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# “We Are Spirits of Another Sort”

## Ontological Rebellion and Religious Dimensions of the Otherkin Community

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Joseph P. Laycock

**ABSTRACT:** Otherkin are individuals who identify as “not entirely human.” Scholarship has framed this identity claim as religious because it is frequently supported by a framework of metaphysical beliefs. This article draws on survey data and interviews with Otherkin in order to provide a more thorough treatment of the phenomenon and to assess and qualify the movement’s religious dimensions. It is argued that, in addition to having a substantively religious quality, the Otherkin community serves existential and social functions commonly associated with religion. In the final analysis, the Otherkin community is regarded as an alternative *nomos*—a socially constructed worldview—that sustains alternate ontologies.

**KEYWORDS:** Otherkin, identity, modernity, functionalism, Paganism

Albert Camus wrote in *The Rebel* that “Man is the only creature who refuses to be what he is.”<sup>1</sup> The Otherkin give new meaning to this oft-cited quotation. Hundreds, perhaps thousands,<sup>2</sup> of people throughout the English-speaking Western world define themselves as fundamentally different from the rest of humanity: while the rest of us are fully and utterly human, they are in some sense animals, angels,

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faeries, and other mythological creatures. Sometime in the mid-1990s, these individuals formed a nebulous identity group that adopted the label “Otherkin.” Slowly, the academy has begun to take notice of this community and its alternative identity claims. Recent scholarship suggests that the Otherkin community may be a form of deviant religion or a spiritual movement arising from the Internet.<sup>3</sup> In 2008, the following definition appeared in *Spiritualities: Webster’s Quotations, Facts, and Phrases*: “Most Otherkin believe they have non-human aspects that are either spiritual or philosophical in nature. Some claim that they are human in a physical sense but non-human (“other”) in a mental or spiritual one. Many Otherkin attribute this discrepancy to reincarnation or a ‘misplaced’ soul.”<sup>4</sup>

Danielle Kirby suggests that Otherkin are part of a larger religious trend in which fantastic fictional narratives are sacralized to produce moral and metaphysical meaning.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, while many Otherkin characterize their identity as “spiritual” or “metaphysical,” they have consistently denied that their beliefs constitute a religion. In fact, some deny any metaphysical significance, framing their “otherness” as either a pragmatic belief system conducive to their wellbeing or (with less frequency) the result of genetic causes not yet understood or recognized by contemporary scientific paradigms.<sup>6</sup>

This article draws on qualitative data and interviews with Otherkin in order to provide a more thorough treatment of the phenomenon and to assess and qualify the claim that the Otherkin community is a religion. The argument that Otherkin identity claims conform to a substantive definition of religion (“Otherkinism”) is problematic. While the explanations Otherkin offer for their identities often invoke metaphysical claims, this is not universally so. Furthermore, Otherkin have almost no institutional organization and their community has few of the trappings normally associated with a substantive model of religion such as sacred texts, shared doctrines and rituals, sacred sites, and so on. I argue, however, that the Otherkin community fulfills two important functions frequently attributed to religion. First, there is evidence that Otherkin identities and belief systems serve an existential function. It has been suggested that Otherkin utilize mythology in order to fill a vacuum of meaning and identity.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, I argue that Otherkin identities provide an effective source of meaning only because they are supported by a community. Thus, the community serves a second religious function by creating a meaningful world order, what Peter Berger called a *nomos*.<sup>8</sup> The collective aspect of the Otherkin community is key to understanding its religious dimension. In discussing their identities with each other, the Otherkin community does not simply suspend logic or freely accept all subjective claims. Instead, they have created an alternate epistemology with its own criteria of sane and insane.

## METHODOLOGY

A study of the Otherkin community is difficult for two reasons. First, as Kirby observes, Otherkin are an acephalous group, and very little can be said about the community as a whole.<sup>9</sup> Second, although Otherkin do meet in person, the vast majority of their interactions occur online.<sup>10</sup> In seeking out Otherkin online, there is a high probability of encountering individuals whose association with the phenomenon is peripheral and fleeting (sometimes referred to as "fadkin")<sup>11</sup> or who are outright imposters. The Internet is home not only to Otherkin but to numerous people interested in mocking and disparaging the phenomenon.<sup>12</sup>

I first learned of Otherkin while conducting an ethnographic study of the Atlanta Vampire Alliance (AVA), a group of self-identified vampires.<sup>13</sup> The relationship between vampires and Otherkin is murky. Both groups make similar identity claims supported by a common pool of metaphysical beliefs and deviant scientific theories, most notably the existence of subtle energy. Accordingly, vampires are sometimes regarded as a type of Otherkin, and some individuals see themselves as belonging to both groups. However, vampires maintain a distinct subculture and the two groups do not necessarily acknowledge one another's identity claims.

In researching the Otherkin community, I have tried to avoid relying on Otherkin websites. Instead, this study is based primarily on research interviews and qualitative data provided through introspective surveys conducted by both vampires and Otherkin.<sup>14</sup> In 2006, the AVA began a project called "The Vampire and Energy Work Research Study" (VEWRS), conducted under their limited liability company, Suscitatio Enterprises. From 2006 to 2009, the AVA gathered quantitative and qualitative data from 955 individuals who either identified as vampires or whose metaphysical practice involved subtle energy.<sup>15</sup> Of these, 850 also identified as Otherkin. The VEWRS sample of Otherkin included 542 females, 306 males, and two who identified as "intersexed." Of these, 8 identified as transgender.<sup>16</sup> The average age was 28.

Question #982 of the full version of this survey asked respondents:

If you acknowledge yourself as being Otherkin describe your personal experiences and characteristics in the following areas: (Note: Please Check "Vampire" if Applicable)

- I. Awakening & Awareness
- II. Physical, Mental, & Psychic States
- III. Requirements & Weaknesses
- IV. Community Social Structure
- V. Distinction: Spiritual or Metaphysical?

Indicate the Type(s) of Otherkin With Which You Personally Identify:

Beneath this text, a checklist presents a variety of beings, many familiar from mythology.<sup>17</sup> The AVA provided me with anonymous qualitative responses to question #982 from 70 self-identified Otherkin. This data filled 81 pages.

Further survey data appears in *A Field Guide to Otherkin* by Lupa, an Otherkin who conducted an online survey of 131 self-identified Otherkin. Her sample ranged in age from 13 to 59 with over half (68) between the ages of 18 and 25. This suggests that the majority of Otherkin are teenagers and young adults. The sample contained 80 females, 48 males, and three unspecified. Of these, five were transgender and 36 considered themselves “androgynous,” “genderfluid,” or “gender neutral.”<sup>18</sup>

The AVA helped me make contact with some intellectual leaders of the community with whom I was able to engage in ongoing correspondence. These contacts have been active in the community for some time, both online and at face-to-face gatherings, and several have produced books and articles on the Otherkin community for a popular audience. They range in age from 28 to 50, indicating (based on Lupa’s data) that they are older than the typical Otherkin. All but one has a bachelor’s degree and several were in the process of attaining a graduate degree.

## OVERVIEW AND HISTORY

Otherkin rarely claim that they are not human. Rather, they usually self-define as individuals who believe they are not *completely* human.<sup>19</sup> Normally, individuals do not convert to become Otherkin but rather discover they always were one. In this sense, being an Otherkin is an essentialist identity. This process of interpreting one’s subjective experience is referred to within the community as “awakening,” which many describe as a gradual progress often beginning in early childhood. Conversely, some VEWRS respondents describe sudden or “triggered” awakenings in response to dreams and nightmares or near-death experiences. Others are aided in awakening by the use of rituals or “mentors” who have already completed the transition.<sup>20</sup> The completion of the awakening process entails discovering a label (for example, “elf”) that defines the Otherkin’s newly discovered identity in a way that is personally meaningful.

The majority of VEWRS respondents describe unusual physical characteristics or abilities, including unusual hair and eye color, mild deformities, unusual body temperatures, heightened senses, and physical faculties that might be considered unusual for someone of their size and fitness level. Often such quirks are considered evidence of or “clues” to their Otherkin identity. For instance, a woman who identifies as a faerie was born with an extra pair of ribs, suggesting vestigial wings.<sup>21</sup> Several VEWRS respondents who identify as wolves or great cats describe walking on the balls of their feet or other behavior consistent with such animals.

Some Otherkin develop vivid images of what their "other self" looks like. For instance, a VEWRs respondent writes:

What I have figured out so far is that I'm a dragon of the Western variety, approximately 20 feet long (nose-tip to tail-tip) with what is likely a 7 to 10 foot wingspan, blue coloration, small scales, some gray markings, green or blue eyes (I think they change), and a bonecrown as well as maybe bone-spikes along the spine which are probably retractable.<sup>22</sup>

A few individuals even describe sensations akin to "phantom limb" in which they can feel absent appendages such as wings or tails.<sup>23</sup>

There is not a finite list of Otherkin "types," but some of the most common include faeries and elves, vampires, therianthropes (individuals who identify with animals and shapeshifters), angels and demons, and "mythologicals" (legendary creatures such as dragons and phoenixes). What is actually signified by these categories is often vague and highly subjective. For example, Lupa identifies as a therianthrope, specifically a wolf:

I am a wolf therianthrope, someone who identifies as a wolf in some ways, but I know that my body is human. I don't have fur (no more than the average human), I can't live on raw meat alone, and I menstruate every month rather than once a year. Physical wolves will still react to me as they would any other human; I look, sound, and smell human, and I cannot change that. But the spirit of Wolf still resides within me. I've tried repressing it, and it only made me miserable. I felt like I was denying a key part of who I am, as if I was lying to myself. Eventually that part of me came welling back up despite my best efforts, and so for my balance and happiness I found that accepting it was the course for me to take.<sup>24</sup>

Other therianthropes who identify as a wolf may have completely different perspectives from Lupa, perhaps believing they were a wolf in a former life or are possessed by a wolf spirit. Lupa frames her identity in terms of emotional wellbeing and makes no reference to metaphysics. The arrangement of subjective identities into "types" points to the social function of the Otherkin community. Types serve to provide collective meaning for subjective identity claims, even if subjective experiences within the same type actually have little in common.

The Otherkin phenomenon appears to have spread throughout the Western world. Otherkin websites feature posts from Otherkin in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and even Scandinavia. It is difficult to reconstruct a history of Otherkin because few print sources are available and the movement is largely devoid of formal leadership or organization. As early as the Spiritualist movement, a constellation of elements was beginning to come together that included contact with the spiritual other and attempts to understand the supernatural in terms of science. This set up an evolving sphere of esoteric

discourse that came to shape the Otherkin movement. Nineteenth-century mediums coined the term “walk-ins” to describe spirits of the dead that would “walk in” to their bodies in order to communicate. The term walk-in evolved with the New Age movement and the related concept of “channeling.” Channelers function like mediums, but they usually claim they are not communicating with the dead but with beings from another plane of existence. In 1979, self-described Christian mystic Ruth Montgomery wrote a book about walk-ins entitled *Strangers Among Us*.<sup>25</sup> The book served to re-popularize the term in time for the New Age revival of the 1980s. Today, the Otherkin community claims walk-ins as a variety of Otherkin.<sup>26</sup>

Other antecedents emerged from Western esotericism. In the early twentieth century, writers with ties to the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn created theories linking reincarnation to Western folklore. French astronomer Camille Flammarion argued in his book, *Mysterious Psychic Forces* (1909), that legends of faeries, goblins, sprites, and gnomes may have a basis in fact. Furthermore, he suggested that these entities might be responsible for some of the mysterious phenomena studied by Spiritualists.<sup>27</sup> Flammarion’s view was endorsed by W.Y. Evans-Wentz in *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911). A student of William James, Evans-Wentz advocated a scientific study of faeries. He reimagined Celtic faerie races such as the Sidhe and the Tuatha de Danann using a metaphysical framework reminiscent of Theosophy. For instance, he described the Sidhe as “a race of beings evolved to a superhuman plane of existence.”<sup>28</sup> Significantly, he outlined what he called “The Celtic doctrine of Rebirth,” which he describes as the ancient Celtic belief that “Divine personages, national heroes who are members of the Tuatha De Danann or *Sidhe* race, and great men, can be reincarnated, that is to say, can descend to this plane of existence and be as mortals more than once.”<sup>29</sup> All of the essential elements of Otherkin metaphysics are present in this work. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle also explored a Spiritualist model of faeries in his non-fiction work *The Coming of the Fairies* (1922).<sup>30</sup>

The idea that non-human entities occasionally incarnate as human beings appears again in the writings of Dion Fortune (a pseudonym of British occultist Violet Mary Firth Evans, 1890–1946). In *Psychic Self-Defense* (1930), which has become a classic of twentieth-century popular occultism, Fortune explained that conception occurs as the result of a “vortex” created by sexual union. This vortex normally draws forth a human soul to be incarnated. However, in some circumstances, such as the mother being inebriated at the moment of conception, the vortex may “be deflected, as it were, out of the normal human line of human evolution, so that it opens and extends into the sphere of evolution of another type of life. Under such circumstances it is theoretically possible for a being of a parallel evolution to be drawn into incarnation in a human body.”<sup>31</sup>

The result of such a union possesses "an alien soul." Fortune also discussed a related (and in her opinion, more dangerous) phenomenon of conception by "elementals" or magical thought-forms. She referred to someone conceived in this way as a "changeling" and accused several acquaintances of being one.<sup>32</sup> Despite Fortune's rather pejorative view of such people, *Psychic Self-Defense* has since been cited as an early reference to the Otherkin phenomenon.<sup>33</sup>

The Otherkin community began in the 1960s and was focused primarily in California. It was catalyzed by the counterculture, the rise of Pagan movements, and, especially, the popularity of the writing of J.R.R. Tolkien.<sup>34</sup> Graham Harvey writes, "It is arguable that J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954–5) provided metaphorical binoculars through which the realm of Faerie became visible again."<sup>35</sup> Musicians such as Donovan and Led Zeppelin incorporated Tolkien into their lyrics, contributing to a resurgence of faerie creatures in popular culture. Pagan groups made the link between faeries and spiritual practices. The Church of all Worlds was founded in 1962 by Oberon Zell. "Oberon" is an adopted name referencing the king of the faeries in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In 1967, Frederick Adams began a Pagan movement known as Feraferia. Robert Ellwood describes a ritual by this group in which a "portal to Faerieland" is temporally created.<sup>36</sup>

The first to claim actual identity as elves are generally considered to be the "Elf Queen's Daughters," a Pagan group rumored to have been active in San Francisco as well as Seattle. They are thought to have died out in 1977, although former members are rumored to be active in Pagan groups such as The Church of All Worlds and still identify as elves.<sup>37</sup> Two members of the Elf Queen's Daughters, a married couple named Silver Flame and Zardoa, practiced the "The Elven Path" and eventually called themselves the Silver Elves, producing a number of books and newsletters and maintaining a website with online resources.<sup>38</sup>

Over the next two decades, Pagan references to elves and faeries continued to blur with actual identification as Otherkin. Both movements drew on what Kirby calls the "fantastic milieu,"<sup>39</sup> but in different forms. Consider the Feri tradition of Paganism, founded in the 1970s by Victor and Cora Anderson and Gwyddion Penderwen. This tradition references Celtic faerie lore, but practitioners do not claim to *be* faeries.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, it is hardly surprising that one of my contacts both studies the Feri tradition and identifies as a fey creature. She explains that her spiritual pursuits and her Otherkin identity are related but not synonymous.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, in the 1980s a Pagan group in Indiana calling itself the Elf Lore Family acquired 100 acres of land which they converted into a nature sanctuary named "Lothlorien" after an elven community described by Tolkien.<sup>42</sup> The group describes Lothlorien as a "green haven for elven folk,"<sup>43</sup> but it is not clear that this refers to individuals who identify ontologically as elves or simply appreciate elves as a metaphor. Nevertheless,



one of my contacts describes encountering publications from the Elf Lore Family as one of her first encounters with the idea of Otherkin.<sup>44</sup>

In the 1990s, the Internet became the medium through which the various strands of Otherkin began to find one another. The term “Otherkin” emerged through electronic mailing lists. Orion Sandstorm traces the first appearance of the term to the mailing list “Elfkind Digest.” One Darren Stalder, writing under the community name “Torin,” first used the term in “Elfin Digest #71,” sent to subscribers on July 9, 1990.<sup>45</sup> Sylverë ap Leanan recalls first encountering the term on a list called Tir Nan Oc—a variation on the Irish “Tir na nog,” the realm where faeries dwell<sup>46</sup>—which branched out from the Elvenkind Digest in 1995. Sylverë comments:

We used [the term Otherkin] to mean that we were living in human bodies but our souls were “other than human.” All of us identified as elves or some other type of Fae creature—satyr, dragon, nymph, Tuatha de Danan, Elenari—the list goes on. We were “sort of” related to each other but not exactly the same and we were “sort of” related to humans, by virtue of inhabiting human bodies, but definitely not human in our thought patterns and spiritual beliefs. Otherkin evolved as a cultural shorthand term.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to producing the term, the mailing lists inspired the first organized Otherkin gatherings, known as “kin-ventions” or “gathers.”

Another effect of the Internet was that communities of “fey creatures” encountered other communities with similar yet darker identities such as vampires and therianthropes.<sup>48</sup> Sylverë, along with Otherkin such as Lupa, argue that these groups also should be counted as Otherkin.<sup>49</sup> As a result of this encounter, the term Otherkin came to have two meanings: as a specific reference to those who identify as elves, faeries, or mythological creatures, or as a blanket term to describe any identity that is not completely human.<sup>50</sup>

## THE SUBSTANTIVE DIMENSION

Clearly there cannot be said to exist an organized religion that might be called “Otherkinism.” When asked, Otherkin consistently deny that their community constitutes a religion. Typically, Otherkin describe a sort of loose relationship between their religious identity or spiritual practice and their identity as an Otherkin. Scholars generally consider the phenomenon to be religious because most Otherkin reference metaphysical and supernatural claims in explaining their identities. Kirby writes, “These groups, I argue, are actively religious in so far as their concerns are of a spiritual and super-empirical nature.”<sup>51</sup> The most common beliefs cited by Otherkin are the existence (either historical or actual) of

mythological creatures and the reality of reincarnation. Indeed, Sylverë advanced an almost creedal position on reincarnation, arguing that, "If you didn't spend at least one life in a non-human body, reincarnate into a human body, and retain memories of that previous life, you're not Otherkin. I'm not sure what you are, but Otherkin isn't it."<sup>52</sup>

Rather than thinking of Otherkin as a religion, it is perhaps more useful to frame the phenomenon as what Bainbridge and Stark call an "audience cult," a movement that supports novel beliefs and practices but without a discernable organization. Individuals frequently participate in audience cults simply through reading books and watching television programs.<sup>53</sup> Most importantly, Bainbridge suggests that audience cults compete obliquely rather than directly with religious traditions.<sup>54</sup> This offers a better model of the substantive religious aspects of the Otherkin community. As an audience cult facilitated primarily by the Internet, Otherkin are free to practice whatever religion they like, but their identity tends to color that practice.

The argument against describing Otherkin as substantively religious arises from the heterogeneous nature of the community. Despite the inherently metaphysical definition offered by Sylverë, many Otherkin do not frame their identity in terms of metaphysical or supernatural beliefs. Lupa, for instance, argues that identity as an Otherkin can be framed as a "personal mythology."<sup>55</sup> As one Otherkin states, "I call myself an elf because it feels right."<sup>56</sup> From this perspective, subjective beliefs do not require empirical confirmation or a systematic belief system. Instead, they have a pragmatic value by contributing to the individual's wellbeing. Lupa writes, "Sure we can explain it away as imagination, but repressing anything completely inevitably leads to ill health, whether the repression is physical or psychological. We need to play, and Otherkin allows us to express that within safe boundaries." She cites Joseph Campbell's theory of ritual to argue that "play" lies at the heart of many forms of spirituality.<sup>57</sup>

This pragmatic aspect of Otherkin belief is reflected in the VEWRs. The fifth component of question #982 asks, "Distinction: Spiritual or Metaphysical?" Several respondents answered that they did not understand the question or that they considered the words "spiritual" and "metaphysical" to be synonymous. This question seems to be an attempt to gauge whether Otherkin see their beliefs as framed in a metaphysical, objective reality as described by Sylverë, or as a subjective, spiritual practice as described by Lupa.

Finally, there is a minority theory that Otherkin have recessive genes and are actually descendants of a biological union between human and non-human species. This theory draws support from legends such as the Nephilim (the result of sons of God taking human wives described in Genesis 6:1–4) or stories of changelings from European folklore.<sup>58</sup> What is significant about the genetic theory is that it is neither super-empirical nor subjective. Hence Lupa: "I demand proof!"<sup>59</sup> Th'Elf fully engages with

scientific paradigms in his description of “genetic Otherkinness,” pointing out that scientific paradigms typically change very slowly and only in response to numerous anomalies.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the Otherkin community not only competes with traditional religion but also with traditional science. Sociologist Nachman Ben-Yahuda and Dominican priest-theologian Richard Woods have noted that the “occult explosion” of the 1960s and 1970s likewise challenged both conventional religion and science and indicated a vacuum of meaning that neither sphere was able to fill.<sup>61</sup> This suggests that the religious dimension of Otherkin community is not simply substantive but also has a psychosocial aspect.

### THE EXISTENTIAL DIMENSION

Otherkin have been interpreted as a form of adaptation to the conditions of modernity. A 2001 article in *The Village Voice* offered the following explanation of the phenomenon:

Before industrialization and urbanization, people depended on their feelings and intuition rather than on shrinks and Oprah. The people lived in tune with nature thanks to a largely agricultural existence, until the Enlightenment and its attendants—calculus, petroleum and animal vivisection—turned the universe into clockwork, work into wage slavery, and the family into a demographic market segment. Elves are now what people once were, before we all got office jobs, health insurance, and credit card debt, before life became like running across a flaming rope bridge. Thanks to modern society, we’re all Frankenstein’s monster. None of us fit.<sup>62</sup>

The assertion that Otherkin feel alienated from modern society is supported by the VEWRS data showing that many Otherkin feel like outsiders. Lupa argues that “modern American society,” with its heavy emphasis on individualism, can be linked to a rise in “anxiety, depression, and other insecurity and stress related disorders” and suggests that the aspects of imagination and “play” entailed in the Otherkin identity offer a sort of antidote to the modern condition.<sup>63</sup>

Regardless of whether Otherkin invoke metaphysics to explain their identities, the identities themselves, along with their concomitant worldview, serve to answer existential questions and provide a source of meaning. In this sense, the Otherkin community conforms to a functional definition of religion as described by Clifford Geertz—a symbol system capable of creating conceptions of a general order of existence.<sup>64</sup> Such a reading helps to interpret two aspects of the Otherkin community: the use of popular occultism and the sacralization of popular culture. Where traditional religion and science have failed, these elements have been utilized to create a new and meaningful picture of the world.

## Occultism

While not all Otherkin describe their beliefs as occult or metaphysical, the movement shares a common pool of ideas and vocabulary with contemporary Paganism and popular occultism.<sup>65</sup> While occultism may meet substantive criteria of religion, in a modern context it serves an existential function. As early as 1971, Woods wrote of the occult revival:

A growing number of people in the world are rejecting customary values and, unable to formulate another system, are turning to the childhood fantasies of the race in a quest for security—not specifically psychological or sociological security but religious certainty that there is meaning and order in the universe and in history, even if it is humanly possible to glimpse only a fraction of it.<sup>66</sup>

As Woods argues, many people find a sense of meaning in these beliefs that they cannot find in traditional religion or a rationalist-scientific worldview. The argument that a resurgence of belief in the supernatural and magical practices can be attributed to secularization and “a crisis of modernity” has since been advanced by Mircea Eliade and numerous others and does not need to be expounded here.<sup>67</sup>

Woods’ association of the occult with “childhood fantasies”—possibly intended as reference to Jungian psychology—is significant. Many of the ideas and modalities to which moderns turn when traditional sources of meaning fail are first encountered in childhood. For instance, Lupa references the merits of imagination and play in her discussion of Otherkin identity as an antidote to modernity. Childhood is also where most Westerners are exposed to stories of faeries, fantastic creatures, and magic. Sociologists Colin Campbell and Shirley McIver point out that most of the elements of modern occultism are present in media intended for children. They conclude, “Almost all members of modern society are introduced to occult material at a tender age. Occultism is thus a central part of the worldview that they inherit and one which they must subsequently learn to reject. It would hardly be surprising if some fail to do so.”<sup>68</sup> This suggests that occult traditions exist alongside fictional narratives as a common pool of potential symbolic meaning.

## Popular Culture

Otherkin often reference or borrow from popular fantasy and science fiction. This is hardly a new practice. Numerous scholars find it significant that the first Pagan group to obtain government recognition in America, The Church of All Worlds, derives its name from *Stranger in a Strange Land*, a science-fiction novel by Robert Heinlein.<sup>69</sup> Ben-Yahuda argues that science fiction, much like modern occultism,

offers answers to “fundamental existential problems” in a way that (at least for populations these genres attract) science and traditional religion cannot.<sup>70</sup> Partridge expands on this theory, arguing that popular culture plays a significant role in “re-enchantment.” Citing popular media such as *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, *The X-Files*, and J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, Partridge demonstrates how popular culture “influences metaphysical and theological questions.”<sup>71</sup> Outside the West, Jolyon Baraka Thomas describes a similar phenomenon in Japan where entertainment media such as *anime* and *manga* (broadly, animated cartoons and printed comics, respectively) have contributed to new forms of religious belief and ritual.<sup>72</sup>

Kirby notes that Otherkin have taken the sacralization of fictional narratives to an unprecedented degree, in some cases espousing metaphysical frameworks in which fantasy narratives are taken to have a literal corresponding reality. She describes how Otherkin draw on what might be called a “fantastic milieu” and notes that many Otherkin websites contain “canons” of fantasy literature.<sup>73</sup> Lupa, in her chapter on elves and fey, offers a list of “modern mythology” that Otherkin turn to seeking “inspiration for personal mythology and ‘family resemblances.’”<sup>74</sup> This canon includes Tolkien as well as the writings of C.S. Lewis and Neil Gaiman, and the comic book *Elfquest*. Fantasy films such as *Labyrinth* (1986) and *The Dark Crystal* (1982) are included, as are role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Changeling: The Dreaming*.

I find three approaches by which Otherkin sacralize this material or use it to serve an existential function. Many Otherkin describe having a “personal mythology,” an approach that views material from the fantasy milieu as personally meaningful in a metaphorical sense and is the least radical form of sacralizing the fantastic. Others hold cosmological and metaphysical beliefs that are shared by, but not necessarily derived from, fictional fantasy narratives. Finally, there is a minority of Otherkin who argue that fictional narratives have a literal corresponding reality. This view is typically buttressed by invoking deviant science and metaphysics.

Sade Wolfkitten, a therianthrope I contacted during this study, describes *Elfquest* as one of her “personal creation myths.”<sup>75</sup> *Elfquest* is an independent comic created by Wendy and Richard Pini in 1978. The story revolves around a tribe of wolf-riding elves who struggle for survival on a primitive planet. *Elfquest* foreshadows some of the tropes of the Otherkin community, including alienation from humanity and alien genetic legacies. The Pinis’ elves are feared and hated by the primitive humans who share their world. The elves are not native to the world in which they live but are actually descendants of an advanced alien race from which they have inherited psychic powers. Wolfkitten writes that she “strongly” suspects that the Pinis privately identify as a sort of Otherkin. She said of *Elfquest*:

I don't literally believe, for instance, that somewhere in the distant past shape-shifting energy beings landed here and crossbred with wolves to create a canis/elven hybrid—well except maybe on alternate Tuesdays after lunch. However, as someone who also identifies as Therian, it gives me a way to 'make sense' of feelings I have that otherwise *don't* make sense.

Using *Elfquest* to "make sense" of one's identity points to the existential function of Otherkin identity. However, Wolfkitten is also careful to point out that she does not take the Pinis' story literally.

Personal mythologies are distinct from supernatural cosmologies, which are believed to have an objective reality. Several of my contacts express suspicion of some of the more common Otherkin cosmological beliefs, precisely because those beliefs seem derivative. One such belief, sometimes called "The Veil," postulates the existence of a sort of barrier between conventional and magical reality. Some Otherkin believe that this barrier will be sundered, at which time magic will return to the world and Otherkin will be physically transformed into their mythological "true selves." The "Falling of the Veil" forms a kind of Otherkin millenarian prophecy. Dan O'Dea compares this belief to the evangelical Christian idea of the Rapture. He also notes that it draws in part on the role-playing games *Shadowrun* and *Changeling: The Dreaming*.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Nonny Hesson, an Otherkin interviewed for this article, rejects this idea of The Veil, adding that it is "much like the premise of *Shadowrun*."<sup>77</sup> Both games are premised on the existence of magical creatures in the modern world and fall into the genre of "urban fantasy."

*Shadowrun*, created by FASA<sup>78</sup> in 1989, is set in an alternate timeline where magic has returned to twenty-first-century Earth, causing certain humans to transform into elves, dwarves, orcs, and trolls. In *Changeling*, created by White Wolf in 1995, players take on the role of fey creatures reborn into human bodies. *Changeling* is in many ways the opposite of *Shadowrun* because it is set in a world where magic is dying out rather than reappearing. Characters require the raw energy of human imagination, a metaphysical force known as "glamour," to survive. The antithesis of this force, "banality," is deadly to the fey. (One respondent from the VEWRS stated, "I require regular exposure to 'glamour,' that is, faerie magic, for my psychological health."<sup>79</sup>)

Otherkin who believe in The Veil do not regard fantasy role-playing games as sacred texts or believe that the places and characters described in them are literally true. However, the similarities between the metaphysical cosmologies of Otherkin and their fictional counterparts are too striking to ignore. Partridge suggests that popular culture can shape new plausibility structures and worldview.<sup>80</sup> Accordingly, exposure to role-playing games such as *Shadowrun* may render one more inclined to adopt a cosmological proposition such as The Veil.

On the other hand, it should be noted that not all Otherkin cosmologies are derived from fiction. The Otherkin community had already begun to form before *Changeling* was published.<sup>81</sup> In fact, some Otherkin argue that so many of the game's details are "correct" because its creators were themselves changelings.<sup>82</sup> It seems likely that both the Otherkin and the game designers were drawing from a common pool of popular occultism. Furthermore, the relationship between the producers of urban fantasy and metaphysical networks is frequently two-way. For instance, several of the game designers for *White Wolf* have engaged in magical practices.<sup>83</sup>

Finally, there is a subset of Otherkin who identify, in a very literal sense, as specific characters from fiction.<sup>84</sup> Lupa describes these individuals as "mediakin" and adds that the most common subset of this category is "otakuin," individuals who identify with characters depicted in Japanese animation. Mediakin are a fringe phenomenon within the Otherkin community.<sup>85</sup> The VEWRS received no responses from self-described mediakin and Lupa found only two in a sample of 131.

The way mediakin sacralize popular culture is incompatible with the Otherkin community at large for several reasons. Identifying as a fictional character is seen as less authentic than identifying as a creature from a traditional mythology.<sup>86</sup> The characters that mediakin identify with typically were created by living people for entertainment purposes. By contrast, mythological creatures have no known "inventor" and stories about these beings cannot always be assumed to be fiction. Furthermore, specific individuals are more suspect than broad categories (i.e. identifying as Legolas from *The Fellowship of the Ring* is more suspect than identifying as an elf). The problem of cogency is compounded by the fact that many mediakin identify as the *same* character. Finally, purely fictional genres seem incompatible with the Otherkin doctrine of reincarnation. Presumably, a being has to have some sort of objective existence in order to reincarnate.<sup>87</sup>

Kirby notes two common explanations for how reality can be ascribed to fictional sources. The first is that the creators of fiction are actually "channels" and what they perceive as their own imagination is actually an alternate reality. The second postulates that repeated focus and attention directed at these narratives bestows them with a form of literal existence.<sup>88</sup> Both ideas predate the Otherkin phenomenon. The first explanation, which I have found to be the most common, frequently invokes quantum physics: if infinite realities exist, there must be one that corresponds to any given fictional narrative.<sup>89</sup> In the 1980s, Ben-Yahuda noted that the theory of multiple universes, especially as described in the works of physicist Paul Davies, has emboldened occultists to argue that the universe is limitless and that therefore anything, including "the materialization of science fiction," is possible.<sup>90</sup> The second idea, that thoughts can take on a physical reality, has been a trope in popular occultism since the early twentieth century. The Tibetan idea of a *tulpa* or

living thought-form was introduced to the West by Evans-Wentz and Alexandra David-Neel. Since then, *tulpas* have been invoked in ufology and other subjugated discourses.<sup>91</sup> It should be noted that some media-kin do not invoke these radical epistemologies but rather justify their identity as having metaphorical or archetypal significance.<sup>92</sup> These individuals are given more credence by the Otherkin community at large.

## THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

Wendy Kaminer has argued that "the therapeutic milieu," which includes holistic healers, psychics, and New Agers, operates on an "implicit contract." The implicit contract theory asserts that members in this community are uncritical of fantastic claims regarding past lives, near-death experiences, and so forth with the implicit understanding that their peers will reciprocate by acknowledging their fantastic claims. This is essentially a utilitarian model in which skepticism is suspended to accommodate shared individual interests.<sup>93</sup> While this appears to be a cogent, "common sense" explanation of communities with alternative beliefs, there are two obstacles in applying this model to Otherkin. First, although Kaminer observed gatherings such as psychic fairs where subjugated claims are discussed and reinforced, the implicit contract offers no explanation for why such individuals would want to form a community in the first place. Mystics and schizophrenics also experience highly subjective realities, but they have no need to confirm these realities with others. By contrast, Otherkin express a need for community, despite their apparent individualist orientation. In the VEWRS data, several Otherkin describe their need for regular interaction with their own kind.<sup>94</sup> The second problem is that Otherkin have *not* suspended skepticism. Despite the value the community places on subjectivity, Otherkin are frequently critical of one another. One concern expressed about the game *Changeling* was that it caused "delusional geeks" to falsely identify as Otherkin.<sup>95</sup> Rialian Ashtae, a self-identified elf, considers some self-identified Otherkin to be insane.<sup>96</sup> Lupa even offers a series of "litmus tests" which help to indicate whether a specific identity claim is a valid expression of the Otherkin phenomenon or simply delusion.<sup>97</sup> These litmus tests and similar criteria demonstrate that individuals who identify as Otherkin will not necessarily be accepted as such by other self-identified Otherkin.

The implicit contract model is correct insofar as it suggests that knowledge must be confirmed by others to be meaningful. The problem is that the social construction of knowledge is a far more radical process and cannot be reduced to a series of contracts between autonomous actors. Kirby characterizes Otherkin as "a mutually supported set of alternate realities."<sup>98</sup> I would take this a step further to argue that Otherkin have created an alternate ordering of the world or *nomos*. Peter Berger describes



“nominization,” the process through which social worlds are constructed, as having three stages: externalization, objectivation, and internalization.<sup>99</sup> This process can be seen through the formation and identification of Otherkin “types.” Highly subjective experiences are organized collectively until they appear to have an objective “out there” existence. These types then become a technology that individuals may appropriate in order to “make sense” of their biographies. Consider Lupa’s description of her identity as a therianthrope: her experience is uniquely her own but the category “therianthrope” has an objective quality that makes these experiences more meaningful. (Berger argues that a perfect symmetry between subjective experience and objective reality is impossible.) For much of human history, religion has been the primary form through which social order is created and maintained.<sup>100</sup> In this sense, characterizations of the Otherkin as “an Internet religion” are true insofar as Internet discourse has facilitated and accelerated this construction of *nomos*.

In order for Otherkin identities to have meaning, the social order that legitimates them must be maintained. This is done through the Otherkin community in two ways: the promotion of social solidarity through rites, symbols, and the creation of an oppositional other, and efforts to circumscribe legitimate Otherkin types. The most obvious sociological interpretation of Otherkin kinventions and gathers is that they promote collective identity and solidarity. Although little ethnography has been done on these events, what is extant lends itself to a Durkheimian analysis. Journalist Christine Wicker describes a weekend spent at an Otherkin gathering during which she experienced days of workshops and lectures on metaphysics followed by nights of wild dancing, partying, sexual liaisons, and general collective effervescence. She writes of the Otherkin: “They knew all the multiple ways that people can be made to feel apart. They had foresworn them all. I’d never seen anything like it.”<sup>101</sup> The rites and symbols associated with Otherkin culture seem to have emerged out of such gatherings. The heptagram, or seven-pointed star, has become a symbol for Otherkin and is ubiquitous on Otherkin websites. Lupa traces one of its earliest connections with the Otherkin movement to an article by the Silver Elves entitled, “Elven Group Dynamics and Bonding Ritual,” published by Circle Sanctuary, a Pagan group, in 1986.<sup>102</sup> Other rituals have since formed around the heptagram, which apparently bears different symbolic meaning to different groups of Otherkin.<sup>103</sup> Michelle Belanger, a psychic vampire and founder of the esoteric group, House Kheperu, describes how she was invited to design an Otherkin ritual for the Kinvention North gathering in Canada. She used the heptagram as the basis for her ritual, precisely because it was one of the few symbols shared by Otherkin.<sup>104</sup>

Collective solidarity is also achieved by defining non-Otherkin as an oppositional other. Those who do not question their ontological status as ordinary human beings are often referred to as “mundanes.” More

recently, with the success of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* franchise, Otherkin have increasingly begun to refer to outsiders as "muggles" (in Rowling's stories, the oft-pejorative term used by witches and wizards to refer to non-magic persons).<sup>105</sup> Although Otherkin are not generally resentful of mundanes, the following response, taken from Lupa's survey data, indicates how this label has served to foster effective boundary maintenance:

Being an Otherkin effects [sic] my life in a very tremendous way. It effects [sic] who I socialize with, now that I know I am not human, socializing with regular humans (mundanes) I find rather boring, and dealing with them too often or in too large of doses is frustrating to me because they're just so, ugh, dull.<sup>106</sup>

Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison have suggested that creating an "oppositional other" is an important part of the apparatus by which social movements disseminate and reify their ideas.<sup>107</sup> Regardless of how an individual Otherkin feels about mundanes, the dichotomy between the two groups has been clearly established as a social fact.

The second way the Otherkin community maintains its social world is through a process of legitimation. Kirby asserts that Otherkin are not interested in consolidating "a singular and cohesive framework of belief."<sup>108</sup> While this is generally true, there is clearly a concern that the label could become a "free-for-all" of alternative identity claims. Significant energy is placed into maintaining the boundaries of the Otherkin category, including an effort to exclude certain identities from the category and create a "canon" of acceptable Otherkin types. For instance, question #171 of the VEWRS asks, "Which types of Otherkin and various subclasses do you believe to exist?" This is followed by a checklist featuring eighteen types as well as the option "other." This question reflects an effort to circumscribe "authentic" Otherkin types. It also acknowledges that the ultimate criterion for legitimation is a *consensus gentium*.

Another example of type maintenance occurs in an article by Th'Elf, who writes of Otherkin:

It is a broad label that encompasses people who identify as elves, dwarves, dragons, therianthropes, angels, faeries, sidhe, gargoyles, and a whole mass of diverse folk. Some include vampires under the label and others don't, but there have also been disagreements about the inclusion of most of the member groups as well as the label itself. Hosts and walk-ins are also included, though furies are right out.<sup>109</sup>

The distinction between furies and seemingly related groups has become the subject of recent scholarship, primarily in the field of psychology.<sup>110</sup> Psychologist Kathleen Gerbasi defines "furies" as "humans interested in anthropomorphic art and cartoons" and adds: "Some furies have zoomorphic tendencies. Furies often identify with, and/or

assume, characteristics of a special/totem species of nonhuman animal.” Gerbasi gathered survey data at a furry convention attended by 2,500 people. The results from her sample of 217 furies indicate that many furies conform to the definitions of Otherkin offered by Lupa and others. To the question “Do you consider yourself to be less than 100 percent human?” 46.3% of furies answered “yes.” This may have been significantly higher if the question had avoided the word “less,” which implies the possibility of being “sub-human.” 27.8 percent described a feeling that they had been an animal in a previous life, and 47.6 percent described their connection to an animal as “mystical.” Finally, while most furies identified with non-mythical animals, ten percent identified as dragons.<sup>111</sup> Why then are furies “right out” of the Otherkin category? One purpose of this exclusion appears to be to lend legitimacy to Otherkin. “The original nominizing act,” Berger reminds us, “is to say that an item is *this* and thus *not that*.”<sup>112</sup>

The existential dimension of the Otherkin community is the product of the social dimension. The “alternate realities” of Otherkin become less meaningful and, I would argue, less real if they are not supported collectively. An individual can insist that they are an elf, but when they are aware that this belief makes them “crazy” and puts them at odds with social norms, it requires more mental energy to perpetuate it. By contrast, if they feel that they are part of a community that endorses this belief, it acquires an “out there” existence and becomes easier to maintain.

Otherkin have acknowledged the relationship between their subjective experience and collective constructions in some interesting ways. Nytemuse has made the distinction between Unverified Personal Gnosis (UPG), Peer-Corroborated Personal Gnosis (PCPG), and Reality-Confirmed Personal Gnosis (RCPG). PCPG might entail an acquaintance who shares your suspicion that there is something otherworldly about you. RCPG indicates a subjective experience supported by inconclusive but empirical evidence (Nytemuse used the example of a prophetic dream). She explains that these terms appear frequently in online forums for Otherkin, vampires, and alternative religions. The use of these terms acknowledges interstitial layers between the empirically objective and the totally subjective. For those who use these terms, PCPG and RCPG are seen as more legitimate than UPG, but less legitimate than conventional epistemology. Nytemuse explains that she arrived at her identity through both UPG and PCPG, as well as more familiar routes such as meditation and “soul-searching.”<sup>113</sup>

An interesting artifact is a diagram sent to me by O’Dea called “The Pagan Hierarchy,” a satirical flowchart delineating “who looks down on whom” within the Pagan and magical milieu. At the top is a box labeled “Mystical Visionaries,” beneath which are dozens of categories including Freemasons, anthropologists, and several varieties of Wiccans. At the penultimate rung of the flow-chart, looked down upon by virtually

everyone, are three boxes labeled "People who Think they're Vampires," "People who Think they're Dragons, Faeries, or Otherkin," and "People who Think they're Aliens." These groups each look down on each other. Finally, on the very last rung is a box labeled "Schizophrenics, Mystical Visionaries."<sup>114</sup> Although a work of satire, The Pagan Hierarchy yields an important insight about modern occult movements: although subjective and experiential knowledge has a high value within these traditions, subjective worldviews ultimately require collective confirmation to be validated. Thus, mystical visionaries occupy both the highest and lowest levels of the hierarchy.

George Herbert Mead argued that, "Men become that as which they are addressed."<sup>115</sup> However, this cannot properly be said of Otherkin. An alternate epistemology maintained by the community allows individuals (within limits) to discover their own ontology. Berger and Thomas Luckmann argue that when two social realities collide, it is the stronger paradigm that imposes itself onto the weaker: thus Native Americans came to identify themselves as *Indios* after Columbus, but the Spanish did not come to identify themselves as Quetzalcoatl or similar supernatural beings.<sup>116</sup> The Otherkin have found a way of resisting this hegemony using the mechanisms outlined here. In some cases, the existence of an alternate social reality appears to have inspired a backlash. The website youtube.com currently hosts numerous video "rants" with titles such as "Why I hate Otherkin" in which young people assail Otherkin.<sup>117</sup> These rants range in tone from satirical to pathological anger. Many of these videos have been viewed by thousands of people and received favorable ratings. This anger seems to be inspired not by the deviant claims of the Otherkin but by the fact that they are able to find support for their beliefs and present a potential threat to the dominant *nomos*. A single individual with a deviant belief can be dismissed as a mental illness. However, when a community adopts a deviant belief system, substantially more effort is required to subjugate its worldview.

## CONCLUSIONS

In thinking about groups such as the Otherkin, there is a tendency to interpret their beliefs as religious simply because they are deviant. Like "mental illness," "religion" can serve as a ready-made category in which to locate deviant ideas. This creates the potential for a category mistake by uncritically designating subjugated discourses as religious. This is not to say that Otherkin should not be studied from the perspective of religious studies or that there is not fruitful comparison to be made between Otherkin and substantively religious traditions. However, it is especially important to be reflexive in how the term "religion" is applied to such groups. As Jonathan Z. Smith argues, religion "is a term created

by scholars for their purposes and therefore is theirs to define.”<sup>118</sup> Here, I have outlined two functions which the Otherkin worldview shares with religious traditions: namely, an existential function of providing profound sources of personal meaning and a social function of creating collective representations through discourse and ritual. These observations, it is hoped, can form the foundation for further exploration of Otherkin and related groups from the perspective of religious studies.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 11.

<sup>2</sup> There is no authoritative method to determine the size of the Otherkin community. Based on the membership size of websites such as otherkin.net, Danielle Kirby estimates the number to be in the thousands. See Danielle Kirby, “From Pulp Fiction to Revealed Text: A Study of the Role of the Text in the Otherkin Community,” in *Exploring Religion and the Sacred in a Media Age*, ed. Christopher Deacy and Elisabeth Arweck (Burlington, Vt: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 147.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Partridge refers to Otherkin as “an online spiritual community.” See Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol. 2 (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 149. Similarly, Lorne Dawson and Jenna Hennebry suggest that Otherkin are “an Internet created religion.” See Lorne L. Dawson and Jenna Hennebry, “New Religions and the Internet: Recruiting in a New Public Space,” in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, eds. Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (New York: Routledge, 2004), 172.

<sup>4</sup> P. M. Parker, *Spiritualities: Webster’s Quotations, Facts, and Phrases* (San Diego, Calif: Icon Group International, 2008), 349.

<sup>5</sup> Danielle Kirby, “Alternative Worlds: Metaphysical questing and virtual community amongst the Otherkin,” in *Sydney Studies in Religion* (2006): 275–87; Kirby, “From Pulp Fiction to Revealed Text,” 141–54.

<sup>6</sup> Th’Elf, “Otherkin,” in *The Vampyre Almanac 2006*, ed. van Houten, (Print-on-demand: Rakasha Books, 2006), 37, <[http://books.google.com/books?id=zp3NCMmTKSYC&printsec=frontcover&dq=The+Vampyre+Almanac&hl=en&ei=r8W-TtzqLIzE0AG-oqDoBA&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CDIQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=zp3NCMmTKSYC&printsec=frontcover&dq=The+Vampyre+Almanac&hl=en&ei=r8W-TtzqLIzE0AG-oqDoBA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CDIQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false)>, accessed 27 November, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Nick Mamatias, “Elven Like Me,” *The Village Voice* (13 February 2001), <<http://www.villagevoice.com/2001-02-13/news/elven-like-me/1>>, accessed 31 August 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), 19.

<sup>9</sup> Kirby “From Pulp Fiction to Revealed Text,” 151.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the methodological problems of researching religion online see Oliver Kreuger, “Methods and Theory for Studying Religion on the Internet,” in *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1, no. 1 (2005): 1–27; also, see the introduction to Douglas and Cowan, *Religion Online*.

<sup>11</sup> Th’Elf, “Otherkin,” 38.

- <sup>12</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin* (Stafford, England: Megalithica Books, 2007), 253–54.
- <sup>13</sup> For more on the Atlanta Vampire Alliance, see Joseph Laycock, *Vampires Today: The Truth about Modern Vampirism* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2009).
- <sup>14</sup> Due to the nature of these communities, it can be argued that internal surveys are more reliable than surveys conducted by outsiders. For instance, the AVA solicited responses through networks that would be more likely to attract legitimate community members rather than imposters who might submit surveys in jest. Someone not intimately familiar with this community would be less effective in controlling the survey sample.
- <sup>15</sup> The full survey contained nearly one thousand questions. The AVA is currently analyzing this data in the hopes of finding social, psychological, medical, and paranormal patterns among self-identified vampires.
- <sup>16</sup> Suscitatio Enterprises, "Statistical Response Chart: VEWRS Question 172" (5 September 2009), <<http://www.suscitatio.com>>, accessed 12 November 2011.
- <sup>17</sup> Suscitatio Enterprises, "Advanced Vampirism and Energy Work Research Survey," <<http://www.suscitatio.com/AVEWRS.htm>>, accessed 27 August 2009.
- <sup>18</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 285–86.
- <sup>19</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 26.
- <sup>20</sup> Merticus, "Sample Qualitative Otherkin Responses To Question #982" (27 June 2009). Personal electronic correspondence with the author, 27 June 2009.
- <sup>21</sup> Mamatas, "Elven Like Me."
- <sup>22</sup> Merticus, "Sample Qualitative Otherkin Responses To Question #982."
- <sup>23</sup> Th'Elf, "Otherkin," 36.
- <sup>24</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 31–32.
- <sup>25</sup> See Ruth Montgomery, *Strangers Among Us* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1982).
- <sup>26</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 76–77.
- <sup>27</sup> Camille Flammarion, *Mysterious Psychic Forces* (Boston, Mass: Small, Maynard, and Company, 1909), 431.
- <sup>28</sup> W.Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1911), 59.
- <sup>29</sup> Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith*, 368. A portion of this text describing the Celtic doctrine of rebirth was posted on sacred-texts.com and is cited in Lupa's bibliography, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 300.
- <sup>30</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Coming of the Fairies* (New York: G.H. Doran, 1922). Doyle wrote this book in response to the so-called "Cottingley Fairies" photographs, which appeared to depict young girls interacting with fairies. Although the photographs were widely dismissed as a hoax, Doyle insisted until his death that they were scientific evidence of faeries. See J. Gordon Melton, *The Encyclopedia of Religious Phenomena* (Detroit, Mich.: Visible Ink, 2007): 64–66.
- <sup>31</sup> Dion Fortune, *Psychic Self-Defense* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1997), 80–81.
- <sup>32</sup> Fortune, *Psychic Self-Defense*, 146–47.
- <sup>33</sup> Suscitatio Enterprises, PowerPoint presentation given at *Twilight* conference in Los Angeles (30 October 2007).

- <sup>34</sup> Christine Wicker cites a strong correlation between Otherkin identification and exposure to Tolkien. See Christine Wicker, *Not in Kansas Anymore* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 83.
- <sup>35</sup> Graham Harvey, "Fantasy in the Study of Religions: Paganism as Observed and Enhanced by Terry Pratchett," in *Diskus* 6 (2000), <<http://www.unimarburg.de/fb03/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus>>, accessed 31 August 2009.
- <sup>36</sup> Robert S. Ellwood, "Notes on a Neopagan Religious Group in America," in *History of Religions* 11, no. 1 (1971): 135–36.
- <sup>37</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 44.
- <sup>38</sup> The Silver Elves, "Elves in Paradise," <<http://silverelves.angelfire.com/>>, accessed 31 August 2009.
- <sup>39</sup> Kirby "From Pulp Fiction to Revealed Text," 150.
- <sup>40</sup> Joanne Pearson, *A Popular Dictionary of Paganism* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon 2002), 57–58.
- <sup>41</sup> Nytemuse, electronic communication with the author, 30 January 2009.
- <sup>42</sup> Sarah Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 155.
- <sup>43</sup> Elvin H.O.M.E., "Elvin Home," <<http://www.elvinhome.org/index.php>>, accessed 31 August 2009.
- <sup>44</sup> Sade Wolfkitten, electronic communication with the author, 8 June 2009.
- <sup>45</sup> Orion Sandstorm, "Otherkin Timeline: The Recent History of Elfin, Fae, and Animal People Version 1.7," (31 May 2011), 19 <<http://orion.kitsunet.net/time.pdf>>, accessed 30 November 2011. Dan O'Dea, a long-time member of the Otherkin community, confirms that the term first appeared on "Elfinkind Digest." (Electronic communication with the author, 16 June 2009).
- <sup>46</sup> Evans-Wentz, *The Faerie-Faith in Celtic Countries*, 60.
- <sup>47</sup> Sylverë ap Leanan, electronic communication with the author, 23 May 2009.
- <sup>48</sup> For the history of the vampire community in the West prior to the Internet, see Laycock, *Vampires Today*.
- <sup>49</sup> Lupa includes vampires and therians as Otherkin types in *A Fieldguide to Otherkin*.
- <sup>50</sup> The majority of vampires as well as many therians appear to reject being classified as a type of Otherkin. These groups had their own culture prior to the Internet and have continued to maintain a separate culture in cyberspace. See Merticus, electronic communication with the author, 15 September 2009.
- <sup>51</sup> Kirby "From Pulp Fiction to Revealed Text," 149.
- <sup>52</sup> Sylverë, personal communication with the author, May 23 2009. Survey data indicate that many Westerners believe in reincarnation, even if they are not affiliated with the "New Age" milieu. In fact, there is evidence that many self-identified Christians find the idea of reincarnation appealing. See Tony Walter and Helen Waterhouse, "A Very Private Belief: Reincarnation in Contemporary England," in *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 2 (1999): 187–97.
- <sup>53</sup> William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, "Client and Audience Cults in America," in *Sociological Analysis* 41, no. 3 (1980): 199–214.

- <sup>54</sup> William Sims Bainbridge, "After the New Age," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 3 (2004): 381–94.
- <sup>55</sup> Lupa, personal communication with the author, 22 May 2009.
- <sup>56</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 16.
- <sup>57</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 27, 28–29.
- <sup>58</sup> Th'Elf "Otherkin," 36. Fortune makes similar references to both Nephilim and changelings. See Fortune, *Psychic Self-Defense*, 146–47.
- <sup>59</sup> Lupa, electronic communication with the author, 6 June 2009.
- <sup>60</sup> Th'Elf, "Otherkin," 36–37.
- <sup>61</sup> Nachman Ben-Yahuda, *Deviance and Moral Boundaries*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 83; Richard Woods, *The Occult Revolution: A Christian Meditation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1971), 11.
- <sup>62</sup> Mamatas, "Elven Like Me."
- <sup>63</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 28.
- <sup>64</sup> Geertz's full definition is as follows: "Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.
- <sup>65</sup> Kirby, "Alternative Worlds: Metaphysical questing and virtual community amongst the Otherkin," 277.
- <sup>66</sup> Woods, *The Occult Revolution*, 11.
- <sup>67</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *Witchcraft, Occultism, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 47–68; Ben-Yahuda, *Deviance and Moral Boundaries*, 99; Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 429–39; Adrian Ivakhiv, "The Resurgence of Magical Religion as a Response to the Crisis of Modernity: A Postmodern Depth Psychological Perspective," in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, ed. James R. Lewis, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 237–68; and Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol. I (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 38–57.
- <sup>68</sup> Colin Campbell and Shirley McIver, "Cultural Sources of Support for Contemporary Occultism," *Social Compass* 34, no. 1 (1987): 58.
- <sup>69</sup> Ben-Yahuda, *Deviance and Moral Boundaries*, 75; Kirby, "From Pulp Fiction to Revealed Text," 245; Christopher Partridge, "Alternative Spiritualities, New Religions, and the Re-Enchantment of the West," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 55; and Ellwood, "Notes on a Neopagan Religious Group in America," 131. One Otherkin I spoke with made reference to the verb "grok" in describing her thoughts about Otherkin. "Grok" is a Martian word taken from Heinlein's novel. It signifies a form of understanding that has no English equivalent. Some English dictionaries now include the word "grok." (Nytemuse, electronic communication with the author, 18 February 2009).
- <sup>70</sup> Ben-Yahuda, *Deviance and Moral Boundaries*, 99.



- <sup>71</sup> Partridge, "Alternative Spiritualities, New Religions, and the Re-Enchantment of the West," 56.
- <sup>72</sup> Jolyon Baraka Thomas, "Shukyo Asobi and Miyazaki Hayao's *Anime*," *Nova Religio* 10, no. 3 (2007): 73–95.
- <sup>73</sup> Kirby, "From Pulp Fiction to Revealed Text."
- <sup>74</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 158.
- <sup>75</sup> Another was the novel *VALIS* by Philip K. Dick (New York: Bantam, 1981). Sade Wolfkitten, electronic communication with the author, 10 June 2009.
- <sup>76</sup> Dan O'Dea, electronic communication with the author, 4 July 2009.
- <sup>77</sup> Hesson, electronic communication with the author, 21 May 2009.
- <sup>78</sup> "FASA" is not a real acronym. It is rumored that the name was formed as an inside joke and stood for "Freedonian Aeronautics and Space Administration," a reference to the 1933 Marx brothers film, *Duck Soup*.
- <sup>79</sup> Merticus, "Sample Qualitative Otherkin Responses To Question #982."
- <sup>80</sup> Partridge, "Alternative Spiritualities, New Religions, and the Re-Enchantment of the West," 56.
- <sup>81</sup> Sylverë indicates that prior to the 1995 creation of the Tier Nan Og listserve, an informal mailing list had been growing for some time. Sylverë ap Leanan, electronic communication with the author, 23 May 2009.
- <sup>82</sup> Mamatas, "Elven Like Me."
- <sup>83</sup> Laycock, *Vampires Today*, 64.
- <sup>84</sup> Only a few weeks after the premier of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), an online community formed for Otherkin who identify as Na'vi, the film's blue-skinned aliens. Online discussions include memories of life on the planet Pandora as well as theories of how James Cameron acquired his knowledge of the Na'vi for his film. At least one Otherkin left a post castigating this community as derivative and advised them to "Go see a shrink." See <<http://community.livejournal.com/tothetreetree/>>, accessed 12 January 2010.
- <sup>85</sup> Kirby, "Alternative Worlds," 280.
- <sup>86</sup> Kirby, "Alternative Worlds," 281.
- <sup>87</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 203.
- <sup>88</sup> Kirby, "Alternative Worlds," 281.
- <sup>89</sup> Michelle Belanger and Chris Miller, "Magick on the Edge of Science," *Shadowdance* (online podcast), 14 June 2006, <<http://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/shadowdance/id135710161>>, accessed 12 November 2011.
- <sup>90</sup> Ben-Yahuda, *Deviance and Moral Boundaries*, 85.
- <sup>91</sup> Peter M. Rojcewicz, "The 'Men in Black' Experience and Tradition: Analogues with the Traditional Devil Hypothesis," *The Journal of American Folklore* 100:396 (1987): 134.
- <sup>92</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 203.
- <sup>93</sup> Wendy Kaminer, *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and Perils of Piety* (New York: Random House, 1999), 154.
- <sup>94</sup> Merticus, "Sample Qualitative Otherkin Responses To Question #982."

<sup>95</sup> Mamatas, "Elven Like Me."

<sup>96</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 15.

<sup>97</sup> Lupa lists certain factors associated with self-delusion, including awakening only a few weeks after learning of the concept, identifying as a unique creature unprecedented by mythology, claiming to be royalty, frequently switching types (for example, first claiming to be a dragon, then an elf), using terminology from role-playing games, and immediately adopting an identity that has obvious provenance in popular culture (see n. 84; also, following the movie *Underworld*, many "lycan" Otherkin appeared online identifying with monsters depicted in the film). Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 231–34.

<sup>98</sup> Kirby, "From Pulp Fiction to Revealed Text," 152.

<sup>99</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 4.

<sup>100</sup> See Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 25. Also see Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religions Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 141–145.

<sup>101</sup> Wicker, *Not in Kansas Anymore*, 243.

<sup>102</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 52–53.

<sup>103</sup> Orion Sandstorm, "A Directory of Otherkin Writings and Other Works, Organized by Topic," 7 May 2011, p. 147 <<http://orion.kitsunet.net/dir.pdf>>, accessed 12 November 2011.

<sup>104</sup> Michelle Belanger, "The Otherkin Avatar Project," 29 December 2008, <<http://www.rendingtheveil.com/the-otherkin-avatar-project/>>, accessed 12 November 2011.

<sup>105</sup> Partridge cites Rowling's fiction as a prime example of the relationship between popular culture and re-enchantment. See Partridge, "Alternative Spiritualities, New Religions, and the Re-Enchantment of the West," 55.

<sup>106</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, 252.

<sup>107</sup> Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 119.

<sup>108</sup> Kirby, "From Pulp Fiction to Revealed Text," 151.

<sup>109</sup> Th'Elf, "Otherkin," 35.

<sup>110</sup> Rebecca Cassidy, writing on "zoosexuality," distinguishes zoosexuals from three other groups: furies, plushies, and therians. "The term 'zoosexual,' or 'zoo,' denotes a sexual identity and is distinguished from 'zoophilia,' the term used by psychologists to refer to a sexual attraction towards animals. . . . 'Furies' can be used to refer to fans of cartoons featuring anthropomorphic animals, or to people who dress up in fur suits. 'Plushies' love and/or are sexually attracted to stuffed animals. 'Therians' range from people who identify with a particular species of animal to those who consider themselves animals of a particular species trapped in a human body." Rebecca Cassidy, "Zoosex and Other Relationships with Animals," in Donnan Hastings and Fiona Magowan, eds., *Transgressive Sex: Subversion and Control in Erotic Encounters* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 108.

<sup>111</sup> Kathleen C. Gerbasi, *et al.*, "Furies from A to Z: Anthropomorphism to Zoomorphism," *Society and Animals* 16, no. 3 (2008): 197, 200, 213, 216, 205.

<sup>112</sup> Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 20.

<sup>113</sup> Nytemuse, electronic communications with the author, 30 January 2009 and 5 February 2009.

<sup>114</sup> Ashley Yakely, "The Pagan Hierarchy, version 5," (2004), <<http://seapagan.org/pagan-hierarchy/>>, accessed 31 August 2009.

<sup>115</sup> Peter Berger, "Identity as a Problem in the Sociology of Knowledge," in James E. Curtis and John W. Pretas, eds., *The Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 375.

<sup>116</sup> Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, N.J.: Anchor Books, 1967), 381.

<sup>117</sup> See Frankie Avocado, "I hate Otherkin," 28 August 2008, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GtSfhLYV44>>, accessed 12 January 2010.

<sup>118</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 281.