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The Beast Within

Anthrozoomorphic Identity and Alternative Spirituality in the Online Therianthropy Movement

Venetia Laura Delano Robertson

ABSTRACT: This paper will introduce a little-known online phenomenon: the socio-spiritual Therianthropy movement. Therianthropes are individuals who identify as part human and part non-human animal in a biological, mental, and metaphysical capacity. Therianthropes have, in essence, an anthrozoomorphic identity that draws upon the spiritual and supernatural associations of the animal kingdom. I discuss Therianthropes as animal-human “shape-shifters” to highlight the sacred and liminal identity these individuals have formulated through their engagement with “popular occulture.” Therianthropy, as both a web-based community and an identity, exemplifies the postmodern bent of new spiritual directions in the re-enchanted West.

KEYWORDS: Therianthropy, animal, shape-shifting, identity, popular occulture

INTRODUCTION

Therianthropy: The belief that a person has a deep spiritual or mental connection to a certain animal . . . Therianthropes believe that they possess the spirit/soul of an animal or the mentality of an animals, either through reincarnation, mergeance, or other means.

—therian.wikia.com.¹

Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions, Volume 16, Issue 3, pages 7–30, ISSN 1092-6690 (print), 1541-8480 (electronic). © 2013 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Rights and Permissions website, at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/nr.2013.16.3.7.

This opening quotation, an emic definition of Therianthropy from the Therianthropy wiktionary, is a helpful way to introduce a topic that is not well known as a psychological or spiritual phenomenon, let alone a burgeoning virtual community. “Therianthropy” is a compound word derived from the Greek for *beast* and *human*. This term often has been used by archaeologists to describe animal-human figures found in prehistoric rock art, such as the cave painting of the Dancing Sorcerer at Les Trois-Frères in southwestern France. Speaking of Therianthropy in a significantly different context, I capitalize the word to connote its appropriation into the socio-spiritual movement of modern Therianthropes. This movement is perhaps best thought of as a subculture or community that exists almost entirely online, and is based around the philosophies and spiritual ontologies of individuals who consider themselves to be “other-than-human.” Therians, for short, are persons who feel such a profound connection with a non-human animal that they feel this animal is an integral part of their identity. As Quil, a leopard Therian, explains, “Therianthropy is a state of being in which the Therianthrope exists, lives, thinks, has instincts, and often acts as a non-human animal. Not ‘like’, but ‘as.’”² I will explore the development of such new and decidedly unconventional identities within the alternative spiritual *zeitgeist* of the postmodern West.

Scholars observing the paradigm shifts of postmodernity have been quick to note that although the social influence of institutionalized religion may be waning, religiosity has not disappeared: the sacred has simply relocated. Lynne Hume and Kathleen McPhillips have asserted that the old dichotomies of high and low culture, fact and fiction, are dissolving in the postmodern world, and the scope for consecration is expanding, notably into the realm of popular culture.³ To this effect, Christopher Partridge has investigated two complementary phenomena: the mainstream media’s current interest in a miscellany of spiritual, mystical, and magical concepts, and the sublimation of these concepts into new syncretic modes of belief. Partridge calls the ensuing *milieu* “popular occulture”—a melting pot of Paganism, Esotericism, Jungian psychology, folk medicine, modern superstitions, and paranormal theories.⁴ These concepts have been detached from their original context, which is often historical and foreign, and have become floating signs in the multimedia of mass culture.⁵ Operating in this de-traditionalized environment, postmodern spirituality has turned to the self as the ultimate arbiter of truth. This “epistemological individualism”⁶ or “self-spirituality”⁷ indicates that today’s eclectic belief systems are rejecting meta-narratives in favor of personal narratives and meta-empiricism.

Zygmunt Bauman characterizes postmodernity by the values of novelty, rapid change, personal enjoyment, and consumer choice.⁸ Strikingly similar characteristics are ascribed to what Mark Prensky calls “Digital Natives,” the generation who grew up with the Internet as a quotidian reality. Prensky elaborates, “Digital Natives are used to receiving information

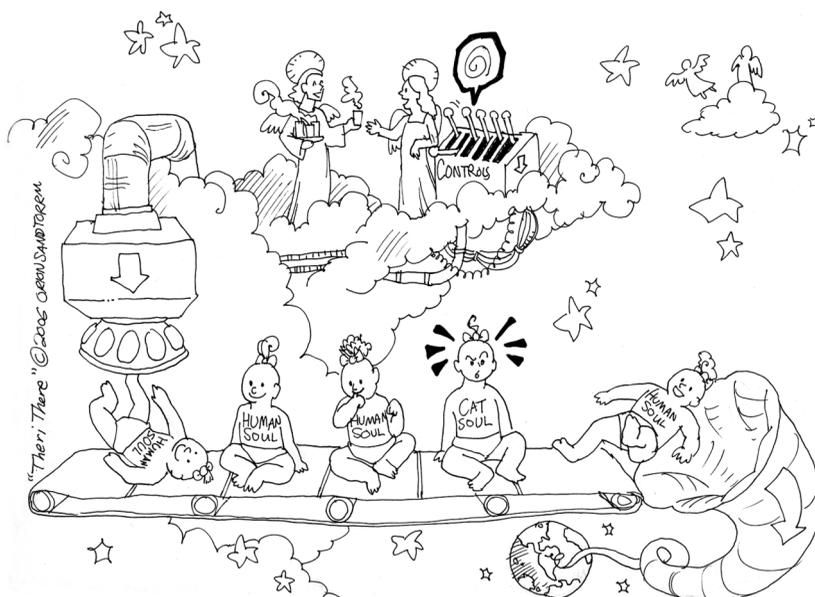
really fast. They like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer their graphics before their text rather than the opposite. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer games to 'serious' work."⁹ Bauman and Prensky invoke an atmosphere that is fun and irreverent yet goal-driven and self-concerned, which is what makes the Internet a fitting marketplace for the spiritual seeker. As Christopher Helland notes, "the Internet has become the ideal medium for communicating religious beliefs and practices in a social context where syncretism, popular tradition, and religion *à la carte* are among the most common forms of religious participation."¹⁰ Douglas Cowan elaborates, remarking that the hypermediacy of cyberspace promotes the appropriation of spiritual concepts into "open-source" belief systems, such as Neopaganism, that advocate creativity and individualism.¹¹ The Internet's most significant contribution to the expansion of postmodern religion is the expressive capacity of web 2.0—user-generated and interactive modes of online communication.

The Internet has always been a spawning ground for alternative and *bricolage* spiritualities that incorporate themes from fiction, film, music, television, and art. As early as 1992 a Usenet newsgroup, alt.horror.werewolves, or AHWV, was founded for those interested in discussing the werewolf in popular culture.¹² From this unexceptional beginning, the first known collective of Therianthropes emerged and the term "Spiritual Therianthropy" was coined. Erik Davis in the mid-1990s described the unmoderated domain of Usenet as "the clearinghouse of contemporary heresy . . . magicians are just one more thread in the net's rainbow fringe of anarchists, Extropians, conspiracy theorists, *X-Files* fans, and right-wing kooks."¹³ Among these colorful characters, werewolf fans (mostly university students) gathered on the AHWV newsgroup, and by joining eclectic ideas about shape-shifting with a fervor for self-discovery and a desire for community, a socio-spiritual movement was born.

Over the last twenty years, Therianthropy has become a fascinating addition to the sphere of cyber-spirituality. Therianthropes synthesize myriad themes from works of fantasy, horror, supernatural fiction, role-playing games, comics, and miscellaneous magical ideas in popular culture to create an ontology that expresses their animal-human—"anthrozoomorphic"—nature. The Internet plays a vital role in this process by commingling mass culture with "geek culture" and offering subcultural capital such as *anime*, cult films, and computer or video games to create a zone where occulture can and does flourish. The Internet provides the avenue by which information and inspiration can be attained as well as a platform for the community that will support and shape these ideas, enabling Therians to disseminate their personal beliefs in user-generated content, be it through a wiki (such as the

Therian.wikia), a blog, a discussion forum, or a testimonial on YouTube. The Therianthropology community does have its offline components. For instance, all major Therian web forums advertise live gatherings known as “Howls.” However, these events are infrequent and have relatively low attendance rates.¹⁴ Consequently, computer-mediated communication is the primary means by which the Therian community articulates its belief systems and sense of Therian selfhood. The latter aspect, what Anthony Giddens has called “the reflexive project of the self,”¹⁵ is at the heart of the Therianthropology movement.

The discussion that ensues will demonstrate how Therians reify their anthrozoomorphic identity through the appropriation of spiritual concepts into personal mythologies. Like Otherkin (persons who identify as fantastic beings such as angels, fairies, and elves) and modern Vampires (who divide themselves into blood-drinking sanguinarians and psychic energy-feeders), Therianthropes should be understood as constituting one of several movements that promote an other-than-human ontology. Such identities have been referred to collectively as “the awakened,”¹⁶ a notion that frames these individuals as more spiritually aware than mundane humans. I concur with Joseph Laycock and Danielle Kirby that while these ontological groups may not constitute a religion in the traditional sense, they provide significant metaphysical, spiritual, and existential frameworks from which supernatural identities are developed.¹⁷ These communities represent the direction of the re-enchantment of the



O. Scribner, “Theri There,” 21 March 2006. Image courtesy of O. Scribner.¹⁸

West as theorized by Partridge, Hume, and McPhillips, utilizing and synthesizing popular culture and the occult to reify non-human identities. As we shall see, Therians believe they have non-human (hence super-human) souls, unique metaphysical properties and abilities (animal-human auras, shape-shifting capabilities, memories of past lives), and are immersed in the language of magic; hence, constructing a Therian identity is indicative of new modes of self-sacralization.

ANTHROZOOMORPHIC IDENTITIES IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Cultures worldwide have shape-shifters in their mythologies: the *kitsune* of Japan, the *selkie* of Scottish and Icelandic legend, the *nahual* of Mesoamerica, the Norse *berserkers* or *úlfhéðnar*, and of course the lycanthrope, or werewolf, from Europe. In addition, Paul Christian, without much explanation or ceremony, lists the werejaguar and werealligator of West Africa, the weretiger in India, the werecoyote in America, the werejackal in Egypt, and the weredingo in Australia.¹⁹ Modern Therianthropes reference the mythical figure of the animal-human shape-shifter by calling themselves “shifters” or, sometimes, “weres,” evoking the most famous transmogrifying creature in the Western imagination, the werewolf. The recurring motif of cross-species transformation is found in the oldest recorded story, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, fragments of which date as far back as 2150 BCE.²⁰ However, it is in the Greek myth of King Lykaon that the earliest werewolf myth is found.

Lykaon was ruler of Arkadia, the rustic land of the satyr-god Pan. As punishment for serving Zeus a feast of human flesh, Lykaon is changed into a wolf.²¹ Second-century Greek geographer Pausanias explains that this change is not permanent, “if, when he is a wolf, he abstains from human flesh, after nine years he becomes a man again, but if he tastes human flesh he remains a beast forever.”²² Subsequently, a secret ritual alluding to this transformation was established at Mount Lykaion, “Wolf Mountain,” where sacrificial meals of animal and human flesh were eaten.²³ Walter Burkert suggests this was part of an initiation rite introducing pre-adolescent boys to their “wild” phase of manhood, nine years before they would reach marrying age.²⁴ He points to the dual worship of Pan and Zeus in Arkadia as further evidence of this institutionalized balance between the savage and the civilized. It is from this myth that we get the word *lycanthropy*, meaning both the condition of turning into a wolf and, in clinical terms, the delusion under which people act like, or believe themselves to be, a wolf.²⁵

While modern Therianthropes, for the most part, attest to being spiritual rather than physical shifters, a considerable part of their identity comes from the mystique surrounding animal-human transmogrification.

Much of the shape-shifting lore that permeates Western popular culture has its origins in the abundant therianthrope imagery of medieval European fables, particularly from the twelfth century onwards. As Caroline Walker Bynum observes, this was an era of “greenmen and werewolves,” a time of “marvel collecting, of theological exploration of shape-shifting and body borrowing, of new kinds of transformation miracles and alchemy.”²⁶ Literary paradigms such as the involuntary or sympathetic werewolf and the culpable, villainous werewolf were popularized in this period and continued to have influence through the Victorian era and early twentieth century.²⁷ Featuring heavily in the gothic horror genre as “a composite Otherness which gave expression to anxieties about working class degeneracy, colonial insurrection and racial atavism, women’s corporeality and sexuality, and the bestial heritage of humanity,” the werewolf motif maintains its appeal today.²⁸

In recent decades, werewolf fandom has thrived at an underground level, inspiring online discussion groups like AHW, and zines like *Fang, Claw & Steel* (1997–2006), dedicated to exploring a more nuanced werebeast through critical articles, fan fiction, and artwork.²⁹ In popular culture, animal-human shape-shifting has been a ubiquitous theme. Comic book superheroes Batman, Spiderman, Wolverine, and other X-men, whether by masquerade or mutation, are paradigms of anthro-zoomorphic power. Children’s television shows such as *The Mighty Morphin’ Power Rangers* and the junior fiction series *Animorphs* are further examples of media that idealize young, transforming protagonists. However, the 2009 Hollywood remake of *The Wolfman* and the 2011 version of *Red Riding Hood* indicate that the werewolf remains the protean monster of choice, retaining its popularity in the mass entertainment industry alongside a spate of recent vampire-oriented novels, films, and television series.³⁰

The glorification of animals, anthropomorphic animals, and theriomorphic beasts in popular culture has impacted the postmodern construction of human identity. If postmodern society is driven by personal enjoyment and consumer choice as Bauman suggests, it is no wonder that increasing numbers of people are adopting unconventional identities and alternative lifestyles. Anthrozoomorphic “lifestylers” are people who make animality an overt part of their personality rather than an internalized experience. Some opt for body modification to take on permanent physical features of an animal. Dennis Avner, known as Stalking Cat, is famous for having undergone extensive facial reconstruction to achieve a feline visage, with tattooing, fang shaped dentures, sub-dermal implants, and artificial whiskers. Animal symbolism also can hold sexual appeal, as seen in the costuming and role-play of “pony play” or “puppy play” in the BDSM (Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, Sadism/Masochism) branch of fetish. Zoophiles hold the animal itself as the central object of desire, but for this discussion we are more concerned

with the attraction of the anthrozoomorph, the animal-human hybrid. Furry Fandom is currently the most visible expression of this interest.

Furries are people who celebrate their interest in anthropomorphic animals, such as characters from comics, cartoons, or Disney movies. They pay tribute to these figures with the usual fan activities—writing fan fiction, creating fan art, and attending conventions dressed as their favorite characters, sometimes donning full-body “fursuits” with the effect of looking like oversized plush toys. Unlike ordinary fans, however, many engage in fandom to express their “fursona,” their true anthrozoomorphic self. According to one study by Kathleen Gerbasi et al, a considerable percentage of Furries judge themselves to be less than 100 percent human, and a notable percentage show signs of body dysphoria and dysmorphia, feeling “trapped” in their biological bodies.³¹ Almost half those interviewed claimed to have a mystical connection with their fursona species, and almost 30 percent believed they were of that species in a past life. Gerbasi has described this sense of discomfort as “Species Identity Disorder,” a phrase comparable to the term “trans-species,” used in the Therianthropy community to express similar states of cognitive dissonance. While there are Therianthropes who engage in Furry Fandom, the two are distinct subcultures and both eagerly encourage this differentiation, the former keen to disassociate the perceived frivolity of fandom and role-play from the spiritual solemnity of their relationship with animals.³²

In terms of contemporary nature religions, some Neopagans and Neoshamans have touted the magical properties of animals, drawing on their traditional roles in indigenous cultures, their biological traits, assorted myths and legends, and general characterizations of animal natures to create mystical archetypes. The metaphor of shape-shifting is of great value in some Neopagan and Neoshamanic practice, providing an analogy for personal change and self-improvement through the acquisition of spiritual knowledge and magical powers associated with animals and nature. The shifter is perceived to tap into a romanticized vision of the past, providing a link between the numinous “primitive” world and today’s disenchanted society. In her Jungian exploration of shape-shifting legends, Michele Jamal says that “shape-shifting stories may seem atavistic, superstitious, or sprung from fantasy born of too strong an imagination. But, in fact, skin walking is an ancient tradition that lives on in our collective unconscious.”³³ Statements like these reinforce the idea that shape-shifting provides not only a nexus between ancient and modern, animal and human, but also a portal into our common psyche and a means by which we can learn arcane truths.

Ted Andrews’ popular book on neoshamanic techniques, *Animal Speak*, aims to help his readers discover their animal totem and uncover their alleged “hidden powers.”³⁴ Typical of white shamanism, Andrews implicitly follows Émile Durkheim’s theory that totemism allows the human to “participate in the nature of the totem animal” and become

sacred through this association.³⁵ According to Durkheim, this religious animal-human kinship assigns humans their place in the universe. Andrews makes the correlation between animal magic and actualizing human potential explicit when he writes, “when we learn to speak with the animals, to listen with animal ears and to see through animal eyes, we experience the phenomena, the power, and the potential of the human essence.”³⁶ Likewise, founder of core shamanism Michael Harner recommends calling upon a guardian animal through dance and trance to become one with the spirit. He proposes that “underneath our ordinary human cultural consciousness is a near-universal emotional connection with wild animal alter egos.”³⁷ This statement intentionally contrasts the mundanity of human life with the liberating and romantic realm of the animal. Harner encourages his readers to transcend reality via a “shamanic state of consciousness” so that the “mythical paradise of animal-human unity” can be experienced.³⁸ In these texts animals are personified and typecast, which naturalizes and universalizes both human and animal attributes, simplifying them down to a formula. This agenda is of course unique to *Homo sapiens* and articulated through the language of magic, soul-searching, and harnessing personal power, preoccupations not shared by our animal companions.

Neopagan authors Yasmine Galenorn, Rosalyn Greene, and Lupa have offered techniques for metaphysical shifting through animal spirit possession. Shape-shifting rituals aim to enable the practitioner to call upon the animal spirit for psychic aid, gain secret wisdom, and draw the power of the animal into the self.³⁹ Initial steps include drumming or dancing, during which the participant invokes the animal’s spirit and enters into an altered consciousness, momentarily taking on the animal’s physical and mental capabilities. Lupa, a wolf Therian, Chaos magician, and Neoshaman, explains that “it is a truly unique experience, an exchange that allows the animal spirit to wear flesh again, and gives the human a chance to see what it is, for a brief time, to truly be that animal.”⁴⁰ Galenorn describes watching her face morph into feline features while in trance, and devouring raw meat to satiate her animalistic bloodlust during shifting rituals.⁴¹ Greene delves into more paranormal effects of shape-shifting, discussing techniques for astral shifting, energy shifting, dream shifting and even effecting physiological changes.⁴² Often, theories of shape-shifting are contingent on the premise that multiple planes and/or parallel dimensions exist where animals—living, extinct, mythical, fictional, and even cryptozoological—dwell in a metaphysical if not physical sense.⁴³ Hence, anthrozoomorphic shape-shifting is rich with symbolism of transgressing boundaries: time and space, flesh and spirit, physical and ethereal, human and animal. These binaries are renegotiated by those who shift.

How are we to understand Therianthropy, a socio-spiritual community of people with animal souls, within the multivalent history of animal-human

affinity? Channeling animal power, thus extending the human experience, is one of the major goals of Therianthropy, a goal shared by many animal-lovers, fetishists, fictional superheroes, and Neoshamans who wish to embody animal aspects. But the label “Therianthrope” and the Therianthropy movement are first and foremost concerned with identity, an identity that is particularly complex because it is both hybrid and protean. The Therianthrope is a “beast-human” but also a “shifter,” which suggests a state of flux. This fragmentation of identity is one of the “dilemmas of the self” that Anthony Giddens feels late (or post) modernity has instigated.⁴⁴ The Internet with its expressive capacities, according to psychologist Sherry Turkle, is “contributing to a general reconsideration of traditional, unitary notions of identity.”⁴⁵ The complex nature of the Therianthrope, so often mediated online, is indicative of this shift towards the fragmentary self, but Therians seem to revel in the faultlines. Fragmentation is translated into liminality, making the Therian not just a shape-shifter but one who is, as Victor Turner said, “betwixt and between,”⁴⁶ a walker between worlds, or as Therian writer Quil muses, with “one paw in the galaxies, one paw on the earth.”⁴⁷

THE MODERN THERIANTHROPY MOVEMENT

Though an interest in the implications of an anthrozoomorphic identity has been present for centuries, as attested in the previous section, in the information age a modern movement of Therianthropes has formed online. The first community of modern Therianthropes was formed in 1992 on the message boards of alt.horror.werewolves, or AHWW, which was founded as a werewolf fiction fan site. By the end of 1993, discussion threads were inundated with queries and personal stories about metaphysical animal-human transformation. Most contributors were students accessing Usenet through university facilities from English-speaking countries.⁴⁸ For many, the iconic werewolf symbolized rebellion, the physical pinnacle of existence, and the supernatural embodied. In the words of one, “To me, the werewolf is a symbol of freedom and empowerment. It allows us a greater contact with nature and places a perspective on our human side. Werewolves are *vita*, passionate, aggressive, sensual and non-conformist to the extreme. They represent the possibility of transformation and ascension beyond the norm, and they must deal with both the pleasure and pain attached to this change. They are our hope to be something more than human. Something better.”⁴⁹ By 1994, people identifying as cats, bats, tigers, coyotes, vampires, and *windigowak* (legendary cannibalistic spirits of the Algonquin-speaking people of North America) were frequenting the message board. Recalling these halcyon opening years of AHWW, one member said, “There was an attitude of optimism, and it was a gathering place for sober adults to come and talk about feelings and

experiences which they had always thought were taboo. It was a time of great acceptance, learning, and an unusual level of maturity. The terminology and slang of the spiritual Therianthropy subculture began to develop for the first time, and people began to classify and study all the reports [of Therianthropy].”⁵⁰

Dedicated contributors collaborated on a “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQ) document designed to provide definitions of key terms and rehash the most common topics of conversation. The group’s central purpose was to promote discussion “about theriomorphs, both physical and spiritual, about methods of changing, about personal philosophies, and about fun.”⁵¹ While AHWW was promoted as a place for friends, the FAQ authors maintained that Therianthropy was very serious and real, insisting “for some of us it’s tantamount to discussing a religion.”⁵² Since this early stage Therian selfhood has been conceived of through the language of dualism and of alterity: being both animal and human, they are neither. A Therian participates in dominant culture, for example, by appropriating aspects of the were-creature of popular culture, and yet is positioned outside of it as non-human and non-conformist. As an animal-human, a neither/nor, the Therian occupies an entirely separate space and takes up a sacred mantle once held by tribal shamans, witches, and other powerful shape-shifting beings of lore. The Therian confounds boundaries and is essentially “other.” In the following passage, KatmanDu, the FAQ organizer, emphasizes the liminal character of the Therian,

All humans are animals, but very few these days can look into themselves and find the animal remnants. We who believe in Spiritual Therianthropy feel those animal remnants very strongly. We exist in the human world, but long to seek connections with the animal one. It contacts us through totems, through dreams, through our very souls. We cannot completely leave the human world, nor completely enter the animal one. We are in-between, half animal and half human in psyche . . . mental, or spiritual, shapechangers. We seek to balance the two halves of our nature, so that someday we can teach the rest of humanity how to balance its drive to conquer with the reality that it needs nature to survive.⁵³

This description resonates with the gnostic experiences of animal magic practitioners like Andrews, Harner, Greene, Lupa, and Galenorn, as well as with otherworldly ontological identities such as indigo children and incarnated extraterrestrials who reportedly manifest on Earth to bring humankind a message of hope from the divine.⁵⁴ The non-human self is not only sacred but soteriological, bestowing upon Therians a special status, spiritual primacy, and altruistic purpose in life.

As the Internet has expanded, so have modes of communicating about Therianthropy. True to the nature of this ephemeral resource,

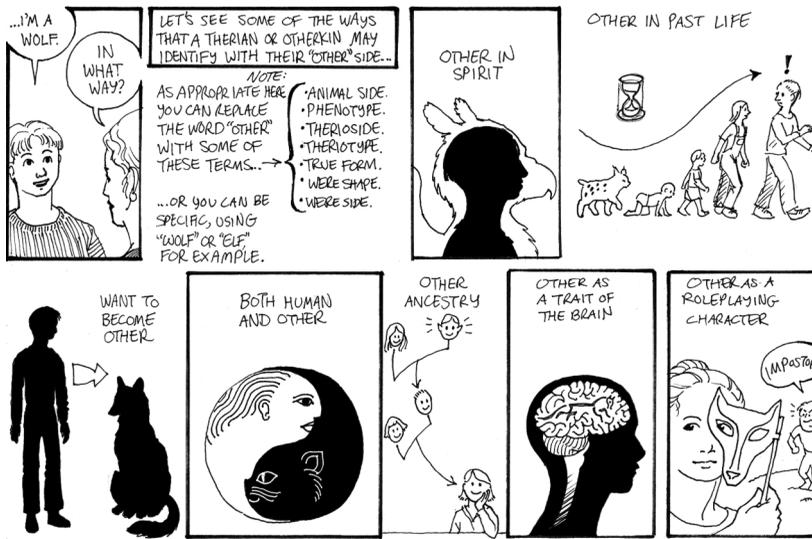
numerous websites that once hosted long and detailed tracts about the history of Therianthropy and Therianthrope experiences have expired and been lost. However, a notable quality of the Therianthrope community is their desire to preserve their cyber-history. To this end, many of the movement's seminal texts from the 1990s have been archived on mirror sites and are still available today with a little searching. Therians have reached all corners of the web, writing blogs, posting videos, and hosting forums and discussion boards such as The Werelist.⁵⁵ These user-generated forms of social media enable the issues of Therianthropy ontology, spirituality, and lifestyle to be debated and deliberated, not without a considerable amount of *ad hominem* quarrelling, but with the general aim of better understanding the phenomenon of anthro-zoomorphism. The following section will attempt to introduce some of the main tenets of Therianthropy as it is presented by members of the online movement.

THE TENETS OF THERIANTHROPY

Etiologies: The Origins of Being Animal

There are a number of websites dedicated to educating the curious public about Therianthropy. These pedagogical projects provide glossaries, testimonies, and lists of references for shape-shifting folklore. Starting with the basics, the site Project Shift explains that "Therianthropy is an internally based experience; it's an integral and personal experience."⁵⁶ While it is subjective and experiential, the Project Shift authors assure readers there are things Therianthropy is *not*. Being "internally based" rather than externally influenced means that having an animal totem, spirit guide or walk-in, or being possessed, are not considered the same condition as being a Therianthrope.⁵⁷ This is not to dismiss the influence of superstition, magic, or spirituality on etiological inquiry, but rather to emphasize that a Therian is defined by having a beast within.

Conventionally, Therianthropy is explained through mental or spiritual reasoning. Without it being necessarily a genetic trait, many Therians believe they were born with a therioside, or at least the capacity to develop one.⁵⁸ Fully realized Therianthropy is described by leopard Therian Quil as a state of being, "I define myself as a cat because that felinity is not just in the way I *behave*; it's also in the way I *exist*."⁵⁹ This can be justified by the presence or reincarnation of an animal spirit in a human body, or the memories lodged within a soul of a non-human past life. Some Therians believe that their spirit is an immutable blend of human and animal, while others contend they possess multiple souls.⁶⁰ Accordingly, the sense that the soul has been born or transmigrated into



O. Scribner, "Theri There," 24 October 2005. Image courtesy of O. Scribner.

the wrong body can result in feelings of displacement and dysmorphia. Therians refer to an emotional detachment from the human form as being "trans-species" or having "species dysphoria," conditions that shares many symptoms with the DSM IV definition of Body Dysmorphic Disorder.⁶¹ Therian artist O. Scribner, author of the online comic *Theri There*, deals with the question of etiology in several of his strips. Scribner's insightful comics are used in this article as representations of the community's discourse from an emic perspective.

"Awakening" and Finding a Theriotypic

Therians tend to speak of their awareness of Therianthropology in the same way Neopagans speak of their magical nature: not in terms of "becoming" or "converting" but *knowing* that they are "born, not made."⁶² They commonly report having acknowledged their Therianthropology for as long as they can remember, but latent Therians, whether searching to identify their animal side or ignorant of their Therianthropology, may discover their therioside in a moment of "Awakening."⁶³ This term, also used in Otherkin, Vampire, and New Age circles, is redolent of Eastern and esoteric notions of heightened awareness that suggest an (often sudden) initiation into a higher level of reality.⁶⁴ Not all Therians experience a lightning flash of comprehension about their condition. Many seem to

struggle to know their species, and even then it can be difficult to see the attributes of their specific therioside manifesting in daily life. Investigating animal behaviors, habitats, and physical features to recognize patterns are methods to divine a theriotype. Otherwise, meditation, lucid dreaming, or calling upon totem or guardian spirits as guides are recommended revelatory techniques. For example, in phrasing typical of the Therianthropy community, wolf Therian Elinox describes her instinctual knowledge of her theriotype as a combination of personal assurance and mystical understanding, “I believe that part of my soul is a wolf. I believe this because of experiences I’ve had and because it’s what feels right to me. It’s part of how I identify myself but it’s also because it’s what I feel deep down in my heart and soul. . . . Part of it is spiritual, part of it is UPG (unverified personal gnosis) and part of it just feels right to me.”⁶⁵ Works of fiction can also provide the impetus for self-discovery. SerpentineZebra, a cobra and jaguar Therian, describes her realization of her snake theriotype while playing a video game and wrote, “[I noticed] when I first played the video game *Primal Rage*, which had a female cobra beast in it named Vertigo. Despite her evil character, I related strongly to her and her unusual form. I’ve questioned the legitimacy of my Therianthropy sometimes because of the nature of how I came upon that aspect of myself, but then I remind myself that a lot of sincere Therians probably realized something about themselves from reading stories or watching movies about werewolves.”⁶⁶ Although the correlation of fiction with belief can incite anxieties about authenticity and validity, Therians like Lupa are adamant that modern mythology, or as Partridge says, “popular occulture,” is just as useful for introspection and hermeneutic study as the legends of old.

An ample lexicon of neologisms divides the subcategories of Therianthropy. As *lycanthrope* is used to describe a wolf Therian, *cynanthrope* and *ailuranthrope* mean dog and cat Therian. “Polyweres” have multiple but separate animal types; “polymorphs” are composite creatures.⁶⁷ Sonne Spiritwind appears to be both polywere and polymorph, “I have certain ‘set’ theriotypes: horse, cat, mongoose, and (possibly) avian, as well as being human, and I fluidly change throughout each day and from day to day within those boundaries. I’m a cat, a horse, a human, a mongoose, and avian, and yet I’m also a humancathorsemongooseavian . . . or a horse or mongoose with cat ears, a feliquine (cathorse), horse with wings, and the list goes on to extents I can’t even describe.”⁶⁸

From my survey of the Therianthropy community, it is obvious that canid theriotypes are by far the most ubiquitous, with wolves ranking first, before foxes, coyotes, and domestic dogs. Big cats are also proliferate, followed by other breeds of felines. The legendary reputation of the perennial werewolf is no doubt the reason for the popularity of wolf Therians, some of whom are self-conscious about the cliché. One Therian remarked that “since so many people identify with large,

aesthetically-pleasing carnivores, to express alliance with Wolf is to invite people to think of you as a thoughtless New Age nutjob with infantile power issues.”⁶⁹

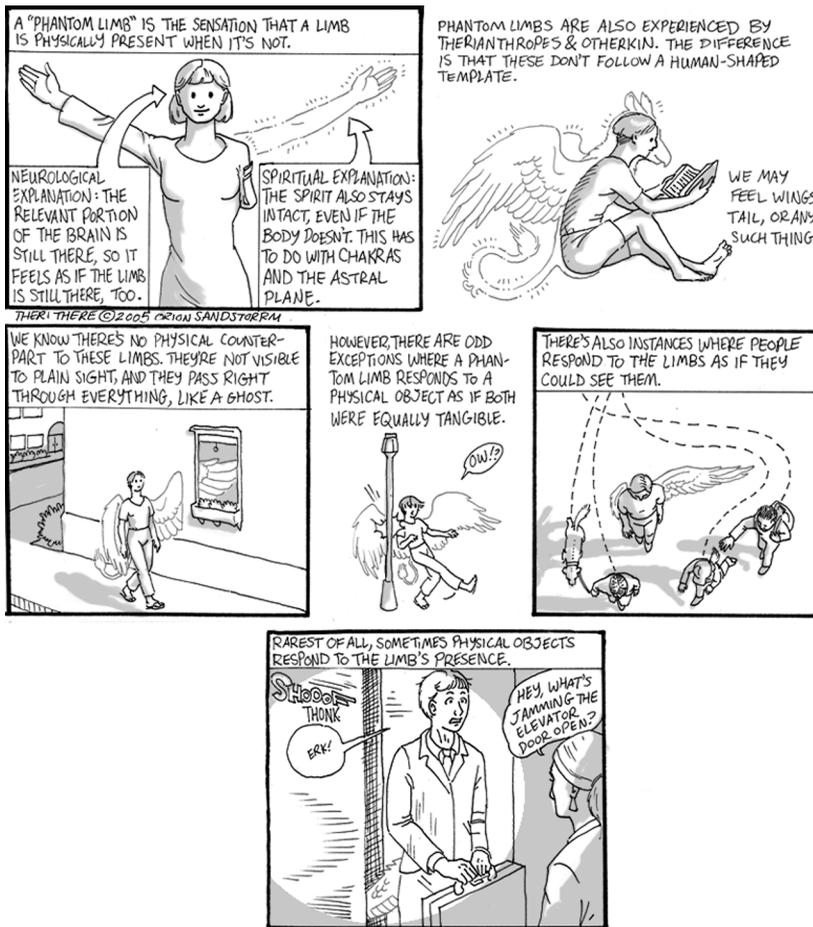
Certainly, the “lone wolf” or misunderstood beast stereotypes propagated in popular culture may resonate with the complexities of spiritual seeking and identity construction in the modern world. It is also easy to understand the appeal of powerful predators over the meeker members of the animal kingdom. At least initially, less exotic theriotypes may not be desirable to the Therian, as one raven Therian testified, “Awakening to Raven was difficult. . . . They were loud, unwieldy, ugly birds to me.”⁷⁰ That is not to say, however, that solace cannot be found in more obscure species. Sara, an earwig Therian, recounts how her acceptance of this unconventional phenotype and acknowledgement of “true self” afforded her a means of emotional protection, “When it told me via trances, dreams, mirror-talks, and other rather terrifying (at the time) means, that it was moving into my consciousness, I was scared. I thought I was going absolutely insane. I fought it tooth and nail, and yet I could feel that armour plating begin coming up, snapping into place, in daily life . . . but my inner voice would keep going: ‘you are strong, you have discovered a part of you that was hidden away for (family, society, self)’s sake. Now, you can be twice as strong, for though you are small, you are fast, you have self-defence.”⁷¹

Shifting: The Metaphysics of Becoming Animal

There are a great many types of shifts a Therian may experience. As one Therian remarked in the early days of AHWW, “We transform, mentally, spiritually, psychically, every day. Some shifts are stronger and fiercer than others, some are quiet, well hidden by conventions of human life. Some changes do not translate well onto the [computer] screen. Some do.”⁷² The most common shifts discussed in the Therianthropy community are mental (m-shifts), phantom (ph-shifts), and physical (p-shifts), although the latter is highly controversial within the community due to its scientific improbability, if not impossibility. M-shifts are described as “an altered state of consciousness, commonly experienced by weres, wherein they take on a more animal outlook, feelings, or perceptions.”⁷³ During a mental shift a Therian may report keener night vision, an enhanced sense of smell, a hunger for unconventional foods like raw meat, and increased agility. These shifts may be brought on by performing specific rituals, or they can be triggered unintentionally by a heightened state of emotion.

A phantom shift is often invoked by a mental shift. In this case, therioside body parts are felt or sensed in the way a phantom limb may be felt by an amputee.⁷⁴ The phantom animal body is often explained with the language of esotericism, invoking notions of auras, the subtle body,

and the astral plane. Therians have theorized that they are able to sense the muscle memory of anatomy from a previous life, or from another dimension where they inhabit an animal form.⁷⁵ This excerpt from Meiryra, a hawk Therian, shows how becoming “Bird” through a phantom shift can be disorienting and uncomfortable, “First there is hollowness, in the mouth. Upper palate expanding, stretching, elongating. . . . The arms are next. Wings. Arms resisting forward movement, fingers stretching to unbending length. Shoulder socket rotating back, limb-lengths all wrong, all disproportionate. I am off balance, disoriented. . . . Confused, and aching, shoulder click-click-clicking as body and mind disagree on what’s what and where and how.”⁷⁶ Therians who have bonded closely with their therioside may experience an almost constant phantom shift. Some of



O. Scribner, “Theri There,” 3 October 2005. Image courtesy of O. Scribner.

the most prevalent body parts are the muzzle, ears, tail, wings, claws, or talons. Therians have reported being able to feel pain in their phantom appendages, gaining extrasensory perception such as enhanced vision or sight during shifts, and effectively visualizing their animal forms.

Physical shifting entails the full transformation of the human body into the form of an animal, a literal rather than metaphoric shape-shift. If the millions of results yielded by a preliminary Internet search is anything to go by, animal-human metamorphosis is obviously a subject of interest to an audience stretching beyond the Therianthropy community. On how to effect this change, particularly to a werewolf, the Internet is rife with instructions taken from medieval spells, the writings of Anton LaVey, role-playing games such as *Shadowrun*, Hollywood movies such as the *Underworld* trilogy, and a panoply of other sources. While some occult authors such as Rosalyn Greene claim that physical transformation is possible via the phenomena of ectoplasm, auras, and *chi*, Therians like Lupa are more skeptical, chalking such beliefs up to “subconscious wishful thinking.”⁷⁷ The physical impossibility of transmutation does not make this urge any less potent or profound. Again, Sara the earwig Therian lends her poetic voice to this living conundrum, “I have fantasies . . . of splitting down my back or through my chest, and I come out, lighter, unencumbered by the moist constriction of flesh. I wear gasmasks and fetish gear, not as a mask, but rather as a window into what’s a layer down. . . . For me, though, it’s like my skin is gone, and the muscles are showing. I feel as though I have a layer of chitin, but it’s weak and wet, and paper-thin right now. I can’t harden it in the sun because it’s not *there*. It’s absolutely maddening.”⁷⁸

SELF-SACRALIZATION AND THE THERIAN AS A “WALKER BETWEEN WORLDS”

The Therianthropy community is wide and varied, but generally speaking anthrozoomorphic identity, like other “awakened” identity groups, hinges on the concept of otherness. The “Other” was once understood to be the unknowable yet all-knowing Divine; yet in the self-sacralizing tradition of the New Age, a Higher Self has become the “other.”⁷⁹ In true postmodern style, Therians construct this sense of sacred self through *bricolage*, syncretizing a range of spiritual practices with metaphysical ideas featured in movies, video games, and other forms of popular culture that glamorize animals, animal magic, and animal-human shape-shifting. Hence, the reflexive project of the (Higher) Self relies directly on the occultic milieu. By embodying both the romantic animal and the rational human celebrated in these circles, the Therian ultimately is characterized as a liminal being, a “threshold person,” an

other who defies the boundaries of sacred and profane.⁸⁰ Invoking the archetype of the walker-between-worlds, Therianthropes have used this rich symbolism to reify their animal-human subjectivity. Hence Quil wrote, “[Y]ou are the living mythology, the urban and the bucolic, the big bad wolf and the hunter god . . . you’re the archetype and you’re not it, you’re the main character in every animal-tale, the Crow and Coyote and Leopard and Bear; and then again you are an ordinary animal, no stories spun about you, a hungry lean thing sniffing at a meal and hating your job and singing in the damn shower.”⁸¹ Likewise, Solo, a female-to-male transgender person and canid Therian, sees Therianthropes as liminal creatures following in a shape-shifter tradition that is sacred and timeless, “The dog is a liminal creature, a creature that exists between one place and another. . . . I find myself poised on the very thresholds of reality, between one world and another, human and canine, female and male. The shape-shifter legacy of the liminal canine lives on, a transformation of species and gender. . . . To those swept up in my howls, in the very end it doesn’t matter what species one was born into, the illusions are stripped away, the primal natures of our very souls are revealed.”⁸² For these individuals, the biological body may not accurately reflect their internal selves, but the shape-shifter paradigm enables them to see the body as a tool for transformation on a spiritual level. For Akhila, the Therian self with its multiple identities of otherness is a true self, “Because I’m an animal-person, between myth and reality, both poetic and mundane, symbolical and raw, both feline and corvine. . . . Because I’m a trans-person and androgyne, not quite male nor female, a bit of everything, or completely other. . . . Because I’m a synesthete and an artist, an oneironaut and dreamwalker, a spiritual and feral person. . . . I cross a lot of different boundaries. . . . I *am* a liminal creature. . . . It resonates with the deepest, most primal and practical aspects of who I am.”⁸³

Quil, Solo, and Akhila identify as Pagans, so it is unsurprising that the language of popular occultism permeates their elucidations of identity. However, mystical terminology has been used to reify animal-human selfhood since the hey-day of the AHWW newsgroup. As well, a number of Christian Therianthropes use the words of God to give their condition spiritual significance.⁸⁴ Wolf VanZandt, an evangelical minister, wolf Therian, and senior member of the Therianthropy community, sees Therians as having a gift bestowed upon them by God to redress the balance between nature and civilization, “Man, over the centuries, has fallen further and further away from nature. Where humanity was conceived, in the beginning by God, as a steward of nature, he has come to see nature as the enemy and something to be conquered and controlled – something to be possessed. Therians, with their strong link to creation, provide a bridge back to nature.”⁸⁵ VanZandt echoes KatmanDu who, in the nascent years of the Therianthropy community,

described Therians as “in-betweens” who could bring humanity into harmony with our animalistic remnants and natural surroundings. The correlation of selfhood with a noble purpose provides part of the explanation for the appearance of this unconventional identity in the last few decades, but Therianthropy, unlike green Paganism, is not inherently an environmentally concerned movement. Instead, the wild and primal aspects of animality are internalized and based upon romantic projections. Like modern Vampires who look to the undead, and Otherkin who take their cue from fantasy, Therianthropes turn to a mythical past and mystical archetypes to harness animal powers and construct an other-than-human ontology. This identity allows them to be in this human world but not of it, and in fact surpassing it as one who is super-human: an animal-human.

CONCLUSIONS

The Therianthropy movement exemplifies the innovation of spiritual individuals in the postmodern age. Therianthropes, in their personal myth-making and unorthodox selfhoods, are dynamic examples of popular occulture and re-enchantment in motion. Though it is not religious in the traditional sense, Therianthropy is an eclectic ontological position system that draws upon myth, magic, and both mainstream and subcultural media to reify a self that is other-than-human. As animal-humans, Therianthropes are living contradictions: their identity is fragmented and liminal, but this is exactly the point. The constant renegotiation of the animal-human binary can be seen as synecdochic with other dualities: nature and civilization, physical and spiritual, the self and the cosmos, or Pan versus Zeus, as Burkert would have it. The variety of metaphysical beliefs and mystical animal archetypes invoked by the liminal yet hybrid status of the Therian enables these individuals to construct their identities as direct descendants of other threshold dwellers: tribal shamans, magic-workers, and superhuman warriors, who fully embodied the power of animals in the mythical past. Indeed, some of the Therians quoted in this paper consider themselves to be continuing this tradition as modern shamans, witches, and messengers of the Divine, put on Earth to mend the rift between humanity and nature.

Therianthropy is just one example of the way alternative identities reflect the spiritual individualism of the postmodern West. Exercises in re-enchantment already mentioned are the Otherkin and the modern Vampire movement, but as Kirby and Laycock have commented, these groups exist on a spectrum that includes communities of indigo children, “multiple systems,” and “fiction kin,” among other fantastic ontologies.⁸⁶ The Internet has provided an ideal space for the formation and growth of such communities based around non-normative worldviews. Taking into account the proclivity of some Internet users, shrouded

in anonymity, to be disingenuous in their comments, I have found Therians, like other members of subcultures who relish the opportunity to express themselves in online forums, to be “surprisingly intimate” in their contributions.⁸⁷ Furthermore, Therians are making considered efforts to become more visible in the public eye and to be taken seriously. Lupa has published two books that combine her own experience with Therianthropy and interviews with other Therians to produce an emic/etic discussion of this phenomenon.⁸⁸ At least two well-known Therians have been featured in television documentaries on “humanimal” hybrids and werewolf folklore.⁸⁹ Finally, the numerous websites dedicated to archiving documents such as the AHWV FAQ, the educational Therian.wikia, and other directories of Therianthropy information are obvious indicators of the community’s wish to preserve its history.

This article has provided a brief overview of a complex and diverse online movement that has offline components. Anthrozoomorphic identity, as we have seen, is not embodied solely in the Therian movement but is identifiable in the vast array of animal-human relationships in Western culture, particularly in fan groups like the Furrries and the contemporary practice of nature religions. Animals, of course, provide only one of many routes to a spiritually infused alternative identity. The plethora of source material resulting from the symbiotic influence of mainstream media and magical, religious, and esoteric beliefs means that new spiritual identities may be developing all the time. As for the development of the Therian as a sacred paradigm, perhaps we should heed the words of New Age author Michele Jamal, who shares an insight more correct than she may realize, “The awakening of the shape-shifter archetype in our present time is a symbolic marker for the emerging spiritual realization that consciousness and situations are malleable and can be shifted. As collectively social structures are transposing from one form to another, individuals are shifting through a myriad of identities, reaching for an integrated, multifaceted self.”⁹⁰ Jamal, incidentally, succinctly summarizes the relationship between the occultic milieu, self-reflexive identity projects, and the Therianthropy movement, and in doing so encompasses the cognitive shift currently galvanizing the re-enchantment of the postmodern West.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁶⁹ Quoted by Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 36.
- ⁷⁰ Quoted by Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 36.
- ⁷¹ Earwig, "The Itch," Thébaïde (2006), at <<http://akhila.feralscribes.org/guests/itch.php>>, accessed 10 November 2011, currently unavailable. The personal essays by this contributor have been removed from Thébaïde, however, that is not to say that they will not re-emerge online either here or on another website at a later date. Nonetheless, parts of this source, an interesting and influential one, have been preserved here.
- ⁷² "The Change," AHW (9 February 1994), at <http://groups.google.com/group/alt.horror.werewolves/browse_thread/thread/241477172ecd013c/560c77df6053f3e1#560c77df6053f3e1>, accessed 29 June 2012.
- ⁷³ "Mental Shifting," Therianthropes United, at <http://www.therianthropes.com/mental_shifting.htm>, accessed 29 June 2012.
- ⁷⁴ Sonne, "Types of Shifts," Project Shift, at <<http://project-shift.org/types-of-shifts/>>, accessed 29 June 2012.
- ⁷⁵ Greene, *The Magic of Shapeshifting*, 44–45.
- ⁷⁶ Meirya, "Feathers," Feather and Flame (May 2005), at <<http://www.dreamofhorn.com/nest/feathers1.html>>, accessed 29 June 2012.
- ⁷⁷ Lupa, *Fang and Fur*, 137.
- ⁷⁸ Earwig, "The Itch," Thébaïde.
- ⁷⁹ See Emmanuel Levinas' classic theory of the Other in *Totality and Infinity* (Dordrecht, Holland: Kluwer, 1991). For Partridge on the self as Other, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, 72–74.
- ⁸⁰ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.
- ⁸¹ Quil, "One Paw in the Galaxies," Absurdism.
- ⁸² Solo, "Essay: Between the lines," Cynanthropy (January 2008), at <<http://www.cynanthropy.net/2008/01/essays-between-lines.html>>, accessed 10 November 2011.
- ⁸³ Akhila, "The Liminal Being," Thébaïde (2004–2010), at <<http://akhila.feralscribes.org/2009/the-liminal-being/>>, accessed 10 November 2011.
- ⁸⁴ There are several forums for Christian Therianthropes. See for example <<http://werecat.proboards.com/index.cgi>>, accessed 29 June 2012.

⁸⁵ Wolf VanZandt, "Christianity and Wereism" (2010), at <http://theriantimeline.com/christianity_and_weres>, accessed 29 June 2012.

⁸⁶ Kirby, "Fantasy and Belief," 59–79; Laycock, "Real Vampires as an Identity Group," 18–19.

⁸⁷ This is a sentiment that Michael Jindra observed in his study of Trekkies. See "Star Trek Fandom as a Religious Phenomenon," *Sociology of Religion* 55, no. 1 (1994): 27–51.

⁸⁸ Lupa, *Fang and Fur; A Field Guide to Otherkin*.

⁸⁹ Science Channel, "Ten Ways to Meet a Monster: Werewolf Transformation," at <<http://science.discovery.com/videos/ten-ways-shorts-werewolf-transformation.html>>, accessed 29 June 2012; Animal Planet, "Weird, True and Freaky: Humanimals," season 1, episode 4 (2008).

⁹⁰ Jamal, *Deerdancer*, x.