainly many members of

these fandoms who approach the participation in the community as a hobby, a very

significant portion of each fandom legitimately believes that they are literally connected

to the persona that is used in the community. Very often, the fan believes that the

animal or mythical creature is much more similar to his or her self-perception than

humankind. This project is focused on members of the fandoms that hold such beliefs.

This sentiment is far from uncommon, as many members of these fandoms have stated

similar experiences of alienation and oppression from the "real" world and find solace

in the simplicity and/or grandeur of the animalistic/mythical/cartoon world. As an

Otakukin interviewee said, "everything in *Inuyasha* [a Japanese anime] makes more

sense to me than the world around me. I'm out of place here, but I can tell where I

belong" (Interview 5).

While most members of the three fandoms are white males, the members of the

fandoms, despite whatever place in society possessed, compromise their privileged

position by adopting an identity that is not dominant or advantaged in the culture.

Thus, members of the fandoms are not part of the hegemonic discourse, despite the

dominance of white males in their demographics. Many participants in the fandoms are queer in some fashion, and others reject gender identity entirely, as gender can matter very little to a mutable, Internet personality, which can change sex and physical composition at will. Indeed, in many instances, the fandoms seem to be challenging the very notion of gender on the Internet, and whether it can be fixed, even for a moment.

The Furries, as stated above, are a fandom that centers around the attraction towards the perceived personality and positive traits of an anthropomorphized animal avatar. Most of the general population has only been exposed to the existence of Furries through an episode of *CSI*, which portrayed the community as a sexually deviant collective whose activities centered around sexual gratification in raccoon suits. This episode, infamous in the Furry community, has come to define the fandom in a negative light for most of the mainstream. A Furry interviewee said, "OMG, that damn episode. Inescapable. Every time I come out to someone, they're either confused (which is fine, I mean, it *is* a little weird!), or they're like "Oh like in *CSI...*" and then give me a really sketchy look. It's insulting!" (Interview 8).

The members of the Furry fandom maintain and nurture an interest for most commonly either cartoon or real animals and create anthropomorphized, animalistic characters, avatars, as a way to interact and relate to one another. An interviewee stated, "I was so nervous making my first fursona [a portmanteau of "Fur" and "Persona"]! I really wanted to put a lot of effort into it... I wanted to be taken seriously" (Interview 2). The Furry community is by far the largest of the three subcultures, and is therefore one of the most complex in terms of both composition and reach. Not only do the Furries have an intense focus on outreach and strive for acceptance (or at least

tolerance) by the rest of the Internet, the fandom also makes great efforts to keep the

community solvent and dynamic. There is a wiki devoted to furry culture, called

WikiFur, and countless sites that detail various traits of the fandom. There are vast

forums that accommodate the fandom, and even interactive games that allow users to

make characters based on their animal avatars. The term "Furry" is actually an umbrella

term, as there are many subsets within the Furry community, most of which, at least on

the Internet, are delineated by specific sexual practices; these practices are related to

the subcultures and are detailed in a later chapter.

One of the defining features of the Furry fandom is the convention, which,

perhaps fittingly, was the setting of the infamous *CSI* episode. Dozens of conventions

are held every year, and the most populous convention, Anthrocon, held in Pittsburgh,

PN, consistently draws over 3000 attendees every year (although, strangely enough,

none of my interviewees had ever attended a convention). Because of this level of

exposure in the popular culture, Furries are relatively well known outside of the

Internet. And this exposure has had both negative and positive impacts on the

community. The conventions are what essentially define the furry experience to the

outside observer, as these events are often covered by news organizations and other

mediums of media, often with negative connotations, such as the Pittsburgh *CW*

entitling their article covering the 2006 Anthrocon "Furries Descend On

Pittsburgh"(KDKA). The most infamous depiction of Furries is in the crime drama *CSI*, in

the episode "Fur and Loathing," wherein a furry convention is plagued by murder. The

Furries are presented as sexually frenzied rejects, people who live only to have sex with

each other in animal costumes. Newspapers and national/local media have been

banned from many of the conventions due to these negative representations. Melissa

Meinzer, in her piece "Animal Passions" for the *Pittsburgh City Paper*, interviewed Dr.

Samuel Conway, the organizer of Anthrocon, concerning the private nature of

Anthrocon and conventions in particular,

> Most furries blame their reputation on a 2001 *Vanity Fair* article by
>
> George Gurley. The piece, which introduced "yiffy" into the general
>
> lexicon, highlighted the bizarre practices of Fox Wolfie Galen, who
>
> admitted to experimenting with bestiality involving German shepherds
>
> and Labrador retrievers... before settling on a sexual preference for plush
>
> animals and sports mascots. "Every family reunion has a crazy Uncle
>
> Frank that the kids aren't allowed to talk to," says Anthrocon chair Dr.
>
> Samuel Conway, known in convention circles as Uncle Kage. He's
>
> disgusted that few media accounts mention the thousands of dollars it
>
> raises every year for animal charities ... almost six grand this year for the
>
> Western Pennsylvania National Wild Animal Orphanage. "After
>
> interviewing several very upstanding, educated people, [Gurley] found
>
> this guy, our crazy Uncle Frank. Once that hit the public imagination,
>
> there was just no going back. This is why we have been very, very media
>
> shy." (Miezner 2006)

Conway points out the flaws of the media machine, in that they are very willing to

overlook the good and beneficial aspects of an allegedly deviant event in order to craft a

narrative that emphasizes the "freak" aspect.

The Furries, due to their intense exposure in the popular culture, are, as noted, one of the most populous fandoms. This means that the members of the fandom constitute a wide variety of people. The spectrum of fandom in the Furry fandom is very wide, and thus the constituency of Furries includes those who do not believe that they are connected to an animal and are rather merely enthusiasts about the subculture itself. These members are not the focus of this research, and I would like to explicitly state that not all or even most Furries think that they have the soul of an animal, but that the population within the Furry fandom that does hold such beliefs is a significant enough segment to demand analysis. The phenomenon of Furries is continually evolving and growing, so much that saying anything concrete about the population is disingenuous. However, for the purposes of this study, I reiterate that I am focusing on the individuals who do believe in the metaphysical transmission of identity from animal to person, in whatever fashion devised.

Instead of anthropomorphized animals, the Otherkin focus on the creatures of fantasy, such as a centaur or a demon, but this divergence from the Furries is also represented in how the Otherkin represent themselves in avatars. Anthropomorphizing the fan-object is significantly less common in the Otherkin, and even when the being is anthropomorphized, less emphasis is put on making the fan-object human. While the Otherkin who connect with elves and angels obviously need to make little by way of anthro-modification, significant changes are required to make a creature such as a dragon less foreign, but sometimes the exotic is fully embraced. "The weirdest Otherkin I ever met, and you know, that's saying a lot LOL was probably a bat-drake-unicorn hybrid that was dual-sexed but still het [heterosexual] and was also somehow an alien"

recounted an interviewee (Interview 5). These revisions are often not implemented by the fan, as the difference between the creature and the human is what is appealing. Thus, in the Otherkin community, one can observe the seamless interaction of a variety of fantastical creatures, without pressure to humanize or otherwise change the avatar from its original, "true" form.

The Otherkin are a much smaller group than the Furries, but nonetheless a somewhat significant presence on the Internet. The umbrella of what constitutes an Otherkin is very broad, and hotly contested by the members of the fandom. Questions such as whether vampires count as Otherkin, or whether the elves are a different subculture, or perhaps the dragons, being so populous, should be their own population category, are continually discussed and argued over. Essentially, and for the purposes of this paper, I am using the term Otherkin to denote any person who believes that his or her inner being is a creature from media or otherwise that does not exist, except for vampires. There is a very large subculture of people who believe themselves to be vampires of some type or another and is multi-faceted enough in my opinion to warrant their own investigation, outside the parameters of this thesis, despite their sometimes inclusion in lists of Otherkin "races."

Another significant difference between the Otherkin and similar subcultures is the level to which the fandom has developed the mythology of fictional existence. *Otherkin.net*, a hub for Otherkin activity on the Internet, is an important part of the fandom's base. It contains a wiki, a directory of other sites, articles on Otherkin, and a comprehensive FAQ section on all things Otherkin. This level of unity and common understanding is much more in-depth than either the Furries and the Otakukin, and the

community of Otherkin has solely developed this body of knowledge. Documents such

as *Otherkin.net's* wiki emphasize and illustrate the creative power and freedom of

fandoms, especially as so many outside sources are utilized in the construction of these

vast stores of information and creativity. *The Otherkin Alliance*, another huge website,

offers much of the same in terms of high quality content; it features popular articles and

FAQs on the nature of Otherkin existence and the legitimacy of belief in the connection

between people and fantasy. While the Furries and the Otakukin are both immensely

creative in their fandoms, the Otherkin have a unity to their mythology and

interpretation of the world that is unrivaled, and the power of this self-created

knowledge to govern the functions and compositions of the Otherkin world is incredible

in scope. A later chapter will address at length the importance of fan fiction to these

communities, especially the Otherkin.

The Otakukin are the most recent and least populous of the groups I will analyze.

A very small community of fans, the Otakukin believe in a deep attachment to a cartoon

character, wherein the souls/personalities of anime characters are attached to the fan.

Seemingly an offshoot from the Otherkin, the Otakukin nevertheless occupy their own

cultural space on the Internet, and justify the beliefs of their fandom in a very unique,

extremely fascinating meta-narrative that frames the mythology and stories of the

world in a context that allows for continual, real life emanations of these same grand

narratives. It's part Carl Jung, part Joseph Campbell, and lots of liberal interpretations of

reincarnation and quantum mechanics. *From Fiction*, an Otakukin community, answers

the question, "What are Otakukin?"

Generally speaking Otakukin are people who have a spiritual connection

to what are considered fictional characters, or worlds. ... Otakukin are

different from Otherkin who believe that their souls are derived from

mythical creatures; Otakukin believe their souls are derived from

'modern myths' of pop culture literature and entertainment, usually

Japanese in origin.

To be brief, and blunt, most Otakukin believe that they have the souls of

anime characters, or at least come from worlds represented by anime, or

other modern fiction. Many Otakukin attribute this belief to

reincarnation, although some have other definitions of their origin.

Although you may be asking yourself how someone can be the

reincarnation of a person that doesn't exist, for most Otakukin their

identity hinges on the belief in multiple dimensions or words wherein

other situations, including those depicted in anime, actually happen.

The idea of multiple dimensions allowing soul transmission is a common theme

throughout the three communities, and the beliefs of the Otakukin are perhaps the best

illustration of how this metaphysical mechanism functions. In chapter 2, I will discuss at

length how the narrative of religion, mythology, and fiction interplay in the three

fandoms, but at the moment it is enough to understand that the beliefs of the Otakukin

are possible only through an interpretation of media in a larger cultural context of

multi-dimensional, pseudo-Jungian archetypes that can and do influence infinite

worlds. As an Otakukin interviewee states, "it seems unbelievable, and I completely

understand when people don't get it. But I know it in my heart and feel it deep inside…

How could you lie to yourself about something like this?" (Interview 6).

The Otakukin are unique in this study mainly for the sheer implausibility of their

beliefs. It isn't an unreasonable reaction to wonder how a person believes that they are

spiritually connected to a fictional character in a cartoon or videogame. However, the

members of this community do indeed believe that this happens, and just because it

seems absolutely implausible doesn't invalidate the beliefs of the Otakukin community.

As we have discussed earlier in this chapter, the power of intense fandom and the

freedom of the Internet allow for individuals to truly embrace their fantasies in a truly

fulfilling fashion, especially if there is a community for support. The Otakukin, perhaps

due to the specific fixation of their fandom, are emblematic of the support structure that

the Internet can foster, no matter what the context, and the extreme creativity that it

affords fans in creating the fictions that define the fandom.

There is significant mixing between members between these communities, but

this is hardly unique in the world of fandoms. Angelina Karpovich writes that, "in

practice, membership of online fandom does not preclude the individual fans'

continuing membership and expertise within other online subcultures" (173). However,

enough distinct traits exist between each group that it is still useful to separately

distinguish them, especially as the groups practice such separation in a self-policing

manner. All of the fandoms are unique in that they are not organized around a

particular fan-object, but are rather organized around a body of fiction and media that

represent the interests of the fandom. Again, a vast amount of cross-pollination exists

among the media enjoyed by the fandoms, as many of the members of all three tend to

enjoy similar tastes, and yet the distinctions between the groups remain, which is interesting in terms of research, since despite all the similarities between the fandoms, the groups diverge based on which media is most *identifying* to the individual. Anime, and cartoons in general, is particularly popular among all three fandoms, and yet only the Otakukin subscribe personal, meaningful identity to the characters in the cartoons. Many of the individuals in the fandoms enjoy fantasy literature, but it is the Otherkin who take up the identity of the elf, or the dragon. So, in contrast to many fandoms that are organized around a single source of interest, bereft of individual contribution, the fandoms researched in this study are united by which identity a person adopts, which thereby adds to the fandom's ongoing evolution and composition.

<div align="center">III</div>

<div align="center">Knowledge Powering Identity</div>

These researched groups have been largely ignored by academia and present a much different interpretation of the fan experience and illustrate the power that media and literature can exert upon a fan, especially when the fan is free to wield his/her interpretations on the Internet. The research techniques I have utilized for this research combine etic ethnography and literary analysis that draw primarily on existing literature on fandom and fan fiction. This follows the traditional academic trend of fan research but also considers the fan's experience of the art. Abigail Derecho writes that,

> Academics writing on fan communities have concentrated largely on
>
> fandoms as cultural phenomenon to be approached and analyzed by
>
> means... of ethnography. In contrast, many of the fan-scholars I have read

are interested primarily in investigating fan authored narratives as a type

of art. (63)

I conducted interviews with members of each fan culture researched and have used this

data to frame an ethnographic analysis in the words of fandom participants. These

interviews provide primary source information on the communities. The phenomenon

of narrative and text within the fandoms has been analyzed through the interview

material in conjunction with literary theory and analysis. This method has allowed me

to not only recognize the work of the fandom as legitimate creative product, but situate

fan writing within a post-structuralist context which seeks to "piece together a

definition, a history, and several theories" of these narrative texts (Derecho 65).

While my research draws heavily from existing work on fandoms, much of the

activity that occurs in the fan communities that I have analyzed is unique due to the

digital positioning of the groups, and much of what is accepted as truths in academia

are no longer entirely valid interpretations of the fan phenomena. Hence, a theoretical

approach to the subject matter must necessarily challenge previously held assumptions,

and in this sense I have adopted a critique derived from Foucault's notion of

power/knowledge as outlined in *The History of Sexuality*, in that "there is no power

exercised without a series of aims and objectives" (95) and that "…in discourse power

and knowledge are joined together" (98). This theoretical lens allows me to analyze the

fluid, dynamic interplay of narrative, appropriated text, and personal identity. The

reciprocal exchange of these forces creates communal enterprise, one in which each

individual member is potentially placed in a position to not only exert creative change

and power over the fan narrative, but also, thereby, the greater community of individuals.

The individual is able to realize his/her power over the representation that is adopted/presented, but the presence of this new individual potentially changes the composition of the group and contributes to the greater fiction. The Internet allows this creativity to be situated in the context of a larger group of individuals, and permits the playing field of discourse to be leveled between dominant discourses and counter-hegemonic communities, so that the argument between the opposing forces is equally accessible to all parties, even those not intrinsically involved in either group. The Internet allows these communities to publish and promote their ideas, and the human element in these communities mirrors and distorts the real-life counterpart, and through this connection, the barriers between the two realms of "reality" and the Internet become increasingly obfuscated and non-distinct (Warf 270). It is important, in context of this project, to understand the Internet as a space that is composed, at least in part, of ideologically driven groups, all seeking a forum of free expression.

The Internet remains a free place, one that fails to intrinsically serve either dominant or deviant discourse, but is rather a tool that allows such conversations to happen and be observed. The Internet, in a startling yet predictable contradiction, has become a Balkanized area of ideological conflict, wherein the forces of discourse and community necessarily clash and occupy distinct "spaces" within the vast terrain of the Internet. Warf writes that, "the Internet obviously does not guarantee the emergence of counter-hegemonic discourses, but it does facilitate the opening of discursive spaces within which they may be formulated and conveyed" (270). These turf wars over virtual

space further separate people from the "real" world, and yet bring them into a

community that shares their interests and their passions, making the collective power

of their Internet presence more appealing and satisfying than their daily existence. The

Internet allows the user to become an important part of something that doesn't even

exist in material reality.

      Groups on the Internet do share some common characteristics with one another,

despite the high level of diversity both in group composition and interest focal points.

Generally, groups on the Internet serve a functional purpose. Warf writes that,

"countless groups use the Net for their own political interests and agendas" (263), and

yet politics is far from the only cause that makes these groups aggregate, but the

sentiment of "agenda" is still there. And the agenda for the groups researched is

essentially to achieve acceptance and community that would normally be untenable in

the physical world.

      Catherine Driscoll in "One True Pairing" has discussed this phenomenon's

relationship to women, and she writes that, "the Internet allows domestic spaces to

contact a wider world, as the novel did, but its use by women has not inspired the same

kind of consternation that novel reading once did" (81). The most interesting group of

communities are those that are composed of marginalized members of society, which

range from women writers to people who simply fail to adhere to the beliefs and

practices of the dominant culture. The Internet offers an alternative to the suffering and

bigotry that plagues marginalized groups in the "real" world. Warf writes,

      Marginalized people who are unable to express their needs and identities

      in the so-called real world, such as gay youth in homophobic rural

contexts, can share interests and experiences in interactive discussion

forums (chat rooms), forming classic "communities without

propinquities," spaces of shared interest without physical proximity

(263)

Warf's article, written in 1997, could not have anticipated the extreme level of

involvement that the Internet has occupied in our contemporary lives. He remains

correct in his statement, in that marginalized cultures still have a refuge in the ebb and

flow of the Internet, but he fails to consider the power that they may acquire once

within these positions of authority and controlled space. The Internet no longer merely

allows marginalized communities to have a space of their own; it essentially allows

these groups to control areas of the Internet with the same level of authoritarian

hegemony that the dominant culture once exerted upon them.

There is no evidence that counter-hegemonic groups intrinsically form a society

that is truly divorced from the mainstream; however, it is interesting to note that most

of these groups very often do attempt to separate themselves from the bigotry and

authoritarian structure that define the dominant culture. The groups in this project are

very accepting of new members, and due to their emphasis on diversity and equal

opportunity, present a much more egalitarian society than what the real world has to

offer. As one interviewee noted, "I really first came to the Furries because in it, there

were so many cool people, and I felt like I could let loose (Interview 1). It seems to be

enough that, if you are truly interested in the subject matter of the community's focus,

then you are accepted into the fold, regardless of race, gender, or economic status. A

benefit of these communities is that through their acceptance of a variety of people,

they can allow many voices to contribute to discourses that are effectively silenced by

the power of the dominant media and culture. They are free to "subscribe to opinions

that are effectively outside the mainstream and are not always taken seriously by the

larger public" (Warf 260). This emphasis on the community gives a group a *raison*

d'être for its existence and a sense of purpose and power for individuals involved.

The power that is invested in people by their membership in a group is a

complex notion. Not only can they now be involved and identify with a highly specific

counter culture, but can effectively distinguish between members of the group and

outsiders by the level of intimate knowledge that a person possesses and

communicates. Foucault describes this struggle between power and knowledge:

> It is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined
>
> together…discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power,
>
> but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance, and a
>
> starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces
>
> power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it
>
> fragile, and makes it possible to thwart it. (*HoS* 101)

Thus, with the proper knowledge, a fan can identify him or herself as a valuable

member but if found lacking, discourse functions equally as a disqualifier. But the

wealth of information that the Internet provides its users creates an interesting

conundrum; one doesn't necessarily have to be a member of a group to understand a

great deal about its composition and its intentions. Fairly intimate knowledge is as

easily gained as typing a phrase or two into Google. Thus, the information that ties

people together is rarely secret, and if it is, this obfuscation is often futile, as there is

always another way to acquire information, especially to those who understand the Internet better than the average person.

So, if intimate knowledge of a group is imminently accessible, what does the group do in order to keep hostile outsiders at bay? As Warf very succinctly puts it, "even the most solid of panopticons can be retrained on its masters" (263). However, fan culture is not necessarily elitist, and encourages the mastery of fan knowledge based around the original object of fandom. As Foucault writes, "we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse… but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies" (*HoS* 100). The neophyte's understanding has the opportunity to grow and learn within the community as a unique contributor and interpreter, though these interpretations often must necessarily fall within a very specific framework.

There are fixed aspects to the fan media that define the "reality" of the narrative. The original piece of media canonizes specific aspects of the narrative (which characters exist, how creatures act, time period, etc.), and while the fans can add extraneous and derivative narratives to their object of interest, the original locus of the fan-object resides in reality. However, the world we live in, especially the West, is increasingly integrating real world objects and the Internet. Katherine Hayles writes in her book *How We Became Post-Human* that

> Virtual reality technologies are fascinating because they make visually
> immediate the perception that a world of information exists parallel to
> the "real" world, the former intersecting the latter at many points and in

many ways… all material objects are interpenetrated by flows of

information… (14)

While practical and utilitarian virtual reality technologies are still definitively

untenable, Hayles makes an interesting point about the nature of material objects,

information, and the subsequent relationship between these two attributes of a product

and the Internet. Each object, whether media driven or material, is inherently involved

in the Internet, as the product itself or others like it is described and likely marketed for

on the Internet. The meaning of real objects is conflated and warped by the expansive

information available about it on the Internet. It is almost impossible to consider an

object without realizing that it certainly has a presence on the Internet. The Internet

has essentially added another dimension to our perception of product; each product's

history and future are likely no more than a few mouse clicks away.

The infusion of real objects with the information available about them online has

effectively made the "reality" of the Internet all the more concrete, and so has the level

of participation that one can experience, especially in fandoms. The media the fandoms

can be displaced from the original content much more easily, and while the

commercialism outlined in fan studies (Hellekson) is still a significant part of the fan

experience, the option for fans to create their own, valid interpretations of the original

media is much more accessible.

This creative freedom has an unintentional result; the additional information

provided by the creative individual actually *changes* the meaning of the original object.

The meaning of the material object is actually wrapped up in its ever-evolving text on

the Internet, since the contribution, especially if it is high quality, becomes part of the

information that is available concerning a topic. For example, Googling something as simple as "pogo stick" reveals a variety of texts that have been contributed to the pogo stick concept; indeed, well over half a million sites have something to say about it. On the first page, a site is advertising its sale, a "History of the Pogo Stick" lies directly underneath, and then a seemingly preposterous description of a high performance, high intensity pogo stick. Then comes to the smattering of Google Images; these range in this small sample from a picture of a girl pogo-ing to a cartoon of a man on a pogo stick, with the suggestive text "RIDE MY STICK" emblazoned beside his image. Even in this mundane object, we find a variety of texts that all challenge and expand what a pogo stick can mean to someone who desired to learn more about pogo sticks. The creative presentation of this object modifies our understanding of what is seemingly innocuous and simple by providing nearly 600,000 different interpretations of it.

The fan can essentially publish whatever he/she so desires about the fan-object and can incorporate this creative information into his/her day-to-day lives. Since the fan can actively contribute to the Internet essence of an object, the product itself can fade into the distance as the interaction between the online identity of the fan and the online materiality of the object in question become all the more fluid and immersive. Fandoms don't necessarily need the original fan-object to justify their contributions, as the contributions are there regardless of the canonized narrative. Fans are directly modifying the original piece, so instead of reinventing it purely for themselves, fans are essentially changing the interpretive meaning of the text for anyone who is exposed to the contributions of fan culture. In this fashion, the process of creating and modifying

literature and media by fandoms on the Internet has a real world effect on the material for the fan, the aficionado, and the casual observer.

What makes a fan want to create and contribute to the fan media? Many scholars have noted the appeal of fan culture in creating a different society wherein the ideals of the fictional world supersede the reality surrounding the fan (Jenkins, Jindra), and explore quite extensively the fixation that fan culture has with their chosen media of interest. Michael Jindra notes that many of the *Star Trek* fans felt drawn to the series for its progressive politics, non-theistic belief system, and high level of functional diversity (30). The temptation to emulate and identify with a fictional, idealized world is always present in the world of the fan, but the Internet allows for a more involved and invested attempt at emulation. The fans can use the personalities of their favorite characters as a model for how they interact with others on the message boards and chat rooms wherein the community meets. As Jindra also points out, these boards can serve as a safe zone for the community. The constructed is reality often superior to the "real" world and appeals to the community as a form of escape and challenge to the accepted ordering of the actual reality around them (28). The fandom stands as a bastion against what the members see as the hostile, flawed "reality" of existence; safety and acceptance is contained in equal parts with the fantastical. The existence of this alternative lifestyle challenges the dominant culture, and frees the members of a fandom to embrace behaviors that can subvert and manipulate forces of consumerism in order to provide a sense of unique identity among each other, counter to expected, culturally-prescribed behaviors. In this fashion, the Internet serves very well as an example of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque of social and literary theory.

The Internet allows fandoms to truly embrace the subversive world of the fan-object, and gives the fan the ability to fully immerse themselves in the fictional, appealing world that the fan object presents. Generally, this fusion of "real-life" and fandom is typical of what previous research has noted as the fan lifestyle, in that fans can be well-adjusted to the real world as well as the fandom, maintain a life that successfully incorporates both the intensity of the fan's interest and the "mundane" of daily life. It is important to understand that the level of passion possessed by the fan is often difficult to determine, even through interviews with the fandom and its members. Harrington notes in *Soap Fans: Pursuing Pleasure and Making Meaning in Everyday Life* that,

> We should emphasize from the outset that the pleasure can be so intense that it almost cannot be articulated by those experiencing it. We were struck repeatedly in our interviews and informal conversations with fans by the strength of their passion for, devotion to, and sheer love of daytime television, to an extent often beyond their own comprehension. (121)

So, the difficulty in the ethnographic analysis of a fandom is that the research can often not tell how intensely the fan is invested in the subject matter of the fan-object. Indeed, the fan might have little inkling as to how significant the object of interest might factor into daily life, but nonetheless understand his/her place within a fandom. The researched communities are principally formed from this interplay between the freedom of the Internet carnival, the preferable world of the fan-object, and the intensity of personal pleasure in participating with the fictional and ideal.

The uniting factors of the researched fandoms are three fold. Each group researched emphasizes a digital avatar that represents the identity of the member in context of the fandom, participates in fan fiction, and each group has a sexual, fetishistic element as a prominent subculture. The phenomenon of the avatar is a particularly interesting notion, as the character created by the fan is the primary means of interaction with other fans. The fandoms in this project ascribe identities to the users of the personas, and the users place value upon them as well, as this avatar is a physical representation of their personal, inner identity. An interviewee said that, "I hire people to draw up my fursona for me. I'm not a very good artist, but I really want it done right, you know? I mean, it's *me*, to a certain extent" (Interview 2). This illustrates the importance that he/she places upon the avatar and how well it represents the fandom member.

Fan fiction is another important aspect of the creation of a character. Not only does the writing of such texts situate the researched fandoms within the context of previous research, but it serves an unique purpose within these communities; it provides the tools by which the author can define his/her avatar in context of the fandom. In this fashion, the author of the fan fiction is utilizing his/her knowledge of the fan object and context in order to provide the creation with legitimacy. This application of knowledge and discourse exerts transformative power upon the historical legitimacy. As Foucault notes in *The Order of Things,*

> Historians want to write histories of biology in the 18th century; but they
> do not realize that biology did not exist then, and that the pattern of
> knowledge that has been familiar to us for a hundred and fifty years is not

valid for a previous period. And that, if biology was unknown, there was a

very simple reason for it: that life itself did not exist. All that existed was

living beings, which were viewed through a grid of knowledge constituted

by *natural history.* (127)

And yet, these historical interpretations influence our understanding of the past. Even

though there was no 18th century biology, we now interpret the natural studies

performed during that period as biology. By creating histories, the historian is able to

apply definitions, concepts, and interpretations that may have little to do with the

original object, and yet the material is inherently invested with these new contexts.

The creation of fan fiction outlines and details the history of characters, avatars

and sometimes even of entire "races" of beings (such as Elves), and gives fans an

opportunity to explore the personas in a fictionalized, creative context, while

simultaneously providing legitimacy to the author, as he or she is the fount from which

this knowledge comes. This differs from normal fan fiction, which appropriates a direct

media or fannish sources for the purposes of entertainment. The fan fiction produced

by the communities researched serve a distinct, identifying purpose: through the use of

creativity, the fan author is able to use narrative to ontologically define him or herself.

The fiction created has the potential to become a pseudo-reality, one wherein the

author can recount his or her "true" nature. It is not only a tool and hobby of personal

entertainment, fan fiction has become a method of defining oneself, even to the degree

of sexual and gender identity.

There is also the question of how sexuality functions within the communities.

Furries, Otherkin, and Otakukin all possess a subculture that is highly sexualized and

invested in producing and consuming pornographic fiction. Not all members of the communities participate in such activities, but the phenomenon is large enough to warrant addressing. Their pornography is unique as well, because it too, like the fan fiction, is situated in the context of the fan community, and reflects the beliefs and predilections of each subculture.

In this project, I will analyze the different forms of expression that each of the subcultures utilizes to define itself against the world. These are generally narrative in execution, and the conglomeration of these texts provides the communities with a concrete ontology. Through the implementation of fiction and narrative, the fandoms are able to create and sustain complex fictional personas in complex fictional worlds, and thereby create a "real" subculture in physical reality, based entirely off of fiction.

My methodology for primary research was the use of interviews with members of each community. I contacted individuals on forums and other points of community interaction, and presented them with an interview rubric that they were to then fill out. They were then free to ask me questions about my project, and discuss their community in as much detail as they desired. The interviewees were told that they were not required to answer any question that made them uncomfortable, assured of their anonymity, and that the interview itself would be destroyed upon completion of this project. The sample size of ten individuals was small, but each had a great deal of information to offer as to their thoughts on the community and their personal experience within it.

CHAPTER 2

The Transmission of the Narrative Soul

I

A Game of You

Identity is a concept, which, on the Internet, takes on a particularly fluid and confusing role, especially in the ways individuals attempt to portray themselves. As discussed earlier, one's presence on the Internet is entirely cerebral and distanced from the actual, physical body; the traits and affectations that define someone in real life have little bearing on how he or she chooses to present their image on the Internet. Because of this disconnect of the physical and mental, the Internet allows for the creation of identities that can run entirely counter to the real world. This phenomenon is pivotal for the groups researched in this project. As a Furry interviewee stated, "there were Furries before the Internet, but the existence of the web has really brought us together" (Interview 1).

The Internet allows communities to form around digital identities, removing the need for direct physical interaction. One of the most famous online communities, *Second Life,* an interactive 3-D chat room, allows users to construct whole new identities for themselves as the platform for their interaction with other players and is a prime archetype for the diversity of online communities. *Second Life* also has a strong presence of both Furries and Otherkin in its demographics, despite the presence of a competing, Furry-centric game known as *Furcadia*. This analysis will briefly focus on *Second Life*, as nothing has been written on *Furcadia*.

Second Life and *Furcadia* are games that emphasize complex fusions of chatting, character development, and economics and have much more in common with MMORPGs (massive, multiplayer, online role-playing games) than it does with the regular conception of a chat room or forum. Users are free to customize their character at will, and also to develop objects in the *Second Life* game. This creates an environment of personal freedom coupled with the ability to exact any change the user so desires, as long as he or she has the requisite skill and lindens (*Second Life*'s currency) to accomplish the goal in mind. In *Furcadia,* the game play is also centered around player-created content, and many of these changes center around physical modification of a character (such as adding horns, or butterfly wings, or cat ears, etc.).

The faddish and fetishistic nature of *Second Life* fashion are best described in an article by Corey Ondrejka, "Aviators, Moguls, Fashionistas, and Barons: Economics and Ownership in Second Life," which describes at length the problems and solutions that have plagued the game. Most interestingly, Ondrejka points out the economic success of clothing and style in *Second Life*:

> Of course, once the perfect clothes and accessories have been purchased, … being seen becomes the next important activity. Clubs and events are very popular in *Second Life* and make up another common business venture. As with stores, bigger is often better and many residents have chosen to make large land purchases in order to fully explore their visions… clubs consistently receive the most traffic within *Second Life*…
> (5)

The driving force of *Second Life*'s economy is the presentation of one's style and fashion to other users of the game, just like in the real world! In this fashion, these Internet communities are mirroring the traditions and compunctions of physical society, thereby reinforcing the validity of the community. Interestingly enough, this phenomenon is also present within *Furcadia*, but originates from a different mindset: instead of keeping up with current fashion, there is a constant push to modify your character to most accurately reflect whatever manifestation of one's avatar is desired. The focus of the game isn't the display of real life attributes, but rather the knowledge of what is aesthetically pleasing in a context that is based in the fandom.

The influence of normal, real world outfits is undermined by the freedom of expression that the game affords the player. A Furry interviewee said, of *Furcadia,* that, "the fads are obnoxious as Hell, but what are you going to do? You can be yourself, but if something is popular and cool, then lots of people are going to do it and like any fad, you want to get into it too. I had butterfly wings for awhile… No real reason, it's part of the experience" (Interview 1). The identities of the users of *Second Life* and *Furcadia* become involved, even in casual play, in this digital narrative of what is popular and fashionable, as this understanding of the group dynamic is part of the basis through which the personas of the users are expressed, as the knowledge of how to participate implies the sufficient involvement of the member in the community. The virtual body is exposed to the power of collective will and knowledge, and must respond accordingly, or be isolated in some way (Foucault, *BotC* 78). This also illustrates the malleability of identity within a digital context.

I would argue that the freedom of the fashion in *Second Life* and *Furcadia* is directly tied into the freedom afforded to the player. Bereft of social pressures and inhibiting constructions, presentation of the individual is able to achieve much more unique heights of creativity and non-conformity. Subcultures and individuals who would never meet can function alongside one another, as the dynamic of *Second Life* encourages activity in a broad spectrum, and allows narrative after narrative to be created and played out in relative harmony. Tom Boellstorff writes in *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* that,

> A man spends his days as a tiny chipmunk, elf, or voluptuous woman. Another lives as a child and two other persons agree to be his virtual parents. Two "real" life sisters living hundreds of miles apart meet every day to play games together or shop for new shoes for their avatars… a group of Christians pray together at a church; nearby another group of persons engages in a virtual orgy, complete with ejaculating genitalia…
> (8)

Vast cultural differences are united under a common flag of freedom; it's heterogeneity homogenized. Each person participating in the activities outlined above no doubt enjoys whatever event so chosen, but there is a distance created by the Internet from the person playing the chipmunk and that individual's real life. He or she is able to scurry through the forest, but as it is entirely cerebral, this may have no bearing on the actual self. The chipmunk is an avatar for a specific set of attributes that that individual wants to present to the rest of *Second Life*, and avatars are the primary separator of individuals from their real lives, as they can be anything the users want them to be, and

nothing that they don't. The freedom of having malleable and mutable avatars fuels *Second Life*.

The use of avatars in this unconstrained context is also how the three researched fandoms create and sustain the personalities that are developed by them for interaction within the fandom. There are many similarities among the avatars created by the Furries, Otherkin, and Otakukin and the avatars of *Second Life* users, but an important difference is the focus of the avatar creation. An interviewee said, "One of the things that I liked most about the [Otherkin] forums is that you're really free to be who you want to be. You can change anything you want about yourself!" (Interview 6) While the player of *Second Life* and *Furcadia* is free to create essentially whatever character he or she desires, the involvement of the fandom phenomena codifies the creation of avatars in each context. Just as we are technically free to clothe and present ourselves however we see fit, our choices are subconsciously determined from what we see as appealing to us in the culture around us. The avatars necessarily reflect the binding interests of the fandom, but also each fan's personal interpretation of it.

The avatar begins to be a projection of the idealized personality, situated in context of the larger fantasy of the fandom, so that the avatar becomes much more of a persona and role than an aesthetic arrangement, though aesthetics continue to factor into its creation to a high degree. Anthony Elliot writes in *Subject in Ourselves: Social Theory, Psychoanalysis, and Postmodernity* that, "In the process of identifying with a celebrity, the fan unleashes a range of fantasies and desires and, through projective identification, transfers personal hopes and dreams onto the celebrity. In doing so, the fan actually experiences desired qualities of the self as being contained by the other, the

celebrity" (139). The difference between the fan's fixation on a real-life celebrity and a fictional character is, through the pseudo-materiality that the Internet imbues in objects, that the fan has the ability to actually take the traits that he/she find so appealing in the character and literally ascribe them to his/her own online identity; the fan is no longer necessarily living vicariously through the object of interest, but is now quite literally living the life of a character within the context of the fandom.

The agency of this relation of fan identity is essentially tied to the fandom's focus. For example, the Furries create their identities from the media influences that create the foundation of the fan-object. On the forum *Furtopia.org*, a site for Furry interaction, one of the threads is entitled "The Origin of Your Furriness" and has garnered a fair number of replies. While the fans all have had different experiences and relate to the fandom differently, many of the members of furtopia.org share some common experiences in processing media into their "fursona." I will directly quote from the public forum.

One poster writes that, "It must have started sometime after I was 10, but possibly even before that. It must have been all those Cartoons and Disney movies," while another contends that "I know the movies had something to do with it, but I can't remember." Another notes even more confusion: "Haven't a clue where it all started (though I did watch *Balto* an awful lot as a child, more than normal)." While having varying levels of cognitive recognition of their origin, the uniting factor of these Furries continues to be explicitly tied to the media referent that inspired the person. The performance of the character persona that the Furries adopt is intrinsically tied to the product of their interest. Baudrillard noted in *The Consumer Society* that the body acts

"in terms of an enforced instrumentality that indexed to codes and norms of society of production and managed consumption" (131). The power that fans have over their personas is more tenuous than what is immediately apparent, as their performance of these personas is tied to cultural ideas about what these animals might be like, as presented in the media that inspired the person in the first place.

Performance theory has developed and contributed a great deal to the understanding of how people present themselves to the rest of the world, and also how the individual understands his/her own role in the world. What has been essentially determined by social theorists such as Judith Butler is that while individuals have the ability to make performance choices based on how they want to be perceived, the actual ability of people to see their actions as performative is much more intrinsic to the individual and might not be understood as performance at all. The body is continually influenced by forces outside of the person's control and hence, as Butler points out in *Bodies That Matter*, "the account of agency cannot be conflated with voluntarism or individualism, much less with consumerism, and in no way presupposes a choosing subject" (15). This theory is problematized by the existence of the fan, since, as performing individuals, fans do not necessarily remain ignorant of their fannish motivators, or why they embrace such motivations. Matt Hills notes that,

> The problem for performative theory is that fans display a type of 'non
> volitional volition' which disrupts Butler's poststructuralist separation of
> voluntarist agency and power/knowledge. Fans are self-absent to the
> extent that they are unable to account fully for the emergence of their

fandom, but they are also highly self-reflexive and willfully/volitionally

committed to their objects of fandom. (159)

In essence, the fans are willfully modeling themselves after an ideal of culturally

codified behavior (a fox is wily, quick, and clever; therefore, a fox Furry would have

these traits). These mythological archetypes influence how these concepts are

interpreted. The devotion of fandoms to media is a new kind of mythology. Fans have

the opportunity to adhere themselves to a system of fundamental guidelines that appeal

to them, and these moral and societal edicts are transmitted through the narratives that

are crafted by media and literature. The heroes and saints of religion are transmitted

within the narrative of popular culture, and archetypes of mythology continue to define

the way in which the viewer experiencing the media understands characters. Hence, the

sympathetic arrangement of hero and villain, conjoined with a moral lesson, acts as a

kind of contemporary mythology, with the resulting effects of people beginning to

believe and cherish the narrative, though fandoms remain much more malleable and

open to interpretation by their members.

A key difference between fandoms and religions is that fandoms are inherently

outside of cultural hegemony. The devotion of a person to a particular fan object is seen

as deviant and outside the realm of normal behavior, even though such accepted

practices of normal behavior include worshipping abstract idols such as the Cross or

the Buddha statue. As an Otherkin interviewee said,

I get so angry when people don't take my beliefs seriously and make fun

of me. You know, this is part of me, my soul. When I'm disrespected, it's

just like telling any religious person that their beliefs are stupid or crazy. I

think there's a lot of similarities between religion and Otherkin, but that

probably makes people uncomfortable. (Interview 10)

In the popular mind, the fandom has much more to do with a "cult" than it does a

religious entity, and this difference of conception exerts a powerful impact upon the

body and mind of the fan who is now at least partly synonymous with a cultist (Hills

180).

The framing of the fan as a cultist creates a negative connotation that is exerted

upon the fan by the dominant culture. This adverse association between the fan creates

a system by which the fan's devout body is continually defined against the worst

aspects of the fandom, and the perception of the fan identity is increasingly determined

by the disciplinary figures of the dominant, hegemonic culture. Matt Hills writes,

Considering the cult body as written through a process of

commemoration and impersonation suggests that this body is not broken

down and recomposed 'retail' in the sense suggested by Foucault's

disciplinary procedures; the body of the cult fan reverts very much to the

wholesale remembrance of disciplinary models. (161)

In this light, the body and persona of the fan necessarily reflects the disciplinary models

from the fan object that are appealing to the individual. This adoption of "wholesale

remembrance" forms the basis through which fans, and devotees of all stripes, process

and create role models for the performance that they present to the rest of the world.

Indeed, it gives the fans a chance to "re-tale" their own history and morality by adopting

a different philosophy and mythology than the dominant hegemony.

The "problem" with fans is that this performativity is widely perceived as a negative characteristic. The idea of the fan persona is inextricably nested within the negative context of powerful devotion to a narrative that is not part of the dominant hegemony. An Otakukin interviewee said, "people just aren't going to understand my beliefs, so they're going to attack me. That's why I keep the truth secret, because I don't want to deal with how my family and friends react" (Interview 5). The reason that fandoms are consistently maligned is that the source of their inspiration lacks the historical and cultural backing of the mainstream; indeed, because the media and literature that excite fan interest are so new, the idea of whether these narratives exist within a purely commodified context is worth considering, and especially whether the pseudo-religious participation of fans in this highly public, commercial framework forms in part the negative connotations that are allayed against them.

II

A Link to the Past

The narrative identity of the fan is already positioned in a negative light as it goes against the hegemonic presuppositions of what is culturally proper to devote oneself to. Hence, the fan has a freedom within his/her identity and the formation of the self to undermine the traditional mores that define society. The narratives that are made available to the fans through the fan object are able to be utilized by the fan to challenge tradition and overturn established order. The researched groups are pivotal examples of this subversion, as they have foregone even the emulation of *humanity*, rejecting the capitalist social codes of contemporary humans for the rules and systems

of a fantastical, egalitarian, and more "natural" world. This allows members of these

subcultures to at once subvert the capitalist origins of their identity, while also

reinventing the conceptions that originally defined the fan-object. Matt Hills writes, "the

cult body does not simply become trapped in an all-encompassing discursive or

capitalist system – the cult body is neither a product of an entirely volitional subject,

nor is it the product of such a subject trapped in total consumer code" (168). So while

the fan is able to create a mutable identity based on the original product, the

interpretations of that object are intrinsically tied into the fan's culture and

background.

There are several examples of this phenomenon within the cultures researched.

On the forums of Otherkin.com, many users have shared their experiences in reaching

their identity, and while many of the stories are unique, aspects of the tales rely on

cultural narratives that are already in place. Here an Otherkin relates the experience of

realizing that he or she is an alien being:

> I was first aware of myself at an early age, I believe around the years 8 or
>
> 9 it very quickly became apparent that I shared traits that altogether
>
> many of my peers lacked, and by many I mean all of them... I thought
>
> differently, I saw differently, and I have been told numerous times that it
>
> shows in my physiology... For those of you who want to know I am what
>
> you would call "Alien". Simply because there is no better word I have for
>
> it. Not a Grey of course, no big eyes and giant head, but something
>
> glancingly similar in thought I suppose. I am very apt at the molding and
>
> understanding of psi [ed. psychic energy] as well. (*Otherkin.net*)

While the poster's origin story continually emphasizes the unique nature of his

perspective and thought process, the conclusion of this narrative implies an influence of

a popular, contemporary idea; that of the "Grey," the archetypal image of the alien,

which was popularized by such shows as the *X-Files* and other science fiction. This

poster might not necessarily even be a fan of such programming, but the presence of

these narratives in the cultural consciousness dictate to a certain degree what

metaphors he/she can draw upon to create and explain an identity. A Furry on

Furtopia.org explained their origin thusly:

> Well... I guess I discovered mine when I was about 17 and saw Don
>
> Bluth's film "An American Tail" for the first time in a decade. I fell in love
>
> with the mouse characters. Later that same year I watched "The Secret of
>
> Nimh" for the first time since childhood too. Those same films led me to
>
> the fandom a couple of years later… My best advice is this: was there a
>
> particular story/movie/whatever that lead you to furry? If so, did you
>
> feel an affinity to one character or species? Make that your starting
>
> fursona. I say 'starting' because most people change at least once, and
>
> some change fursonas as often as they change clothes… (*Furtopia.org*)

Here again, we have a member of the subculture who is sharing a personal narrative of

self-discovery as a fan and more specifically, a Furry. The connection to media is much

more obvious and acknowledged by the poster, especially in how he/she determines

that the movies directed him/her to the fandom at large. The most interesting aspect

about this post is the advice given to others who might be trying to develop their own

"fursona;" determine what media you saw that inspired you, then analyze the

characters therein to learn which you might feel an affinity for. This allows prospective Furries the freedom to interpret the media themselves, but the connection between the fan, the product, and the resulting persona is conflated with the original presentation of that fan-object. So, if a person wanted to be a dog, he/she could in theory watch a film like Disney's *Balto*, taking cues from the personalities of the characters in the movie. While the ultimate personality is personal, the narrative foundation informs the process of creating that character. The fan is intrinsically tied to the media.

The Otakukin perhaps represent the most powerful example within these fandoms of a subculture that is heavily influenced by the media that it gravitates around. The fans that compose this group explicitly state their connection to a character from an anime, and so their link to a narrative that is part of the popular culture is incredibly concrete and inarguable. However, whatever way the connection between the cartoon character and the person occurs, the fan nevertheless believes in the validity of this connection. The interesting thing about the Otakukin is that, along with the narrative of the anime, the character must also absorb the history of a culture, that of the Japanese. Much anime is situated within Japan, or some equivalent, and therefore carries much of the socio-historical framework that defines the actual country.

The fandoms inherent within the Otakukin community are two-fold; one, an explicit and powerful connection to an anime character; two, an implied sympathy to Japanese narrative style. Nearly all Otakukin that I have read about or talked with during the course of this research have been Westerners, and so this intense fascination with what amounts to a foreign media product is an interesting facet of the subculture. I would argue that this devotion to the highly fictionalized, idealized, and product-

oriented portrayal of Japanese society is part of the rejection of institutionalized norms and realities of the Western world. An Otakukin from *From Fiction* writes that,

> Otakukin believe that they, for one reason or another, have the souls of anime characters, or the souls of people/entities from worlds depicted in anime, or in other modern fiction. Does this mean that there are people who believe that they were Sailor Moon in a past life; people that believe for all intents and purposes that they are Sailor Moon *now*? Yes it does, although this is not always the case. Many Otakukin simply find a certain anime to be… hauntingly familiar in someway, like a house you moved out of when you were three. Some Otakukin believe that a certain anime is merely their spiritual home, where they 'should' have been born, or that they lived there in a past life but were someone inconsequential to the plot of that anime.

The focus of the above quote on the "spiritual home" of the Otakukin really emphasizes the discontentment that is felt in the context of their current lives. As maladjusted Westerners, the romanticized image of Japan, as presented through anime and other media forms, provides a fantastic setting through which the Otakukin can escape, at least mentally, from the confines of Western, American society. In this way, not only do the Otakukin merge identities with the characters that are so appealing to the fandom, but are also able to adopt interpretations of cultural traits that are different from the society in which they live, further cementing the bonds that unite the fandom.

Ultimately, the conflation of identity and fandom on the Internet is a vastly complex topic, and the creation of these personas draws upon many different sources of

inspiration and maintenance. It is interesting that the personas created by these fandoms are more or less entirely dependent upon the writer who crafts the identity, and are thus tied inextricably to the fan's ability to portray in writing the persona to the outside world. Hence, the process of crafting a character of any type, and even the style with which the character interacts with the rest of the fandom, is a continuous use of rhetoric. The writer must be constantly informed as to how the readers and interpreters of the character react to the presentation. So the writer must necessarily adapt to the demands of the fandom's meta-narrative, all the while keeping the unique nature of their created persona intact. There is an interesting juxtaposition between the freedom of the fan to create whatever he/she so desires, and then the continuous rhetorical pressure to frame the narrative within the confines of the fandom itself.

The presentation of the persona targets the specific audience of the fandom. The use of narrative techniques such as voice and other literary devices and conventions allows the writer of the persona creative freedom to make a character that effectively illustrates the narrative that the creator desires. As there is an audience, the writer must adapt the presentation of that persona to the particular group of readers and interpreters. A Furry interviewee said, "there is drama between the Otherkin and Furry communities at times. I like to think that we're all one big family, but for some reason the Otherkin I've met are really uppity and snobbish. I think it's because Furries are more accepting, and the Otherkin are more elitist" (Interview 8). The writer is necessarily forced to adopt a style that meshes with the group dynamic, and whether that style is successfully deployed or not can have a significant impact on the role the writer plays in the fandom, and the pressure to contribute something of significance to

the greater narrative is very significant for a fan, as the meta-narrative of the

community is the driving force behind the unity of the greater fandom.

And often, the greater narrative influences even the conceptions of what a

persona means to the rest of the population. For example, in the Furry community, the

predominance of "foxes" within the demographic has led to preconceptions about the

personality and traits of foxes. These assumptions are tied to cultural ideas about "fox-

ness," so that assumed characteristics of foxes include clever, quick-witted, and, most

significantly, highly promiscuous (Interview 1). This limits the ability of the aspiring

fox to create a character that goes counter to the already established narrative of fox-

ness. Matt Hills, in an analysis of Elvis impersonators, writes the following concerning

the grip that preconceptions have on how members of that particular fandom are

perceived and discussed by others:

> The flexibility of such hegemonic articulations is evident in the case of
>
> Elvis impersonators. One might think that it would be difficult to align the
>
> King's men with a feminized stereotype of emulation, but at the equation
>
> between "impersonation" and "femininity" is so ingrained at a *a priori*
>
> level that discussions of Elvis impersonators almost inevitably revolve
>
> around discussions of the feminine…mimicry and impersonation are
>
> intrinsic to the phenomenon of stardom…(164)

The Elvis impersonator is tied by the history of their object of interest (Elvis) to a set of

ideas that define and permeate the idea of Elvis himself. So mimicry takes a principal

role in the presentation of Elvis, as does femininity, almost without the active

contribution of the fandom itself. Impersonating Elvis will always have these traits

attached to the activity, as long as the dominant culture continues to perceive Elvis in this light. Such is the fate of foxes within the Furry fandom as well.

It goes without saying that many members of the researched fandoms would like nothing more than to cast off the stereotypes that define their participation in the community, especially as judgments and a feeling of discrimination have already driven many members away from the dominant culture and into the fandom. And while the fandoms are very open about different members, the bigotries held towards certain kinds of members nonetheless exist. The solution to the problem is a simple one, take control of the narrative of one's character and define him/her around one's own expectations of how that character would be represented. This reappropriation of the persona away from the stereotypes and expectations of the fandom is another example of the continuous narrative that defines participation in these fandoms. The extent to which fans can become involved in the participation of their fictional persona can be impressive.

One particularly interesting phenomenon I encountered within the fandoms is the concept of "soulbonding." Through my interviews, I was able to meet a few members of the groups that believed that the characters within their fictions had actual stake within the real world, as in their personalities were present and real within the author of the fan fiction. Characters in the stories could exert their personalities and their experiences in the physical life of the author; and often, the author felt as though many of his/her creations were present in his/her mind and soul. As one interviewee says,

> I don't feel like the stories I write are really my own. I'm a storyteller, but
>
> the stories were already there. I just access this reality and write it down,
>
> because it used to be part of me. The characters make up different aspects
>
> of my personality, and my soul is wrapped up in each story. (Interview 6)

The interviewee went on to mention that the fan fictions he/she wrote do not

necessarily reflect events that occurred in a former life, but rather possibilities. The

narratives that appeal to the fan provide the framework for the story, but ultimately the

direction in which the text is constructed is determined by the predilections of the

writer. However, this conflation of pseudo-history and creative power lend the practice

of writing such "soulbonded" fiction to a function of creating a personal legitimacy and

personal history. The texts provide a basis for the persona of the author to live out a

dynamic life within the narrative, and thus the fictions take on a much more personal

function than typical fan fictions. As another interviewee said, "these stories are my

history and if I keep writing them, then I get to understand what happened to me before

I was born in this life" (Interview 10). This freedom to explore the fictionalized past of a

persona allows the author a vast amount of creative freedom, as anything written can

be seen as an attempt to parse the gulf of identity.

This inevitably leads to highly creative play with the narratives.

An interviewee said, when asked about the creation of his persona, a dragon, that the

process "took a really long time. I had seen films and read books about dragons, and I

always felt a real connection to the stories, but I just never made the final step! I found

some Otherkin sites, and after trying a out an elf, and then a vampire, I thought about

dragons, and something just fell into place!" (Interview 10). This interview reveals a

fascinating aspect of the creation of identity: the mutability of the entire process. This person struggled with other parts of the fandom, but eventually came to accept his place within the dragon subsection, as James G. Kellas notes, "all nationalisms are partly inclusive and partly exclusive" (91).

Stories are taken from one source, reinterpreted to fit into the fandom, and then revamped yet again in order to provide the writer with freedom to create a persona that he/she is happy with and respects. This creative activity can be done within the confines of the fandom or privately, especially if the character is too deviant even for the fandom's acceptance. The need for a narrative for the persona to occupy is a powerful pressure as the relation to the world it inhabits significantly defines the persona. One of the most significant ways in which members of these fandoms create identities and narratives for their personas is through the use of fan fiction.

CHAPTER 3

The Use of Fan Fiction

I

The Pursuit of Ownership

Fan fiction has been extensively studied by academia as an artifact of fandom and fan interests. The creation of this media is one of the defining trademarks of a fan culture, as many members participate in fan fiction's production. Henry Jenkins, in his seminal work *Textual Poachers*, describes the phenomenon of fan fiction at length, noting the power that the writing has on the community at large. He describes the production of fan fiction as "a discursive logic that knits together interests across textual and generic boundaries" (40). In this fashion, the community can create cohesive texts that draw upon the narrative of interest, all the while adhering to the logic of the original narrative.

The communities in this project are little different in the production and use of fan fiction. No matter what the specific interests of the particular fan, there is potential for the fan to create and/or enjoy fiction that adequately mirrors, recreates, and ultimately reappropriates the original media. Mafalda Stasi writes, in "The Toy Soldiers From Leeds: The Slash Palimpsest" that fan fiction and slash are, "part of an often complex intertextual sequence, and it bears a close and running relationship with (at least) one other text. This is why I use the term *palimpsest*, to indicate a nonhierarchal, rich layering of genres…" (119). Fan fiction has the ability to cross boundaries of genre and content; it creates a continuum of creative product bounded by the context of the producing fandom. This freedom and versatility of fan fiction is almost certainly the

reason that it is prevalent in almost every fandom, including the subcultures researched in this project. Indeed, the creation and subsequent consumption of fan fiction provides a significant point of contact among members of the fandom, especially if the subject matter has significant cultural and personal meaning that is directly related to the identity of the people involved in the creation of the text.

The creation of fan fiction is a personal matter, as is all writing, but writing depends upon an audience, be it a single person or an entire community of readers. The technology of the Internet affords fan fiction writers the ability to reach a greater audience than ever. Angela Karpovich, in "The Audience as Editor," notes, "any consideration of the social practices of online fandom reveals the complexity of the engagement between the social and textual norms of the community and the technological competencies that enable the community's existence and development" (174). Internet expertise and technology now provide and define the framework wherein most fan fiction is written, and also define who can read it. As Elizabeth Freeman notes, "this concept of kinship-like association as 'imagined community,' though, so far depends upon the literacy and/or upon equal access to technologies of visual representation among possible members" (302). In this project, all of the participating members researched were already on the Internet, and the Web remains the significant contact point between the members. It is curious to note that even if there was a significant element to the culture that was completely off-line, it is intrinsically denied the opportunity to participate in the greater subculture.

Fan fiction helps create a community of readers, as Jenkins writes that, "fans often form uneasy alliances with others who have related but superficially distinctive

commitments, finding their overlapping interests in the media a basis for discussion and fellowship" (41). Fans are an audience that is attuned to a particular narrative; the creation of extra media within the context of the fan interest is particularly edifying for both the writer and reader of the fan fiction, as the new media not only contributes to the limited original narrative, but also allows the fans to adapt the narrative to more personal, contemporary issues. The fiction and media produced provide additional stories, extra mythologies, and ultimately, a living narrative that can continually be modified, expanded, and changed. Jenkins notes,

> Fan reading, however, is a social process through which individual interpretations are shaped and reinforced through ongoing discussions with other readers. Such discussions expand the experience of the text beyond its initial consumption. The produced meanings are thus more fully integrated into the readers' lives and are of a fundamentally different character from meanings generated through a casual and fleeting encounter with an otherwise unremarkable text. (45)

The integration that Jenkins mentions is pivotal to understanding the appeal of fan fiction, especially as it relates to communities wherein identity is formed around media archetypes. Fan fiction allows the appropriation of a narrative so that the narrative may *respond* to the desires of the fan, and it represents the control that fans seek to have over the media that is adored by the fan community. Now, the narrative can directly address issues outside of the context of the original production. The narrative can be adapted to whatever the writer desires.

This appropriation of media provides fan cultures with a basis through which to bond and explore the object of interest in a more personal way. The use of fan fiction allows fans to create new original media and literature *ad infinitum*, as long as it is tangentially within the confines of the original interest object. As Jenkins writes, "fans possess not simply borrowed remnants snatched from mass culture, but their own culture built from the semiotic raw materials the media provides" (49). The freedom of expression that lies within the realm of fan fiction allows fans the ability to constantly reinterpret and appropriate media so that it fulfills the specific interests of the fandom, without necessarily adhering to narratives that are counter or irrelevant to the beliefs and relevant ideas of the fandom. This feature is especially important in the groups researched in this project, as it frees the writers to focus on their own interpretations and mutations of the narrative. Freedom to reinvent fictional realities provides the necessary space to deviate from the original material and adapt the narrative to the author's needs without consideration to the canon.

Fan fiction allows similar bonding through the freedom of the narrative. The fan community responds to the creation of fan fiction by doing what audiences do best, consuming it. Through fan fiction, fan communities have the opportunity to continue the experience of their object of interest, and therefore keep the fandom occupied and sustained with new material and original interpretations. Deborah Kaplan writes in "Construction of Fan Fiction Character Through Narrative" that, "the work both contributes to and draws from the community's collective understanding of character. The roots of fan fiction characterization lie both in this interpretive community and in an individual interpretation of the source text's characters (136), and in this context,

fan fiction serves as a possible foundation and focal point of the community. Jenkins writes that, "meanings form the basis for the construction and maintenance of this fan community; the expectations and conventions of the fan community also shape the meanings derived from the series and the forms taken by the fans own artistic creations" (88). The proliferation of fan fiction could be interpreted as the natural result of fans having a limited base of original material, and as this material is limited in nature, fans, like larger cultures, create new semiotics and narratives of meaning in order to address new issues and interests within the culture. The evolution of fan fiction is analogous to the continual development of language.

Just as language has a foundation in grammar, fan fiction is ontologically tied to the original fan object. As Jenkins writes, "the raw materials of the original story play a crucial role in this process, providing instructions for a preferred reading, but they do not necessarily overpower and subdue the reader" (63). This ability to constantly generate new interpretations is similar to the idea of transformative grammar, as posited by Chomsky in *Syntactic Structures*. One of the aspects of generative grammar is that language is essentially creative and is necessarily infinite; we cannot run out of words through which to convey ideas. Through this consistent creative force of language communities are built and maintained, and indeed, the entire human race is bonded together through our use of unlimited and fluid language, and fandom operates around the bond created within an "interpretive community" (MacDonald 132). The multitude of possible interpretations of the text by the fan are essentially unlimited, so the narrative is free to be utilized in whatever fashion the writer requires. This allows characters to be reinterpreted, placed into contexts that wouldn't occur on the actual

programming, which is one of the greatest appeals of fan fiction; it represents a chance

for the fan to have complete control over the direction of the original narrative.

Kaplan writes, "Fan writers create texts that rely on the interplay between

knowledge of the source text and knowledge of the fanon" (136). This reappropriation

of a narrative by an interested fan community is a distinctive trait of fan fiction and

helps to both create a commonality among fans and a knowledge/power distinction

between fans and casual consumers. Jenkins writes that,

> Fans also draw distinctions between regularly viewing a program and
>
> becoming fans of the series… as many fans suggested to me, the
>
> difference between watching a series and becoming a fan lies in the
>
> intensity of their emotional and intellectual development. Watching
>
> television as a fan involves different levels of attentiveness and evokes
>
> different viewing competencies than more casual viewing of the same
>
> material. (56)

The "intensity of emotional and intellectual development" is an interesting aspect of the

information gathered by Jenkins. The fan of a product, under this definition, inherently

feels more and thinks more about the fan object than does the regular observer. The fan

distinguishes him or herself from the casual observer by participating in fannish

activities. If the fan viewer truly needs more personal validation from the product, then

fan fiction provides a chance for the fan to achieve personal edification from an object

that doesn't necessarily directly address his/her needs.

The intense level of personal involvement with fan fiction primes the narrative

medium as a particularly relevant action for the subcultures researched to undertake.

In the researched communities, the personal need of fan fiction is often to create

contexts wherein the imaginary persona can interact with an imaginary reality. Not

only does it allow members of these communities to control narratives in personal

ways, it completely reinforces the relationship between the fan and the context of the

fan's character within the meta-narrative of the community. It allows fans to expose and

present the unique aspects of their characters. As Jenkins writes,

> Fans tend to see themselves in highly individualistic terms, emphasizing
>
> their refusal to conform to 'mundane' social norms and the range of
>
> different interpretations circulating within their community; they are
>
> nevertheless responsive to the somewhat more subtle demands placed
>
> upon them as members of fandom—expectations about what narratives
>
> are 'appropriate' for fannish interest, what interpretations are 'legitimate'
>
> and so forth. (88)

The lack of conformity cherished by many fans finds an avenue for expression within

fan fiction. This writing allows communities such as the Furries to create narratives

around the avatars they create; fan fiction lets the fan write the history of the character

and the world in which the character inhabits, thereby imbuing the persona with a

logical, ordered background that explains and contextualizes the avatar within the

fandom's interest set.

The center interest of the fandom plays a vital role in fan fiction, as the binding

product creates a centered ideological framework through which the fiction can be

written. Kaplan writes that, "the community that produces and consumes fan fiction is

virtually the same as the community of fan critics; most fan fiction readers and authors

critique and analyze source texts" (136). As noted earlier, this phenomenon doesn't

necessarily limit the content of the fan fiction, but rather creates a situation wherein the

reader is primed to be more or less accepting of certain rhetorical features within a

piece of text. Jenkins writes that, "The reader is 'positioned; ideologically; certain

textual features 'determine' how the reader will respond to the represented events or

the depicted characters; viewers will have no choice but to accept the ideological

'demands' of the narrative system" (63). The readers are forced to accept certain

aspects of the fan fiction as true in order for the rest of the story to make sense; this

ranges from being as simple as "the main character in this story is a tiger" to "this

specific subset of magical powers function in this particular world."

These ideological adherences frame the story in such a way that it becomes more

believable within the contextual underpinnings of the original narrative; it becomes

more "plausible", as Jenkins notes "what counts as 'plausible' in such a story is a general

conformity to the ideological norms by which the viewer makes sense of everyday life.

Such a conception of the series allows fans to draw upon their own personal

backgrounds as one means of extrapolating beyond the information explicitly found…"

(107). Hence, the plausibility of the fan fiction allows both the writer and the reader to

draw upon personal experiences conflated with the accepted rules of the fiction's

context in order to make the story all the more relevant to them, and thereby useful in

providing pleasure in the pursuit of fandom.

The engagement of the researched communities in fan fiction is interesting, as it

performs all the usual purposes of fan fiction, and yet takes on another element in that

it is often used to define the persona of the individual. The writers in these communities

can utilize writing to provide context and meaning for their characters by positioning them within imaginary places that compliment, rather than oppose, the existence of such creatures. So while fan fiction provides the critical examination of media as discussed by Jenkins, it potentially takes on an interesting dimension of immediate personal importance if the subject of the fiction is the author's persona.

II

The Pursuit of History

Within the researched communities, there is a tremendous amount of fan fiction, written for all manner of purposes and positioned in an equally great number of contexts. All the literary genres were present, and the best fan fiction I encountered was very well written and extensively researched by the writers. Most of the stories involve popular characters from movies or books, but the writers were often very keen to include their own characters and personas within the context of the original media. In this way, the fans accomplish Jenkins' "poaching," but also take the next step in the narrative development: the inclusion of a personal avatar within the context of the original narrative.

One of most interesting types of fan fiction created within the communities researched would be "histories." These fictions detail stories that take place in a mythological fiction that recounts the history of a particular character, or an entire category of personas. Francesca Coppa writes in "Writing Bodies in Space" that, "fan fiction develops in response to dramatic rather than literary modes of storytelling and can therefore be seen to fulfill performative rather than literary criteria" (226). In this sense, the fan fiction can potentially effect a function other than pleasure; it provides

the historic-mythological context of the persona. The Otherkin are particularly

prominent in this regard, with vast documents that explore the history of the various

races that compromise this particular subculture. This subculture has perhaps the most

focused fan fiction of the groups researched, as often the attempt is to reveal the

forgotten history of the person's avatar (Interview 3).

The other fandoms researched also had reason to create pseudo- historical

documents, since an individual who believes that he/she is the reincarnation of a

former being is essentially dealing with events that happened in the past; these

individuals are, as John Keats once said, "living a posthumous existence." The memories

and emotions that fans claim to experience draw from a deceased or otherworldly

source, and thus the onus of providing the history of that being or place falls upon the

hands of the fan. Each character needs to possess a history, and that history needs to be

contextualized within the fandom's meta-narrative, and so much of the writing that is

done by the fandoms deals primarily with the past of their character, and potentially

the future. This is not unlike the necessity of seeking historical justification in the "real"

world. We need histories and mythos to provide a stabilizing force of identity. As

Anthony D. Smith writes, ""Irrespective of their historical accuracy, the primary

function of such myths has been to enhance a sense of collective belonging and provide

security, dignity, and continuity for successive generations of the nation's members"

(92). The establishment of a historical context provides a sense of comfort and reality

for a society, even if the basis of that past is fictionalized.

The fact that the character is tied intrinsically to the fan takes the freedom of

creation discussed earlier to a much higher level of involvement. The character *is* the

person writing the story, so the history of the persona is entirely up to the developmental whims of the creator. While a constricting narrative frames most fan fiction, the meta-narrative of the communities researched is much more open and free to be manipulated by the wishes of the writer. For example, if I were to endeavor to make a persona in the Otherkin community, I would have the nearly limitless horizons of fantasy literature and media from which to draw inspiration. I could easily craft a creature that defies all logical sense, but under the loose framework of fantasy, could indeed be completely plausible; if I establish enough background and history then my idea could be "believable" within the context of the fan community. Making a "fursona" for the Furry community would be equally creatively expansive, as I would have all of nature and the texts that involve animals to pull from in my attempt to establish identity. This attempt at fantasy historical graphing is influenced by several factors, which exert limitations (of a kind) on the writer in what they can create.

This freedom to explore identity is pivotal in the fan fiction community, and the narratives that are created around different ideas of identity maintain this sense of malleability. While the purpose of the fandom is to support these narratives of fantastic identity, there is a mistrust that accompanies the whole endeavor, since it could be exceedingly easy for someone to "fake" his or her beliefs. An interviewee corroborates with this sentiment, saying, "Yes there are a lot of posers. People take advantage of how accepting the forums are and just make up something. It's really frustrating, but it comes with the territory and they don't really last too long" (Interview 3). Hence, while writers of personal history and fan fiction have the freedom to essentially do what they

desire, there are controls in place to weed out those who fail to live up to the demands of the more serious members of the fandom.

This complex dynamic of acceptance but with the requisite of legitimacy has been hugely influential in some sections of the fandoms, but particularly with the elves, who more specifically refer to the Elven race as "Elenari." They have constructed a vast history for their fandom, and many of the members of the elves rely on this history in order to make sense of their own identity. For example, the description of an Elven "homeworld" Selar:

> The Elenari aren't sure what they called this Homeworld when they lived there; but they have adopted the name "Sel'ar," which means "homeland" or possibly "temporary homeland." Several different Elenari subraces lived on Sel'ar, including
> the Tulari, Draestari, Listari, Dai'ari and Kalthilas. Dragons and Unicorns also lived on Sel'ar.
>
> Sel'ar had blue skies with a single sun and moon and a "low" tech level (swords & tools but no advanced machines). Sel'ar had small towns and villages in the plains, forests, and deserts, and some tribes lived underground. There were many forests that included enormous trees that some remember being so big that it took 20 Elves to encircle an average tree. Often, houses were built in the branches of the largest trees. On Sel'ar there were seasonal celebrations with festivals, food, drink, music, dance and merriment lasting all night. (*Otherkin.net*)

This description, which is just the first of many other worlds, situates the Elven consciousness in a particular physical place with specific features and codes. This phenomenon allows the participating members to imagine themselves in a context that is accommodating of the fantasies that define the subculture. By providing these detailed anecdotes, the members of the subculture produce fanfiction that codifies the former reality for other members and further provides them with referential and inspirational material.

Inspirational is the key term here: notice the idyllic language of the above quote, and how it illustrates a "simpler" time that is entirely removed from the tumultuous present. Smith notes that, "the 'golden ages' of a community, recorded in epic and chronicle, art and song, are not only a source of collective pride and confidence, they also inspire action and emulation" (95). Not only does this history comfort the members, but it also informs their perspective on how to interact with the world around them. Importantly, it also outlines the nature of the world of origin, as it points out that dragons and unicorns exist there as well. This justifies the Elven presence, as it reassures the reader that the nature of the world is definitively one in which the fantastic has supplanted the mundane, where the ideal has trumped cold, cynical reality.

Fan fiction allows this historical narrative to occur. The history of the Elenari is a vast document and contains incredible amounts of information about the origin of the elves. This document, of course, is a prime example of fan fiction, and yet, many members of the Otherkin community take its narrative rather seriously. While members of the fandom are free to disagree with the document, it does exert a powerful

influence over the narratives that are constructed within the elf Otherkin, who must at least take into account the existence of this massive warehouse of information. An interviewee says, "There are lots of different kinds of elves out there. The Elenari are probably the most powerful and have the most magic, but the other elves still have similar powers" (Interview 7). This is an interesting intersection of both discrimination and the legitimizing effect of the fan narrative. It's rather unclear as to what is meant by "power," but it seems that the community to which they belong, with the Elenari being the highest echelon, determines the level of power relative to each type of elf.

Why is this the case, especially when one considers that each individual narrative can be modeled after the desires of the writer, thereby giving the writer full control over the "powers" of his persona? The conclusion seems to be that the extent of the Elenari "history" gives credence and background to the legitimacy of this particular branch of elves; the overwhelming narrative of power imbues those who adhere to it with that same history and that same potential for ability. As in the real world, it is ironic to think that even in rejecting the dominant hegemony of identity, these fandoms, at the very least the Otherkin, have imposed their own powerful narratives onto the communities and determine how the members of the community relate to one another.

Fan fiction serves a variety of uses within the fandoms, and the power that it explicitly and implicitly exerts over the communities cannot be easily denied. It remains an intrinsic part of the development of narrative within each group, and through this activity, fans have an opportunity to create and remodel the identities to which they subscribe. Fan fiction is definitely a productive force that shapes the ways in which the members of the communities relate to one another, and represents a creativity that is

not merely limited to the selective "poaching" of media texts, but rather an infinitely diverse endeavor that draws from countless sources of inspiration.

It is difficult, in these groups, to attempt to draw one-to-one connections among sources of literature and media and the resulting fan fiction. While the basis and foundation may remain the same, the power of the individual writer is extremely important to consider, and thus the stories are often tied in very specific ways to the author of the piece, especially if the author inserts him or herself into the piece. This fusion of personal identity and fantastic narrative yields a document that is not only a glimpse into an alternate reality, but also a person's interpretation of his/her soul and what the body should represent as a manifestation of that soul. And often, the demands of the body are what drive the creation and content of these narratives.

Chapter 4

Real Pleasure in Fictional Lives

I

Stories Having Sex with Stories

The dominant form of fan fiction that I encountered was carnal in nature and unapologetically explicit in execution. Their purpose in the researched communities was pornographic in nature, in that the production of these texts had the intent of sexual satisfaction of the reader/viewer. The fantasies and desires of the writers were laid bare within the documents, which occupied a vast range of sexual actions and fetishes that were often physically impossible to perform in reality, which is analogous to the imaginary nature of the personas within the community. A Furry interviewee noted, "Some of the sex stuff is really, really odd. Most Furries aren't into it, but there are plenty who are… I'm not one of them. Furries get a bad reputation for having so much porn, but sometimes, thinking about what's out there, I kind of understand why" (Interview 1).

This contiguous element of prodigious sexuality crisscrossed all the fandoms researched, and seemed like a common thread in the fan fiction produced among the communities. Indeed, the use of the pornography created yet another point of interaction and bonding between the fans, facilitating a sexualized space wherein the fans could explore the nigh-limitless possibilities of the sexual fantasy. The communities offer a safe place for members of each fandom who are also fans of particular fetishes, and as the communities have grown in numbers, new fetishes and artistic licenses have been inducted into the communities. The sexual element of these

communities serves a variety of uses within the fandoms and is a significant part of the fan fiction.

There has been a type of sexual fan fiction that has been extensively researched within the academic community. Slash fiction is a product of fandoms that positions two characters from the original media into a situation wherein homosexual activity occurs, and it further explores same-sex relationships that could potentially happen between characters from literature or media. The "slash" aspect of the term comes from the use of a slash to indicate that a relationship exists between the two people. For example, if I were to compose a slash fiction based on *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, I could posit a lesbian relationship between the characters Buffy and Willow, which would then be written as Buffy/Willow, and perhaps ultimately shortened to B/W. The existence of slash fiction is intellectually stimulating in a variety of ways, which explains its appeal to academia.

Not only does slash fiction reappropriate narratives away from their original source, it also questions the assumptions of what is generally heteronormative, mainstream programming; that is, pornography utilizes the characters within these texts in performances that challenge the dominant hegemony by subverting the traditional notions of romance and sex. The fact that this is a relatively common practice among fandoms, especially when the demographics of the writing population are predominantly female, has made this particular aspect of fan culture an appealing subject of research in the academic community.

However, the focus on slash fiction has caused other forms of sexualized fan fiction to fall by the wayside. Even the term and its etymology is questionable, as during

my research I found that slash was being occasionally used casually to refer to fan

fiction that had a sexualized element between *any* two characters, not just same sex

couples. I'm not sure if the word has changed meanings or if the writers are confused

themselves as to the accepted definition, but the word does seem to possess fluidity.

Perhaps the evolution of the term is indicative of the vast amount of sexualized fictions

that have appeared in the fandoms, so much so that a single term cannot begin to define

the range of fetish that is currently found within fan fiction.

Sexuality plays an extremely visible and equally indivisible role within the Furry,

Otherkin, and Otakukin communities. While the group dynamics affirm community and

fan fiction allows individuals to explore new identities, the pornographic element

within the communities researched is never completely divorced from the experience

of fandom.

This phenomenon has been researched previously, especially in regards to slash

fiction. However, the communities researched in this project have a particular

relationship with the pornography that each fandom produces, in that the creation of

such pornography further serves to map out and define the persona that the individual

has adopted. Indeed, much like the work of John C. Hale in his exploration of the Sado-

Masochist (SM) subculture, the sexuality of the communities serves as a potential

resource in exporing the persona. He writes that, "Bergstedt [an interviewee] described

SM as 'a resource or a means of learning more about myself and growing more

spiritually'" (227). Bergstedt found his experience in SM as a productive endeavor,

where he could explore aspects of his personality that weren't necessarily available to

him in a hetero-normative context. As one interviewee said, "I look at a lot of the porn,

yes. It's not something I'm really proud of, but it's definitely an important part of the experience. I like seeing myself [his persona] in different situations and fucking in weird ways" (Interview 4). Just like Hale's interviewee, this person sees intrinsic value in the exploration of the sexual through pornography, though also seems ashamed by his enjoyment of the text. This could be a result from the stigmatization of pornography and "deviant" fetish by the mainstream society.

The variety of pornographic fetish is quite numerous, and exhibits the wide range of sexual narrative that exists within the communities. These pornographic elements are tailored to serve the demands of the individual who creates the fiction, and also satisfy anyone who may share the same interests. As Hale notes, this shared fetish can provide a point of unity between the participants. He writes that, "Leatherplay can create, so to speak, a culture of two, composed of those two people who are playing together" (229). Through the participation of fans in sexual play and fantasy, the members form a distinct bond through the mutual experience of the fetish. This engenders trust and deep intimacy between the participating people, thereby further solidifying the group dynamic of the fandom.

This phenomenon of pornographic reciprocity has led to an interesting dynamic within the communities, as many users devote themselves entirely to the creation of these sexual narratives as their contribution to the community. Others, lacking skill to create their own fantasies, support these writers and artists through payment, which has created a strange sort of hedge-publishing economy; writers and artists create tailored sexual narratives for individual buyers. As an interviewee said, "I draw art for lots of people and get paid pretty good for doing it! I really just like to draw, but if I can

make some money off of it and help somebody out, then that's just great!" (Interview 1).

In this fashion, sex, fused with fantasy identity and meta-narrative, has taken on a very

similar role to the way pornography functions in the mainstream society. The role of

identity in this interplay between narrative and sex is complex. In traditional feminist

theory, pornography is interpreted as inherently degrading to the participants, who are

generally female.

Angela Carter, in her book *The Sadeian Woman,* notes that pornography

recreates the narrative of romance to emphasize physical sexuality. In this fashion, the

sterilized romantic notion of love is replaced by the reality of sexual contact and

pleasure (23). For Carter and other sex-positive feminists, pornography doesn't

necessarily represent the worst of society (though it certainly can), but rather has the

potential to subvert the hegemonic narrative of romance and de-sexualized courtship.

Fan fiction scholar Catherine Driscoll writes that the creation of fan pornography can be

understood as, "injecting subversive potential into the field of romance" (81). In this

sense, the sexual element recreates the text and positions it in a context that

acknowledges the erotic element instead of the romantic. The pornography produced

by the researched communities is similar, in that it positions the imagined persona in a

sexual and generally positive context.

As Judith Butler notes in *Undoing Gender,* gender roles and the performance of

gender is a behavior that is prescribed onto the individual by the society wherein he or

she lives; a person must adequately perform their gender roles in order to be

recognized as such, and this performance is often unconscious. Hale eloquently states

that "gender performativity, just as any other form of performativity, must occur within

social constraints to be intelligible; it must be intelligible to be efficacious; and if it is not

efficacious it cannot succeed as performance" (225). It is important to analyze the role

of the individual within this process and in consideration of their context, especially as

the pornography allows the reader a glimpse into the sexual identity of the writer and

how that sexuality functions within the context of the narrative that the fan has

adopted. The power of the pornography created by the fandoms lies in its ability to

transgress the mainstream ideas of body by sexualizing anthropomorphized

representations of human/non-human hybrids.

  The pornography of the communities researched depends just as much on the

fan narrative as any other aspect of the research. As one Furry interviewee noted, "the

story has to make some kind of sense, otherwise what's the point? It's easy to get off to

just about anything, but you know, the real good stuff has a plot and good development,

all that stuff" (Interview 4). The pornographic narrative needs to adhere to the same

demands that are placed upon other fan fictions: consistency, literacy in the subject

matter, and understanding the rules of the setting in which the story is placed. Hence,

even the creation of such pornographic materials is dependent upon the meta-narrative

that influences the fan fiction. The creation of such pornographic material is an

inherently creative process, but is further complicated by the need to adhere to the

existing body of literature. In this sense, the effective writer of pornography contributes

to the whole of the community through the inclusion of the community within his or her

writing.

  As established, the malleability of personas within these communities has a

significant effect on the presentation of the avatar in any context. This freedom of form

and display extends into the narrative of pornography, but has a much different effect. Without the necessity to adhere to set forms of life, the authors of fan pornography have the ability to twist anatomy and physiology, and can, due to the fact that the subject of the narrative is often entirely imaginative, create texts that are completely different from any other kind of pornographic material. As an interviewee said, "the cool thing about fan fiction is that you can pretty much do whatever you want. I like slash, vore[cannibalism], whatever, but those are really just the tip of the iceberg. I mean, you can literally do anything you want with fiction, and I don't mean to sound like a freak, but if you can do it all, why don't you?" (Interview 5) The potential for new heights of sexual activity is a tempting concept, especially as the fantasies stay in the realm of pen and paper.

With this freedom, writers and artists can posit whatever scenario their minds can imagine, but to what end? The writings of the Marquis de Sade are extremely graphic in nature, but pale in comparison to many of the fictions that have been created in the researched fandoms. While this creative production does indeed contribute to a community, it is unclear what this phenomenon does for the community. Much of the pornography, especially the more violent fetishes, such as the aforementioned vore, is reminiscent of horror movies or other such media in their execution, especially when one of the participants is fantasized as dying during the course of the text, or under constant, erotic threat of death. A poster Amalia of *Eka's Portal,* a pornographic Otherkin and Furry oriented website, writes that:

> Of course, no matter how infrequently Jeremy killed humans, the fact
>
> remained they were his prey. His kind lived among them for their own

survival, blending in, the humans having no idea of their existence other than as myths. Myths which got everything wrong, all the moon nonsense or that biting could make someone become a werewolf. Humans knew nothing of their kind, and didn't believe, and so they walked among them, thriving and killing. Humans were just lower animals, occasionally a werewolf would use one for breeding purposes, and maybe care for it, but still humans were food.

Collin did smell so appetizing. Well he wouldn't make the best meal, too scrawny for that, bones and all he would hardly be filling. Jeremy suddenly felt disgusted; he shouldn't have such thoughts about Collin. The boy was dear to him, he would never hurt him. It was just his nature and the fact he hadn't had a good human kill in ages, which made him crave it. Meat between his jaws, blood wetting his tongue, the crunch and crack as his jaws crushed bones.

The language used in this piece of fanfiction is intensely erotic and violence oriented. It is also analytically interesting for a number of reasons, especially due to the fact that it serves to define the role of werewolf in relation to the humans. It positions the werewolf character in a superior role to the weaker people, leaving them at his mercy. This power dynamic has parallels in the submissive/dominant nature of sexuality, but in this case is taken to indicate that strength also commands the power of life and death. The humans in this story are simply "prey," unless they come to the main character's attention, as did the "Collin" character. The relationship between the werewolf and the boy seems to mirror Hale's leatherdyke daddies and their boys; there is the sexualized

threat of authority and power, but also the erotic pressure to withhold that dominance. And yet, the fiction is interesting, as it doesn't necessarily take place in any "real" context, as in the fiction's reality humans are apparently at woeful odds against the werewolves. This piece of writing and its implications must be considered in context of its positioning in the realm of fantasy and how that world functions for the fan author.

The issue of interpretation is further complicated by the fact that these sexual activities must take place in the narrative realm of the phantasm and the illusion, separate from the physical body. Busse writes that, "these modes of discourse create an ambiguous space in which sexuality has shifted almost completely into the realm of fantasy" (209). The texts of sexual activity in the communities researched are as fictionalized as the fan fictions, but the result of pornography is unquestionably fixated towards the satisfaction of the physical body, but now, that body is no longer human, though the fantasies most certainly are; the pornographic body of the fandoms researched is, by nature, anthropomorphized, ontologically tied to an objectified, sexualized body. In this fashion, the pornography serves as a lens to interpret the gender performance of the imagined persona. As Hale writes, "I needed to know that my gender identification could be enacted legibly to at least one other person for it to be convincing enough to me that it could transform from a self-identification fully contained within my fantasy structure to a self-identification with a broader social sphere of enactment" (229). By placing their characters within the contexts of pornography, the fans are actively exploring their sexualities and showing others the extent of their character's personality and performance of that character.

The reality created in this pornography is a power dynamic that re-orders the structure of personal and narrative knowledge; it is the dehumanizing "medical gaze" that Michel Foucault outlined in his book *The Birth of the Clinic*. Such a gaze offers the authoritative space and power needed to maliciously exploit even a treasured narrative; this is the result of the interplay between knowledge of the fictionalized material and the intellectual ability to interpret that material in a manipulative fashion (35)*. Writers of fan fiction can utilize the separation afforded to them by a "medical gaze" to subvert and convolute tame texts into sexual pieces.

I would argue that this phenomenon is a result of the questionable relationship that exists between the reader, writer, and the text itself. The writers of this fan fiction have already started the process of transformation and metamorphosis through the creation of the persona, but, as addressed earlier, the product of such transformation is archontic from original material (Derecho 63), in that it is not necessarily derivative, but certainly a palimpsest in nature. Hence, while the writers apparently have the freedom to create whatever they so desire, the precise nature of that desire is often archontic from sexual narratives that exist within the mainstream, despite the attempts to undermine normative sexuality.

The nature of taboo could be useful here, as Carl Holmberg writes, "taboo frees human conscience to explore safe and secure action on the stages of life, yet everywhere people are chained to the very taboos that set them free" (89). By defying the norms of society, the defier is intrinsically defined by the existence of those mores and rules. The exploration of the violent and the taboo is liberating to a point, but it is important to understand that the nature of taboo is to tantalize and tempt, as it is at

least somewhat acceptable to defy these cultural codes, especially in the context of

Bakhtinian carnivalesque as discussed earlier. The fandom is a community that

promotes and facilitates such behavior, and fall under what Holmberg calls a

transgressive community, writing that "…The basis of transgressive community…

allow[s] transgression of the taboo under ritualized and unritualized circumstances"

(94). The safe space offered by the fandom facilitates the formerly tabooed behavior in

an acceptable context. However, the fantastic nature of the fandom's personas lends a

particularly potent element of fantasy to the pornographic material.

Fetishes that possess complete impossibility and implausibility in the real world

are present in large numbers throughout all the fandoms. This phenomenon creates an

interesting dynamic between normative porn and "deviant" work, in that, due to the

receptive nature of the fandoms, both are generally accepted. An interviewee said that,

"there are literally hundreds of different kinds of fetishes. I can't even begin to explain

them all, but some are way worse than others" (Interview 9). The above quote is telling,

as it illustrates the uncomfortable relationship that exists between the pornography

and the fandoms.

Of course, not every member likes every kind of pornography, but there is still a

desire for unity between the members. Elizabeth Freeman writes that, "sexual

minorities are stranded between individualist notions of identity on one hand and on

the other a romanticized notion of community as some amalgamation of individuals

whose ties to smaller affective units ought to be subordinated to a more abstract

collectivity, one often modeled on the liberal nation" (297). So, while the above

interviewee may have his or her own compunctions and sexual predilections, there is a

conforming pressure to amalgamate those desires into the structure of the community. No matter how bizarre fringe elements may get, the community still benefits from the creation of this pornography, though the individual may balk.

It would be beneficial to specifically analyze one of the fetishes that seem to have unique literary and narratological merit in the context of fandom and identity. This particular fetish is called voraphilia. The fetish is present within the communities researched, but is hardly ubiquitously enjoyed, and I do not claim that every member of the fandoms enjoys this pornography. However, this fetish is extremely interesting in its contextual placement, as its narratives stretch the limits of human understanding of sexuality, arousal, and shock value.

<div align="center">

II

We Are What We Eat

</div>

In Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman,* the main character is consumed by the fear of commitment and increasing disdain for the materialistic world around her. Her identity is shaped by what she consumes, and when she rejects that role in life, she begins to self-cannibalize her body. As she denies herself the trappings of capitalism and materialism, she is alienated from what is expected of own body and devours it in the process. She may not have the power to reject consumption entirely, but she can ultimately choose *what* to consume: her own sexualized, commodified, and patriarchally exploited body.

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Americans were urged by George W. Bush to "go out and shop." This exhortation of capitalist values, while seemingly shallow, illustrates a very important idea about the act of consumerism: that purchasing items,

consuming their essence as product, and ultimately using these items to better your

existence, is an intrinsic part of the healing process. Bush seems to imply that, just like

eating familiar food comforts us in times of need, our consumption of capitalist product

will satiate not only our personal worries, but help the economy of America by feeding

it finances. More cynical interpretations of this event pushed aside, it is apparent that

consumption is a pleasurable activity, on any level, and that the act of consumption, of

eating (metaphorically and literally) can and perhaps should provide a meaningful

experience to the participant beyond simply sustaining; it should be comforting,

pleasurable, and perhaps even a little sensual. The use of the mouth is an important

aspect of sex, and is unto itself an erogenous organ. It is not an improbable link of logic

to combine the pleasure of eating and the sexual application of the mouth, so that the

object consumed is as equally sensual as the experience of consuming it. The narrative

that Bush constructed around the pleasure and healing power of consumption mirrors

the fetishization of consumption by the voraphiles.

       Voraphilia, colloquially referred to as vore, is a sexual fetish that centers on the

sexual pleasure of consumption. The voraphile, basically, derives sexual pleasure out of

the idea of being eaten and/or eating others; it is sexualized cannibalism. The poster

ArchiesAngel of *Eka's Portal* writes that,

> There was no humor as Maria was swallowed down, that gulp almost
>
> breaking the drums of her ears, her body pressed against tightly by the
>
> eager and determined flesh as it caressed her down inside, her lump
>
> barely recognizable as it descended down her partner's neck, vanishing
>
> behind his chest. Against the walls did Maria hear the naga's [a

snake/human hybrid] beating heart, and for a moment all her struggles,

her tears and words cease. Was this not the perfect way to become that

much closer? She loved him more than anything - what would be so bad

about ending up in joining him? With this peace settling down over her

frantically searching mind, Maria remained in the sandwich paste as the

acids began to rise from the dimly illuminated walls around her.

The art depicts a variety of disturbing situations that would normally be devoid of

sexuality, but are sexualized by the content of the narrative, such as a detailed

description of a person being digested, or swallowed up by a gigantic throat. An

interviewee who was also a voraphile said that, "it's definitely weird, but I still enjoy it.

It's a power thing, another being eaten up by you, or you getting caught and eaten by

someone else. I don't know why it turns me on, but it does" (Interview 2).

As noted by Juana Maria Rodriguez in "Gesture and Utterance," that pleasure can

come from the feeling "to be possessed, inhabited by another body, is to give over

corporeal control to another entity that demands surrender…" (290). Sexual submission

is a common element in pornography and sex in general and provides a structure

through which participants can sexually interact with each other in a productive

manner. This phenomenon is taken to an extreme in vore, with one individual literally

obliterating the other in a sexualized context of destruction and consumption. As the

Eka's Portal poster Passion_25 writes in a poem,

Before much longer I'll cease to exist, a signature of her contentment

These conditions will take care of me, like fresh meat thrown to the

lions./ My flesh has been her decadent feast, the results of our pure

insanity/ She sits down peacefully to rest her belly, the colours a nuclear

ion./Having successfully fulfiled my desire, wishing I didn't go through

with it/ Screaming out for escape to deaf ears, it doesn't fucking matter./

All hope for me has been stripped away, face now reddened with

sobbing/ As sounds of snoring enter my cavern, all my future dreams

shatter.

As the interviewee noted, power is an attractive quality of this particular fetish,

and while the power implied is not over anything real, the fiction that it devours does

have a connection with another person, especially if the porn was produced for a

specific individual. The power of the author to create and weave a narrative places the

writer at the reins of character development within the framework of the fan media.

This immediately gives the author power over a narrative that might otherwise be

denied to him or her, and when the author chooses to insert his or her own

character/persona, this insertion allows the author to actively participate in and

transform the world into which they have projected his or her creation. This mirrors

Hale's spiritual exploration: the character has the opportunity to explore their sexuality

in the context of the fetish. This power works both ways; apparently, the persona can

either consume or be consumed, which is indicative of the sexual performance that they

would like to project. An Otakukin interviewed said that, "what I like about vore is that I

am completely helpless to the writer. Whatever he thinks up to happen to me, does"

(Interview 5). The power of authorship is situated in a crossroads of influence, wherein

the act of penetration is continuous throughout all participants, so much so that each

aspect of the narrative is consuming and equally being consumed by the other: an

uroboros of stories consuming identities and identities devouring stories.

This process ultimately demythologizes the romance of the persona that has

been crafted by the author. If the process of fan fiction on the Internet, as Henry Jenkins

put it, is folklore at light speed (35), then vore and much of the other pornography

produced by the fandoms is the post-modern critique of these mythological structures.

In crafting stories wherein characters are mutilated, eaten, and then defecated, the

authors of such work are inherently demythologizing the very narrative that defines the

personas, since these stories no longer matter; it is just the sexual body being acted

upon. Pornography potentially rejects the fiction behind that character and focuses on

the body and what that body is made to do, that is, eat and fuck. Vore, in essence, can be

interpreted as an extreme example of these inherent biological needs combined; a

literalizing of the Freudian id.

As vore narratives tend to fixate on the consumption and logically subsequent

death of a character, the fetish seems to be uncomfortably tied to elements of

cannibalism and sexualized suffering. Vore is different in a significant fashion from

many other fetishes, in that if the actual acts were carried out, the fetishists would be

cannibals. Deborah Cameron notes that, "In *The Lust to Kill,* we trace connections

between response to this problem of freedom and individualism, and redefinitions of

the sexual and the erotic… [in de Sadeian, Romantic, and Existentialist thought] the

human condition is one of miserable subjection to political and social forces; the

morally brave and authentic will strive to transcend their situation and act freely… the

most cherished social conventions are those governing sexuality…" (160).

Perhaps the penultimate forbidden social convention would then be the eating of other humans, which would contextualize this fetish as combining two different taboos: demystified sex and the consumption of human flesh. Could vore be interpreted as an attempt at a post-modern de Sadeian commentary on the nature of sexuality and the transcendence of cultural mores? Ironically, like much of de Sade, if vore were actually performed, it would render the participants either dead or a demonic, Ed Gein-esque sociopath. Perhaps that is part of the nature of the pornographic piece; it allows us to explore venues of controversy and sexuality that would otherwise be inaccessible or abhorrent in the real world.

Concluding Remarks

As this research draws to a close, I am perplexed as to precisely what I have

learned in the exploration of this subject matter. These communities were incredibly

fascinating, often confusing, sometimes bewildering, and complex beyond any

preconceptions I might have possessed before beginning this project. This research has

only scratched the surface of the subject matter; I feel a strange apprehension that my

work is already becoming obscured by the inexorable march of cultural change.

Perhaps that is the lesson I ultimately garnered from this thesis. I come away from this

project in awe for the ability of humankind to create and disseminate culture. The

rapidity of cultural change, especially in the age of the Internet, is mind-boggling, and

for the researcher, humbling. We can try to capture brief glimpses of a world in motion,

and even as letter is put to paper, the reality we observe recedes before our eyes and is

replaced by another. Researching humanity is a pursuit that must necessarily be

undertaken, but for me this project has clarified the constant, increasingly

incomprehensible change that cultures experience as a part of their existence.

Luckily, cultures leave artifacts behind in their wake, and these objects help us in

our attempts to understand the intricacies of humankind. Texts especially provide

incredible insight into the values, codes, familial ties, and other nuances that existed

during the period when the text was produced. Texts, especially literature, capture

some essential quality of the author and his/her culture; I chose to study fan fiction in

this project as an attempt to understand the cultural production of the researched

communities. These texts were unlike anything I had ever read before. In them, the

authors were able to lose themselves in a world that meant something impossibly dear

to them, and in this sense, the writers were much like any other passionate fan of literature and stories.

I was not prepared for the complex fusion of reality, fantasy, and fiction writing that seemed to permeate and define some of these texts. In them, the authors were able to lead lives wholly different from their own and participate in a world that was essentially divorced from the physical, the human. These texts, then, strike me not only as artifacts of a particular time period of a culture; they also possess a striking multi-dimensionality that defines them in relation to an idea of a fictionalized, non-human culture that originated in human minds, and the fictional experience of the author's characters is actually a critique of the world the author lives in.

The inclusion of fan fiction in this project is absolutely vital to the understanding of the complex arrangement that exists between the researched fandoms and the mainstream. Just like literature performs as an artifact for interpreting the changing culture, the fan fiction of these communities provides a similar artifact; it simultaneously carries with it an analysis and critique of the original subject matter through a conception of a different world with different cultural values and further serves as an indication of how the particular community would function in this fictional world, thereby indicating the non-compatibility with the "real world." Fan fiction, in this context, is transcendental of several cultures, and is intrinsically critical of them all. The researched groups need fan fiction as surely as the mainstream needs its own texts, but it is so intimate and vital to the fandoms precisely because of its ability to provide alternative, livable reality, all the while battling the constant pressure of the physical world.

The hostile dynamic between the fandoms and "the mundanes" isn't particularly surprising. As I noted in the beginning of this manuscript, the nature of human culture is conflict driven by the very nature of community and ideology. As the research progressed in this project, the magnitude of what the researched groups believed was increasingly impressive to me: that their community wasn't human. This struck me as perhaps the most hostile position a culture could possibly take, that there was something intrinsically lacking in the entirety of the human world. I was torn in my understanding of this.

The desire to possess animal-like attributes is not a particularly challenging concept. Cultures have used anthropomorphized animals and beings throughout human history, and the temptation to equate ourselves to admirable qualities of an animal is persistent and appealing ("He's as strong as a bear!"). However, in the researched communities, the need to fully separate the animal from the human was profound, and though the personas were often anthropomorphized, the dichotomy between the subculture and mundane humans was a profound wedge. The legitimacy of these notions is particularly undermined by the fact that much of the understanding of the fantastic or the natural exhibited by the fans was decidedly ethnocentric and Western in origin.

I'm not willing to denigrate the researched communities due to their reactions to the mainstream, curious though they sometimes may be. As the interviews progressed, more and more people began to express to me a deep sense of loneliness and incompatibility with the world around them. Sometimes because of their connection to animals or fantastic creatures, sometimes not, they hadn't been accepted

by "normal" society and had suffered mentally and sometimes physically for their

differences. They had been tormented in school, ostracized from social networks,

unable to hold jobs, and, after having been essentially forced into the margins of society,

lacked the means and ability to acclimate to the society around them.

Thus, they turned to the Internet and found solace in the freedom that the

anonymity offered. Each person had the ability to mold their persona to whomever and

whatever they desired; they were no longer beholden to the prejudices that they had

suffered, because now they needn't be connected to them. In the case of the members of

these fandoms, there was already a community of like-minded people, waiting with

open arms for the next beleaguered castaway. For these people, the fandoms provide

the succor, comfort, camaraderie, acceptance, stability, and perhaps most importantly,

love, that weren't available in the real world. Martin F. Manalansan writes that, "Modern

love with all its imperfections and illusions has continually been accused of trapping

people into 'domestic gulags' and relationship black holes... these discrepancies and

complications have not diminished its allure" (84). People are going to seek love and

companionship, and if it takes the adoption of a non-human persona to accomplish this,

then people are going to do what it takes to reach this very human emotion.

In this light, the decision to reject humanity makes much more sense. If you can't

trust your fellow man, then to what are you to turn? What about your pet cat, who has

never betrayed you and loves you unconditionally? Or the beautiful, wild fox,

independent and sly? Or a powerful, ancient dragon, a creature that inspires confidence

and awe? Or perhaps even a favorite character from a cartoon, who can do nothing but

safely entertain you and provide something like company? The choice to discard the

trappings of humanity isn't so much an indication of the fandom's sanity so much as a critique of a world that discarded them; humanity hasn't worked, and so therefore the alternatives are explored. The fandoms imbue their emotions, their time, and their passions into vessels that have always been dependable, familiar, and safe. Through the Internet, these idealized forms are able to communicate and congregate, creating that alternative to the status quo. In this way, they finally have the potential to find a culture in which they belong and thrive.

The world is increasingly violent and complicated; so little control seems to be possessed by anyone, even those in positions of power. We are more and more aware of the rapid pace of social, political and economic change, and this fact can be terrifying as we are thrust into the unknown future. We sit atop a rudderless ship and push on blindly, not knowing where we are going but also realizing that we cannot return from whence we came. Is it not tempting to desire a release from this uncertainty, to possess a modicum of control in our realities? To have reliable bedrock, as opposed to a world that rests upon spider webs? The withdrawal into fiction and belief is a very human reaction to have when faced with insurmountable adversity; the Furries, Otherkin, and Otakukin are acting upon this impulse and making their communities function on the Internet, and while it may seem odd to outsiders, the existence of these subcultures indicates much more about the nature of the human psyche and soul than anything animal, than anything fantastic.

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