

Articulating Non-Humanity: Discourse Analysis to Discover The Otherkin Community

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ABSTRACT: The Otherkin are an identity-group of individuals who consider themselves to be non-human or not completely human. Over the past years, their online presence has grown, in particular through The Otherkin Community, Inc. Simultaneously, the validity of their identity claim has been increasingly challenged. Relying on concepts in the field of discourse theory, this study examines their position and prospects in the wider Western culture. It uncovers their discursive strategies in an externally hostile and internally fragmented context, systematises their modes of identity-building, and explores the extent of their possible mainstreaming as an online counterpublic. In linking the findings, it argues that ‘Otherkinism’ is heavily impacted by an environment of exclusion, yet may still thrive – to that environment’s likely benefit.

KEYWORDS: Otherkin; identity; community; discourse; online; counterpublic; counterculture; emic; etic; re-enchantment; articulation; inclusion; public sphere; mainstreaming

Introduction: A Double-Edged Enquiry

Discourse is a powerful, deeply connoted term. In political life, in daily social life, it refers to that “capacity of language to produce representations of the world”¹. Thereby, as per many strands of critical theory, it betrays its *performative* potential “to constitute the world in meaning”². As Chouliaraki puts it (in reverse), “[in] this sense, the concept of discourse draws attention to the linguistic dimension of social power”³.

Discourse is indeed an enactment of communicative intentions. The property of subjective social actors, these carry ideological sediments, understandable in the humanities tradition as a “relatively contingent arrangement of symbolic power that can be reflected on and changed”⁴. Hence, a goal of this paper will be to *reflect on* an obscure and contested (sub)cultural world, and perhaps to encourage *change* in its discursive/social contexts: that of the Otherkin.

¹ CHOULIARAKI Lilie, ‘[Discourse and mediation](#)’, in STUART Allan (ed.), *Rethinking Communication: Keywords in Communication Research*, Hampton Press, New York, USA, 2010, version: LSE Research Online, 2011, p. 3.

² *Id.*

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

To label the Otherkin ‘obscure’ and ‘contested’ is to cast an outsider’s look on a chiefly online community, deemed both to be ill-known and to face significant challenges. But it is also to reflect the members’ own view.⁵ In a wider sense, to analytically present the Otherkin, an anthropological tool should prove useful: the dual study of *emic* and *etic* discourses, taken here in the simplest sense of *insider* and *outsider* interpretative stances.⁶

To begin with, one can highlight the following emic descriptions of the Otherkin:

“People who call themselves otherkin[...]look human, but identify as supernatural entities ordinarily thought of as legendary or mythological, most commonly elves, Fae, and dragons, but many other kinds of creatures are represented as well.”⁷

O. Scribner, 2012

“The term ‘Otherkin’ is poorly defined, even within the community itself. The best definition, because it is relatively general, is that Otherkin are people who identify in some internal way as non-human.[...]Therefore, the definition of ‘Otherkin’ includes anyone who identifies as an entity/creature/being that is not human on an internal level.”⁸

The Otherkin Community, Inc., 2014

“[No-]one has ever been able to get the members of the otherkin community to agree on a single definition.[...]Ultimately, however, otherkin are the people who choose to be members of the online otherkin community, the wider otherkin subculture, and/or self-identify as otherkin. That’s the only 100% accurate definition of the word otherkin.”⁹

J. Dreamsinger, 2016

With these descriptions, presented either by authors active within the Otherkin culture, or by the largest Web-based venue for Otherkin itself: The Otherkin Community, Inc., a New York State-registered non-profit corporation since 13 February 2009,¹⁰ some key points can be stressed. Firstly, the community’s entry threshold is very low: mere self-identification suffices. Secondly, members’ lack of consensus on its characterisation hints at a great in-group variety, if not fragmentation. Thirdly, the ontology of the Otherkin is not immediately clear. While a religious reading of their identity might spring to mind (“identify as *supernatural entities*”), the door remains open for other approaches (“identify in *some internal way*”). These aspects will be considered. But to paint a fuller picture, etic descriptions may now be turned to:

⁵ Cf. The Otherkin Community, Inc., ‘[The Otherkin Community, Inc.](#)’, modified April 2009, accessed May 2016. “Virtually nobody knows about [the concept of ‘Otherkin’... Many Otherkin] are afraid to come forward”.

⁶ Cf. HEADLAND Thomas N., ‘[A Dialogue Between Kenneth Pike and Marvin Harris on Emics and Etics](#)’, in HEADLAND Thomas N., PIKE Kenneth L., HARRIS Marvin (eds.), *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate*, Sage Publications, USA, 1990, version: SIL International Online, 12 February 2008.

⁷ SCRIBNER Orion, ‘Otherkin Timeline: The Recent History of Elfin, Fae, and Animal People. V. 2.0.’, ‘[Non-fiction about otherkin and therianthropes](#)’, 8 September 2012, *The Art and Writing of Orion Scribner*, p. 5.

⁸ The Otherkin Community, Inc., ‘[Otherkin](#)’, Wiki, modified 15 May 2014.

⁹ DREAMSINGER Jarandhel, ‘[A Revised Otherkin FAQ](#)’, *Dreamheart.org*, 8 Jan. 2012, updated 8 January 2016.

¹⁰ Cf. The Otherkin Community, Inc., [Wiki](#) and [Forums](#), 2006-2016: <http://otherkincommunity.net/>.

“The Otherkin are a loosely affiliated group of likeminded individuals who have formed a virtual online community. Their shared belief is that some people are, either partially or completely, non-human.[... Types] of non-human entities[...]include dragons; elves; vampires; lycanthropes; fairies, fae and angels,[...]creatures sourced from ancient mythologies through to [pop culture] media creations[...]. Otherkin fit broadly within the ideas encapsulated by the neo-pagan movement and religions of re-enchantment, although it needs to be stressed that such a classification is only general.”¹¹

D. Kirby, 2006

“Hundreds, perhaps thousands, 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, faeries, and other mythological creatures. Sometime in the mid-1990s, these individuals formed a nebulous identity group that adopted the label ‘Otherkin’.”¹²

J. P. Laycock, 2012

“The term ‘Otherkin’ refers to the identity and the identity-group of individuals who believe themselves to be, to some degree, non or other-than human, despite having a human appearance.[...]Only in the age of the Internet would these independent, though sometimes overlapping, identity-groups gather under the umbrella term ‘Otherkin’.”¹³

V. Robertson, 2015

Again, a number of salient aspects can be derived from these attempts at definition. Firstly, outsiders likewise underscore the community’s blurry boundaries (“nebulous”, “overlapping”), and often, its out-of-the-ordinary nature (“while the rest of us are fully and utterly human”). Secondly, the spontaneous associations are of a spiritual kind (“religions of re-enchantment”). Thirdly, all of the above portrayals to some extent assimilate Otherkin’s very *existence* to the community’s current *form*: that is, its organisation in online discursive spaces.

Via these expansive descriptions, it is hoped that a balanced, if preliminary presentation of the Otherkin as a community has been achieved. At the same time, some of the issues faced and raised by them have been suggested. These can be summarised as being of three orders: (1) community-shaping, in the face of inner and outer challenges; (2) ontologically construing alternative identities; (3) dependence on, and perhaps restriction to virtual spaces, as a non-mainstream online-based community. These are all of broader theoretical interest.

¹¹ KIRBY Danielle, ‘Alternative Worlds: Metaphysical questing and virtual community amongst the Otherkin’, in DI LAURO Frances (ed.), *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on the Sacred*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, Australia, 2006, pp. 276-277.

¹² LAYCOCK Joseph P., ‘We Are Spirits of Another Sort: Ontological Rebellion and Religious Dimensions of the Otherkin Community’, in *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 15, No. 3, February 2012, pp. 65-66.

¹³ ROBERTSON Venetia, ‘Otherkin’, in *World Religions & Spirituality Project (WRSP)*, Virginia Commonwealth University, 5 September 2015, accessed May 2016: <http://www.wrs.vcu.edu/profiles/Otherkin.htm>.

As a result, this paper will address the following questions. To what degree and through what discursive means do Otherkin constitute a community, both as regards cohesion-building despite frictions and tensions and with respect to projection toward non-Otherkin? Around the members' alternative identities, what kind of ontologies (e.g. spiritual, rational) emerge, and with what effects? Finally, what are the opportunities and limits of the online environment for the development of their counterculture? The lessons should extend to sociological matters of power through discourse, production of knowledge, and social inclusion.

As phrased before, the Otherkin are '*obscure*', in that they are by essence an alien(ated) minority with respect to humanity itself, and that a widely received, precise, easily accessible definition is lacking. They are '*contested*', especially insofar as they "have been the subject of several pieces in the Western media that[...]provoke[...]umbrage, incredulity, and revilement from the audience"¹⁴. Both observations provide rationales for scholarly attention. Like any group formed by a mode of self-perception in deviance from or in defiance of leading norms, the Otherkin expose the limits of communal life and how these can be negotiated with.

This study will shed light on their online discursive performances, on their articulation of their own nature – both in a verbal and in an ontological sense – and on evolution paths for them as a counterpublic. Guided by the previous questions, it will unfold along three sections:

1. Community- and self-presentation / projection;
2. Competing ontologies to shape alternative identities;
3. Online development and mainstreaming strategies.

This paper will rely on The Otherkin Community (OKC Wiki, Forums) as its main source. As mentioned before, the OKC exists as a corporation since 2009. It was created in 2006, to provide "a safe discussion area for those who identify[...]as Otherkin and to provide general information on metaphysical sciences and practices."¹⁵ Since then, it has "evolved to adopt a more scientific and objective mindset[...], while still attempting to preserve the element of belief and personal experience"¹⁶. In so doing, it aims to advance and disseminate what it calls the metaphysical sciences, as well as awareness of Otherkin.

Drawing on the literature of discourse analysis, publics, articulation theory and (cyber) communities, this work – an etic production in itself – will exploit the 'double edge' of insider / outsider discourses on an atypical culture. Ultimately, it will try to overcome the dichotomy, and attempt to enrich the larger society within which the Otherkin express themselves.

¹⁴ ROBERTSON Venetia, *id.*

¹⁵ The Otherkin Community, Inc., Wiki, 'The Otherkin Community, Inc.', *art. cit.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

Discourse, Power and Being: Enacting Other-Identities

1. Social Unmarking. Means of Self- and Community-Building

As stated before, power and discourse are intimately related. This link, Richardson argues, is manifested “in the ability of language to act ideologically”¹⁷: social structures of ascendancy and subordination are undermined or shored up by *discourses*,¹⁸ the variety of which enables the emergence of alternative *publics*. The latter are definable, with Warner, as “[spaces] of discourse organised by nothing other than discourse itself”¹⁹. To flesh out these concepts and engage with the subject-matter, it is useful to think of the Otherkin as a *counterpublic*. In point of fact, such a group of interconnected strangers is “constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public. [It is] structured by different dispositions or protocols[...], making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying.”²⁰ By the above accounts, the Otherkin are indeed ontologically and epistemologically apart.

This community sets off in a fundamentally adverse context: a tugging war for legitimacy with a sceptical, arguably disenchanting cultural majority.²¹ As Warner states, a “counterpublic maintains at some level[...]an awareness of its subordinate status”²² vis-à-vis dominant views. Hence, the question becomes by what mechanisms and discursive choices the Otherkin cope with what Warner labels a ‘socially marking’ context, in that “ordinary people are presumed not to want to be mistaken for the kind of person that would participate in this kind of talk”²³. This can be most accurately examined on the level of communal organisation.

As of June 2016, The Otherkin Community (OKC) hosts over 5,000 registered users and nearly 100,000 posts. While many accounts are dormant and daily guest traffic is heavy, this makes it the largest active venue. The first post to refer to is the ‘OKC Rules and Regulations’, which gives a bird’s eye view of the community’s organising principles. It is annexed to this paper. In conjunction with related texts, its study will make up this section. To steer it, Gee’s 28 Tools for discourse analysis²⁴ will be exploited, specifically those focussing on context.

¹⁷ RICHARDSON John E., ‘Analysing Newspapers: Context, Text and Consequence’, in *Analysing Newspapers: An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis*, Palgrave, New York, 2007, p. 32.

¹⁸ *Id.*, pp. 32, *sqq.* For example, a journalistic discourse can vindicate the legitimacy of a given political class.

¹⁹ WARNER Michael, ‘Publics and counterpublics (abbreviated version)’, in *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 88, Issue 4, 2002, p. 413.

²⁰ *Id.*, p. 423.

²¹ Cf. JENKINS Richard, ‘Disenchantment, Enchantment & Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium’, *Max Weber Studies* 1, 2000, p. 12. “For Weber the disenchantment of the world lay right at the heart of modernity.[...] It is the historical process by which the natural world and all areas of human experience become[...]conquered by and incorporated into the interpretive schema of science and rational government.” (To be seen further on.)

²² WARNER Michael, *art. cit.*, pp. 423-424.

²³ *Id.*, p. 424.

²⁴ Cf. GEE James Paul, *How to do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit*, 2nd Edition, Routledge, T&F, USA, 2014.

The **‘OKC Rules and Regulations’** post consists of 11 points meant to direct the on-site behaviour of “all members[...], staff included”, since June 2014. For the purposes of analysis, these can be arbitrarily grouped into the following categories:

- a. Rules designed to manage the forum from a *pragmatic* perspective: nos. 1, 7, 11.
- b. Rules designed to manage the forum from a *relational* perspective: nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9.
- c. Rules designed to manage the forum from a *content* perspective: nos. 8, 10.

Several of Gee’s questions help elucidate these sets of communicative instances, the focus being on community-building in the face of a challenging external and internal environment.

a. *‘Pragmatic’ Rules: nos. 1, 7, 11*

➤ *Tool #25 (Intertextuality): How is interaction with other texts enacted?*

Throughout the rules, intertextuality is exploited very directly: hypertext and external links route the reader to additional material, most notably the OKC’s Terms of Service (rule no. 1). Intertextuality here helps situate the forum’s Rules and Regulations in a wider, unambiguously official context: that of a legally established corporation. As this point is made from the onset, its effects ripple through the rest of the post, vindicating both its style (formal) and the system it imposes (procedural, as in 5 or 7). The OKC comes across as a respectable organisation.

➤ *Tool #18 (Politics): How are social goods being constructed and distributed or withheld?*

The forum having been construed as the service to be used, it is the social good in itself. Detailed provisions are listed in the legal Terms of Service. Hence, the post may serve to offer a more succinct overview of the conditions for enjoying it. Such requirements – introducing oneself (1), keeping only one account (11) – can be said to have filtering purposes. The social good is to be granted to members of good faith, and denied to those having ulterior motives.

➤ *Tool #3 (Making Strange): What aspects are ‘strange’ to an ‘outsider’?*

The post makes reference to issues specific to the Otherkin community: discussing beliefs (2, 3), online bullying (5), accommodating members identifying as multiple systems (11: “one account per physical body”, not “per person”). These potentially unfamiliar aspects are dealt with in neutral/formal style. At the level of lexis, words referring exclusively to the Otherkin subculture are used sparingly, and always linked to the site’s glossary (6: ‘metaphysics’).

In consequence, although outsiders can develop awareness of the community’s alternative assumptions and subordinate status in the sense of Warner, the use of ‘mainstream’ tools (rule of law) and of a legal-pragmatic linguistic register enable the OKC to structure and ratify a ‘socially unmarked’ discursive context, irrespective of its ‘socially marked’ content.

b. *‘Relational’ Rules: nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9*

➤ *Tool #17 (Relationships): How are social relationships being built, sustained or changed?*

This main set of rules arranges relations in a community construed as dealing with matters contrary to or beyond scientific discourse. Under slightly varying angles, three (3, 4, 6) address the same issue: amalgamation of belief and fact. This is warned against, explicitly to protect members (“from being mocked”) as well as the community (“against false information”). This pre-emptively recognises distinct orders of discourse – a crucial notion with the Otherkin.

➤ *Tool #28 (Conversation): What historical/social issues/discussions are taken to be known?*

Besides the previous rules, which manage miscommunication due to unequal discourses, the remaining ones (2, 5, 9) address potential in-/out-group conflict (“[r]espect others’ beliefs”, “assume that people are posting [in a neutral tone]”) and aggression (“harassment”). This is done by acknowledging on-site diversity (“not everyone within the community is otherkin”), and differentiating as a principle between respecting and sharing belief (2). The social context is hereby construed as delicate. Appreciating to what extent requires deeper familiarity with it.

➤ *Tool #15 (Activities): What activity/practice is being built or enacted?*

At this stage of the ‘exegesis’, it is useful to invoke the concept of *discourse communities*. Broadly, these are “groups that have goals or purposes, and use communication to achieve those goals” (Swales, 1990:9). Yet many points remain open: whether they could exist without goals, the defining character of speech, of what size and how stable they should be.²⁵

As per its rules, the OKC presents itself as law-governed, based on virtual interactions of a possibly conflictual kind, and with the dual purpose already presented: providing a secure space for discussion on the one hand, researching and disseminating ‘metaphysics’ as well as the concept of Otherkin in itself on the other. Thus, it bears the traits of what Kehus frames as *online discourse communities*: the Web can simultaneously be “the medium of a[...]discourse community, community of practice or even a virtual learning community.”²⁶

Under this concept, various bases for community coalesce: intercommunication, up to the use of own repertoires; joint enterprise, via common resources; and knowledge-seeking.²⁷ All these elements and purposes are observed with the OKC. In a characteristic “chicken-and-egg circularity”²⁸, its official discourse both reflects them and lays the groundwork for them.

²⁵ Cf. BORG Erik, ‘Discourse community’, *ELT Journal*, Vol. 57, Issue 4, Oxford Univ. Press, 2003, pp. 398-400. Swales’ seminal criteria for forming a discourse community are: (1) a broadly agreed set of common public goals; (2) mechanisms of intercommunication; (3) participatory mechanisms to provide information and feedback; (4) one or more communicative genres; (5) specific lexis; (6) members with content and discursive expertise.

²⁶ KEHUS Marcella J., ‘Definition and Genesis of an Online Discourse Community’, Academia.edu version, published in *The International Journal of Learning*, University of Toledo, USA, 2010, pp. 5-6.

²⁷ Cf. *id.*, pp. 2-6.

²⁸ WARNER Michael, *art. cit.*, p. 414. “Could anyone speak publicly without addressing a public? But how can this public exist before being addressed?” This may not be so much of a paradox as of a dialectic process.

c. 'Content' Rules: nos. 8, 10

➤ *Tool #24 (Social Languages): How is a given social language signalled and enacted?*

The last set of rules completes the standards of behaviour by asking that members adopt a socially unmarked mode of expression (“business English”) and leave out potentially shocking (“sexually explicit”) content. Beyond the style of the Rules and Regulations as such, Otherkin and other participants are thereby required to help *perform* the community and themselves as above and beyond that “hierarchy of stigma [that] is the assumed background of practice”²⁹ of a counterpublic. Discursive genres “that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility, or with a sense of indecorousness”³⁰ are precisely rejected: this ties in with the OKC’s aforesaid purpose of reaching a broader public with matters “outside of the ‘comfort zone’ of society”³¹.

➤ *Tool #7 (Doing and Not Just Saying): What is the speaker trying to do?*

Overall, the post is designed to overcome or subvert a context identified as problematic, and shape a space of constructive discourse on non-mainstream self-perceptions and beliefs. In Warner’s terms, this is *poetic world-making*: discourse “must characterise the world in which it attempts to circulate, and[...]attempt to realise [it] through address.[...]Public discourse says not only ‘Let a public exist’, but ‘Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way’.”³² Referring back to the double etic/emic stance, this has complex implications.

Indeed, the OKC’s Rules and Regulations can be said to address both external contention, following a strategy that can be qualified as one of *social unmarking*, and internal clashes due to the community’s motley nature – “Otherkin are very diverse and[...]share a[...]wide variety of beliefs and opinions”³³. But this does imply opposite discursive movements: mainstreaming homogenisation on the one hand, recognition of heterogeneity on the other. A case in point, another prescriptive sticky, ‘Welcoming Members’³⁴, describes a subtle balancing act between formal cordiality and criticism of content. One author notes that “some Otherkin prefer their Internet frank rather than kind”³⁵. This may reflect the OKC’s *double bind* situation.

To further probe the Otherkin’s socio-discursive conditions, a deeper exploration is thus warranted. Aforementioned ‘orders of discourse’, or ontologies, guide the formation of their alternative identities. Which ones dominate, how are they constructed, how do they compete? These questions and the effects of their answers on the community will now be examined.

²⁹ WARNER Michael, *id.*, p. 424.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ The Otherkin Community, Inc., Wiki, ‘The Otherkin Community, Inc.’, *art. cit.*

³² WARNER Michael, *art. cit.*, p. 422.

³³ The Otherkin Community, Inc., Wiki, ‘The Otherkin Community, Inc.’, *art. cit.*

³⁴ The Otherkin Community, ‘Welcoming Members’, 31 August 2015, accessed May 2016.

³⁵ GETZLER Melanie, *Otherring Among Otherkin: The Discursive Negotiation of the Face-Threat of Exclusionary Otherring in a Demarginalizing Internet Community*, Master’s Thesis, Indiana University, US, April 2013, p. 70.

2. Ontological Empowerment. Constructing Concepts of Being

The idea of a ‘disenchanted’ world has been hinted at, to sketch out how Otherkin’s identity-performance is at odds with the cultural mainstream – entailing their status as a counterpublic. For Jenkins, the modern process of disenchantment is made up of two aspects: “secularisation and the decline of magic; [...] the increasing scale, scope, and power of the formal means-ends rationalities of science, bureaucracy, the law, and policy-making”³⁶. With regard to the former findings, it is worth noting that while the OKC manifests a trend opposite to the first aspect, it still attempts to integrate the second. This may illustrate the process’ intricacy.

Convincingly, Jenkins argues that “the imperialism of formal-rational logics and processes [...] is] undermined by a diverse array of oppositional (re)enchantments”³⁷, either because (re)enchantment exists at the core of “rationally organised business”³⁸, or due to a persistency of enchantment itself, through alternative epistemologies or escapist tendencies.³⁹ This second path of re-enchantment appears to be the most relevant. Quoted in the introductory part of this paper, Kirby broadly links Otherkinism to neo-paganism: “participants [engage] in an eclectic personal mix of magic; philosophy, metaphysical questing and self-inquiry”⁴⁰. The OKC may seem to endorse a spiritual ontology. However, this is only partly the case.

The Rules and Regulations advised against mixing up beliefs and facts (esp. rules 3, 4, 6). In itself, this reveals that *both* may come up in this community’s discourse. The reference text introducing the organisation, ‘The Otherkin Community, Inc.’, presents its research values: “[m]any practitioners [of ‘*metaphysics*’: “*a term used in modern time to emphasise something that defies modern sciences, such as psychic abilities or otherwise*”⁴¹] may take offense[...] at] the ‘testing of their beliefs’. Everyone must understand that this is done in good faith[...] to help support the advancement of the sciences.”⁴² What outside observers may find contradictory is here upheld as a rule: the OKC aims to reconcile ‘scientific’ and ‘spiritual’ ontologies.

Nonetheless, this remains difficult in practice. Under the header ‘Sciences & Beliefs’, the OKC Forums display the separate groups of ‘Metaphysical Forums’ and ‘Science Forums’.⁴³ Thus, to investigate the matter, this section will distinguish three ontological angles: *Spiritual*, *Scientific*, and *Utilitarian*. The last one may cast yet another light on the Otherkin community. For each, emic and etic discourses will be studied; articulation theory will inform the analysis.

³⁶ JENKINS Richard, *art. cit.*, 2000, p. 12.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*, p. 13. E.g. “the ritual, symbolism and theatre of nation”, or “the staged drama of international summitry”.

³⁹ *Id.* For example, superstition, beliefs, “weird science” for the first; computer games, the Internet for the second.

⁴⁰ KIRBY Danielle, *art. cit.*, 2006, p. 277.

⁴¹ The Otherkin Community, Forums, ‘Glossary’, ‘Metaphysics’, 2006-2009, accessed May 2016.

⁴² The Otherkin Community, Inc., Wiki, ‘The Otherkin Community, Inc.’, *art. cit.*

⁴³ *Cf.* The Otherkin Community, Forums, accessed May 2016.

a. Spiritual / Metaphysical Ontologies

This ‘ontological brand’ has attracted the most scholarly attention. Laycock distinguishes both terms as follows: *spiritual* beliefs and practices refer to a subjective world, *metaphysical* ones to an objective reality.⁴⁴ This is to say that while the former reflect individual modes of being and engaging with the cosmos, the latter could, in theory, point toward factual truths. For the Otherkin whose spirituality takes root in metaphysical knowledge-seeking, however, the limit is arguably blurred. Neither approach falls within the remit of a religion.

Indeed, Scribner finds that being “otherkin is a very individualistic thing”⁴⁵, with personal accounts including having a nonhuman soul or being the human reincarnation of a nonhuman creature. “Although[...]belief is often involved, ‘otherkin’ isn’t a religion”⁴⁶: Otherkin can be found to practice any. At the same time, neo-paganism is a common perspective.⁴⁷ Hence, the community’s inclination toward outer spiritual frameworks raises the question of the degree to which it uses them in its construction of ‘Otherkinism’, and to what stated ends.

Articulation, a key concept in discourse analysis, may come in particularly useful. To cite Slack, “articulation works[...]at] the epistemological, the political and the strategic [levels]”⁴⁸: it refers to “a way of thinking the structures of what we know as a play of correspondences”⁴⁹. Articulating patterns of knowledge, that is, discursively stitching those from one sociological world onto those from another – e.g., neo-pagan ideas and Otherkinism – can yield compelling new patchworks of meaning. Many discursive tools may come into play:⁵⁰ lexical connections, intertextuality, prototypical worldviews (e.g. referencing the Western notion of ‘soul’).

In the case of the OKC, articulation is but a terminological step away from being overtly used. This is for epistemological (‘metaphysical questing’) but also strategic/political reasons:

“[The OKC] needs to ‘speak [the public’s] language’[...], lest they] consider Otherkin to be a crazy concept[...]. Therefore, information will be released slowly and in a manner that compares it to their own ideas and beliefs to show that the concepts aren’t [so] strange. In fact, most[...]exist in beliefs that are already held by religions and philosophies.”⁵¹

⁴⁴ Cf. LAYCOCK Joseph P., *art. cit.*, 2012, p. 73.

⁴⁵ SCRIBNER Orion, ‘Otherkin lexicon : A multi-lingual dictionary of jargon used in the communities of otherkin, therianthropes, and other similar peoples. V. 0.1 Abridged’, ‘Non-fiction about otherkin and therianthropes’, modified 21 Jan. 2013, *The Art and Writing of Orion Scribner*, p. 24.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ Cf. *ibid.* “It has always been the case that most of the otherkin community practices Neo-Pagan religions”.

⁴⁸ SLACK Jennifer Daryl, ‘The theory and method of articulation in cultural studies’, Chap. 5, in MORLEY David and CHEN Kuan-Hsing (eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, Routledge, USA, 1996, p. 112.

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ Cf. GEE James Paul, *op. cit.*, 2014. Of particular reference would be the ‘Building Things in the World’ Tools and the ‘Theoretical’ Tools, such as those stressing significance-, identities-, and connections-building practices. Cf. also FAIRCLOUGH Norman, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*, Routledge, T&F, US, 2003, pp. 39-61, ‘Intertextuality & assumptions’: mechanisms of appropriation and implicitness can be exploited.

⁵¹ The Otherkin Community, Inc., Wiki, ‘The Otherkin Community, Inc.’, *art. cit.*

Thus, articulation with external ‘religions and philosophies’ may be a further strategy of social unmarking, or of discursive legitimisation within a secular yet spiritually-aware culture. Metaphysical ontologies, be they construed via neo-paganism or other relatively mainstream sources, empower the OKC vis-à-vis sceptics and facilitate cohesion-building: insofar as the OKC manages to shape “a meaningful world order”, Laycock contend that it “does not simply suspend logic or freely accept all subjective claims[...], but creates] an alternate epistemology with its own criteria of sane and insane”⁵². External yardsticks support this process.

This is not to claim that Otherkin have an inherently exploitative approach of established religions, however: rather a reconciliatory one.⁵³ This would fit with what Kirby terms “self-reflexive western esotericism”⁵⁴, as opposed to belief systems relying more on set structures – or with what an emic author referred to as a Campbellian link between spirituality and play.⁵⁵ As it happens, the Metaphysical Forums gather “various metaphysical topics”⁵⁶, making for exchange of diverse ideas, for which outer references may serve as anchoring points. A case in point, that of *awakening*, the epiphanic experience of realising one’s Otherkinness,⁵⁷ is judged by Robertson to have “Buddhist, Jungian, and western esoteric overtones”⁵⁸. Given the fluidity, one could conclude that “though metaphysical beliefs are common, they are not essential to an Otherkin identity.”⁵⁹ Other ontologies may be called upon: these entail different articulations.

b. Scientific vs. Psycho-Medical Ontologies

In his scrutiny of the world’s ‘disenchantment’, Jenkins almost paradoxically contends that the erosion of ‘mystery’ was a more definite process in Weber’s less scientifically advanced times. Nowadays, with non-Newtonian physics, “a wholly unified epistemological and explanatory framework for understanding the natural world”⁶⁰ is lacking. To a wider extent, the ‘objective’ fruits of Western science “are becoming increasingly understood as (at best) contingent rather than permanent verities”⁶¹. In practice, the OKC’s approach resonates with this. Its Science Forums host sub-fora to discuss topics in relatable fields, of varying interpretive flexibility.⁶²

⁵² LAYCOCK Joseph P., *art. cit.*, 2012, p. 66.

⁵³ Cf. SCRIBNER Orion, ‘A Directory of Otherkin Writings and Other Works, Organized by Topic. Version 0.6’, ‘Non-fiction about otherkin and therianthropes’, modified 8 Sept. 2012, *The Art and Writing of Orion Scribner*, pp. 159, *sqq.*, for sources of reflections on Judaist, Taoist, Buddhist tenets, etc., in the light of ‘Otherkinism’.

⁵⁴ KIRBY Danielle, *art. cit.*, 2006, p. 286.

⁵⁵ Cf. LAYCOCK Joseph P., *art. cit.*, p. 73, citing Lupa, 2007, pp. 27, 28-29: “[R]epressing anything completely inevitably leads to ill health[...]. 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.”

⁵⁶ The Otherkin Community, Forums, accessed May 2016.

⁵⁷ Cf. SCRIBNER O., ‘A Directory of Otherkin Writings and Other Works, Organized by Topic’, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

⁵⁸ ROBERTSON Venetia, *art. cit.*, 2015: <http://www.wrs.vcu.edu/profiles/Otherkin.htm>.

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ JENKINS Richard, *art. cit.*, 2000, p. 17.

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² I.e. Astronomy/Astrophysics, Biology, Chemistry, Parapsychology, Physics, Psychology, Quantum Mechanics.

The ‘scientific ontology’ of Otherkinism can be said to rest in its articulation with patterns of scientific knowledge, be these established, evolving, or unresolved. Robertson finds that some Otherkin construe their nature neurologically, psychologically or genetically.⁶³ The latter perspective, “a minority theory that Otherkin have recessive genes and are[...]descendents of a biological union between human and non-human species”⁶⁴, straddles the boundary between science and belief – which, in its Rules and Regulations, the OKC frowns upon.

As stated above, it also wishes to link scientific and spiritual ontologies. This calls for the use of objective tools. As Scribner puts it, secular-minded Otherkin “value critical thinking skills, psychology, and the scientific method. The psychological explanation for otherkin is popular among them.”⁶⁵ This line of thinking will briefly be focussed upon.

Under this rationale, Otherkinism would be a mental trait: a mode of being, independent of conscious choice. Therefore, purely spiritual/metaphysical ontologies appear as insufficient or not universally valid: at the root of the phenomenon, this ontology postulates a genuine ‘trans-speciesm’. It also pits the Otherkin against the holders of psychiatric interpretations.

As a matter of fact, the ‘psycho-medical ontology’ is not one endorsed by the OKC. It is a frequent strand of etic criticism, which goes that “being Otherkin is[...]actually a justification for a serious underlying psychopathology[...]. The medical community acknowledges a range of personality disorders[...]that present symptoms that may be seen as similar to descriptions of Otherkin phenomenology.”⁶⁶ On this theme, Scribner can be quoted at length:

“There is one shared conviction held by most of the otherkin and therian community, [...]and is part of what makes it possible to be a community at all... it is this novel idea: *the belief that one is an elf or an animal is not inherently a delusion or pathological condition.*[...]We seem to be the first to consider being non-human-identified as a healthy self-identification, albeit a rare and idiosyncratic one.

More than any topic, this issue – of otherkin as a mentally healthy people – would be vital for the otherkin community to explore and formally argue for (or against, when necessary), in order for our experience to be considered with respect.”⁶⁷

It has been shown that the Otherkin articulate a *sui generis* epistemology. In 2016, the OKC published the results of its Survey⁶⁸, taken by 366 respondents, 242 of whom identified ‘most strongly as Otherkin’ (p. 17): the picture of perceived correlations of Otherkinism and mental illness is, at best, ambivalent. To the question ‘Do you believe there is any sort of link between non-human identities and mental illness?’, about 64% of answers are negative (p. 42).

⁶³ Cf. ROBERTSON Venetia, *art. cit.*, 2015.

⁶⁴ LAYCOCK Joseph P., *art. cit.*, 2012, p. 73.

⁶⁵ SCRIBNER O., ‘A Directory of Otherkin Writings and Other Works, Organized by Topic’, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

⁶⁶ ROBERTSON Venetia, *ibid.*

⁶⁷ SCRIBNER O., *ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶⁸ Cf. The Otherkin Community, Inc., ‘[2016 Otherkin Community Survey](#)’, published February 2016.

Overall, construing a psycho-scientific ontology of Otherkinism involves clear tensions with the sociological worlds from where concepts can be borrowed. On the one hand, etic-imposed psychopathological articulations must be refuted.⁶⁹ On the other, the Otherkin's status as a counterpublic might impose caution in emic articulation processes: for instance, those who suffer from nonhuman body dysphoria may speak of *otherlimbs* or *metalimbs*, out of concern "that the term 'phantom limb' might be appropriative of the experiences of people who are disabled"⁷⁰. Similarly, the words "'transspecies' or 'transspirit' are occasionally used[: some Otherkin liken their experience] to that of transgendered persons"⁷¹. But this is not the OKC's official claim. This particular nexus typically attracts mixed etic and emic reactions.⁷²

As such, articulation implies a discursive drawing of correspondences with distinct worlds. In the Otherkin's case, there are many. Spiritual/metaphysical and scientific ontologies present different categories of *why* and *how*, but nothing stands in the way of OKC members choosing either or becoming a Warnerian public to both. For political and learning purposes, they resort to combinable, by necessity articulated, by definition innovative discourses.

Hence, this ontological sketch can come across as chaotic. As noted before, Otherkin hold a variety of views. As a 'learning community', however, the OKC is aware of the articulated nature of its epistemologies: amid miscellaneous minds, this may be the condition to overcome fragmentation – a constructivist approach of knowledge itself, leaving room for postmodern re-enchantment to boot. This may lead to a last kind of ontology, one strictly inward in purpose.

c. 'Otherkinism' and Self-Actualisation

To Laycock, "subjective beliefs[...]have a pragmatic value by contributing to the individual's wellbeing"⁷³. From the standpoint of religious studies, he argues that "the Otherkin worldview [...] has] an existential function of providing[...]resources of personal meaning and a social function of creating collective representations through discourse and ritual."⁷⁴ Arguably, this may count for the Otherkin who experience their nature as non-spiritual, or as hard to accept.⁷⁵ The paradigmatic space of a community enables personal growth and self-discovery.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ Cf. SCRIBNER O., 'A Directory of Otherkin Writings and Other Works, Organized by Topic', *op. cit.*, p. 43. "[I]n my opinion, this topic [of otherkin as mentally healthy] has not yet been addressed to a satisfactory degree. Better research and writings would be extremely valuable."

⁷⁰ SCRIBNER O., 'Otherkin Lexicon', *op. cit.*, p. 25. These terms are "unique to the part of the otherkin community active on Tumblr.com", however. Searches on the OKC Forums reveal that the terms 'phantom limbs' are used.

⁷¹ ROBERTSON Venetia, *art. cit.*, 2015.

⁷² Cf. SCRIBNER O., 'A Directory of Otherkin Writings and Other Works, Organized by Topic', *ibid.*, pp 55, 178. For either of the two publics involved, the parallel could be convincing or fallacious, damaging or helpful.

⁷³ LAYCOCK Joseph P., *art. cit.*, 2012, p. 73.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84. For an in-depth discussion, see pp. 74-83.

⁷⁵ Cf. SCRIBNER O., *ibid.*, p. 143. Links to personal testimonials help frame the Otherkin/Therian experience as a difficult one: e.g. SummonerWolf, 'It's not my choice', DeviantArt, 26 January 2008.

⁷⁶ Cf. LAYCOCK Joseph P., *art. cit.*, 2012, pp. 82-83.

Without prejudice to the previous ontologies, ‘Otherkinism’ *itself* might be construed as a ‘utilitarian’ one, insofar as it can be a vehicle of self-actualisation. Upon interviewing Otherkin via social networks, online reporter Roberts phrases this perspective as follows:

“[Many Otherkin] admire certain aspects of their kintype (the animal [*sic*] they feel akin to) and seek to develop their own characteristics to mirror this. It’s almost like having a role-model within yourself. Azurel tells me about one particular dragonkin who does his best to emulate what he thinks of dragons – he thinks of them as ‘wise, thoughtful, thrifty, and brave’ – so it’s an aspirational kind of transition.”⁷⁷

Community life may be indispensable to this. After all, the OKC’s initial impetus was to shape a friendly context for individuals identifying as Otherkin to interact. Its forums still offer “a safe haven for all Otherkin[...; indeed,] there is a lot of conflict with outside communities. It can become very stressful”⁷⁸. As Laycock notes, one “individual with a deviant belief can be dismissed[...; but] when a community adopts [it], substantially more effort is required”⁷⁹. Conversely, then, the hostility of outsiders “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*”⁸⁰ – or Warner’s “cultural horizon”⁸¹.

This, the construction of the Otherkin identity as a development process and online spaces as resources for self-realisation, may raise the question of the community’s future. The OKC must strike a balance between some members’ desire to remain insulated from the mainstream public, a ‘closeting’ strongly advised by some emic authors⁸², and its awareness-raising goals. What are its prospects? The Otherkin’s discursive community-shaping and some ontological articulations it enables having been reviewed, the final section will consider them under the angle of an online counterculture, and seek out mainstreaming strategies for counterpublics.

3. Inclusion? Online Subculture and Mainstreaming Strategies

The Otherkin’s virtual existence can be traced back to the 1980s. Back then, mailing lists let groups of Elves stay in touch. Though real-life meetings occur, the community is taken to exist only online.⁸³ As previously exposed, via the Internet, the Otherkin are able to hold a shared alternative discourse, pool social goods, and strive for goals of individual and group growth.

⁷⁷ ROBERTS Amber, ‘[Otherkin Are People Too; They Just Identify as Nonhuman](#)’, in *Vice*, 16 July 2015. See also CLAIRON Olivier, « [Pas complètement humains...](#) », *Le Monde*, 20 mai 2014, for similar views (in French).

⁷⁸ The Otherkin Community, [Forums](#), accessed May 2016.

⁷⁹ LAYCOCK Joseph P., *art. cit.*, 2012, p. 83.

⁸⁰ *Id.*

⁸¹ WARNER Michael, *art. cit.*, 2002, p. 423.

⁸² Cf. DREAMSINGER Jarandhel, ‘[A Revised Otherkin FAQ](#)’, *Dreamheart.org*, 8 Jan. 2012, updated 8 Jan. 2016: “Basically, don’t shout that you’re otherkin from the rooftops.[...]Last, steer clear of the media.[...]You will get manipulated, you will get misquoted, and the otherkin community will be treated in a [sensationalist] manner”.

⁸³ Cf. ROBERTSON Venetia, *art. cit.*, 2015.

Accordingly, though the “concept of otherkin[...]got its start in about 1972 when groups of people[...]said they were elves”⁸⁴, most scholars equate the Otherkin with virtual forms of expression. Their flourishing online can be explained in several ways: under a practical angle, through the *sui generis* concept of cyber-spirituality, and from a social viewpoint.

Firstly, “some pragmatic issues facing the community[...], such as the geographic spread of participants”⁸⁵ are evidently solved by the Internet. A problem of information is overcome, since the “likelihood of locating others who share any particular philosophy is increased many times over by the use of the Internet”⁸⁶. This is linked to another benefit of the virtual culture: “the freedom that[...]anonymity [offers]”⁸⁷ to individuals facing censure for their discourses. As such, these discourses may best blossom via multimedia means.

Secondly, as it happens, cyber-spirituality highlights “the continuity between the content of [metaphysical] perspectives and the nature of online engagement.”⁸⁸ In Kirby’s words, “the very virtual world [which the participants] populate in itself reinforces the experiential reality of non-tangible worlds”⁸⁹. This is Partridge’s point that “cyberspace is an occulture-friendly environment[...: on] the other side of the screen is a three-dimensional cosmos[...] where] mysteries are explained,[...]avatars appear, ‘magick’ happens, the paranormal is normal.”⁹⁰ With those two authors, a rich case can be made that the spoils of the online world bolster ‘re-enchanted’ views, as may be held by Otherkin under metaphysical ontologies. Thus, the OKC is particularly at home there. More universally still, “text and image [remove] at least a degree from the fleshy reality, through to the use of avatars[...] As a result, the Internet] is something of a playground for remaking and representing the self as one desires.”⁹¹

Thirdly, then, comes the social argument that “[the] ‘othering’ of individuals holding to unusual beliefs or practices is slowly giving way to the development of outsider cultures”⁹² via online means. Because the Otherkin are non-mainstream and constrained in the real world, the Internet becomes their favoured locus of expression. With what results?

⁸⁴ SCRIBNER O., ‘Otherkin Timeline: The Recent History of Elfin, Fae, and Animal People, v. 2.0’, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁸⁵ KIRBY Danielle, *art. cit.*, 2006, p. 284.

⁸⁶ KIRBY Danielle, *Fantasy and Belief: Alternative Religions, Popular Narratives and Digital Cultures*, Chapter 4, ‘The Internet and Popular Cultures: Sources of Context’, Routledge, USA, 2014.

⁸⁷ ALTMAN Eric Stephen, *Posthum/an/ous: Identity, Imagination, and the Internet*, Master’s Thesis, Appalachian State University, USA, May 2010, p. 88.

⁸⁸ KIRBY Danielle, *art. cit.*, pp. 283-284.

⁸⁹ *Id.*, p. 284.

⁹⁰ PARTRIDGE Christopher, *The Re-Enchantment of the West, Volume 2: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, T&T Clark International, London, 2005, p. 135.

⁹¹ KIRBY Danielle, *chap. cit.* Cf. also ALTMAN Eric Stephen, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89: online alter egos can be construed as escapism, as “[each has] the ability to mold their persona [as they desire];[...]humanity hasn’t worked, and so [...]alternatives are explored”. Yet this frames Otherkinism as a result of exclusion, rather than the reverse.

⁹² KIRBY, *id.* Cf. also *art. cit.*, 2006, pp. 286-287: “The Internet stands as a genuinely new space, with its own[...] geography, language, and cultural norms.” The OKC can be said to be “developing in relation to [it]” (p. 284).

For Partridge, these would be “[pluralisation] and empowerment, not homogenisation and impotence[...]. Cyberspace encourages difference, unregulated opinion, idiosyncratic belief, anarchy, and subversion.”⁹³ As a matter of fact, this paper has started out by noting how the Otherkin, as a norm-diverging discursive public, challenge existing social boundaries: the Web is the ideal space for doing so. Yet as seen above, for Laycock, it is precisely this ‘anarchic’ threat that drives an unrestrained backlash via equally virtual platforms.⁹⁴

In consequence, the contrasting argument can be put forward that both pluralisation and empowerment and a manner of impotence are involved in the community’s online existence. In itself, heterogeneity has been shown to entail discursive fragmentation, only kept in check through principles enacted via authoritative rules. And beyond the OKC’s frontiers, the online world’s lawlessness means that the mainstream chorus may as well hound the Otherkin into remaining in a sociological dead-end – a vilified corner of cyber-subculture.

This may be judged a sub-optimal outcome, as far as democratic and progressive societies are concerned. Fraser, in her critique of Habermas’ concept of a *public sphere*, that “theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk”⁹⁵, argues that “the idea of an egalitarian, multi-cultural society only makes sense if we suppose a plurality of public arenas [featuring] groups with diverse values and rhetorics”⁹⁶. In Young’s terms, democratic process should foster and allow “the organising of[...]contending discourses [...] But] unless multiple spheres are able to communicate with and influence one another,[...] there are only parochial separatist enclaves”⁹⁷. This issue, *inclusiveness*, may call for “a single public sphere, a process of interaction and exchange [via] which diverse sub-publics argue”⁹⁸. In its absence, regarding rational-critical debate, a social deadweight loss occurs.

Yet to Warner, participation in a counterpublic entails negative social marking. Indeed, etic discourses with respect to Otherkin are essentially stigmatising.⁹⁹ The OKC can be said to integrate this issue, as it implements practices to reduce its impact: socially unmarked forms of expression, signallers of status (corporate officialdom), articulation with pre-existing spiritual or scientific ontologies, and in itself, the honing of its discourse within a space enabling cross-geographical association, meta-corporeal expressivity (‘text and image’), and insulation from outsider hostility. These can be considered short- or long-term mainstreaming strategies.

⁹³ PARTRIDGE Christopher, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 144.

⁹⁴ Cf. LAYCOCK Joseph P., *art. cit.*, 2012, p. 83. The author mentions YouTube “video ‘rants’ with titles such as ‘Why I hate Otherkin’”. In the same vein, comments on the cited *Vice* and *Le Monde* articles are revealing.

⁹⁵ FRASER Nancy, ‘Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy’, in CALHOUN Craig (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, M.I.T. Press, 1992, *Social Text*, n°25/26, 1990, p. 57.

⁹⁶ *Id.*, p. 69. The author calls “subaltern counterpublics” such groups which “circulate counterdiscourses” (p. 67).

⁹⁷ YOUNG Iris Marion, *Inclusion and Democracy*, Oxford University Press, UK, 2000, p. 172.

⁹⁸ *Id.*

⁹⁹ Cf. GETZLER Melanie, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-4, 70-72.

Nonetheless, far from becoming what could be called a *concurring* public, or a tributary to mainstream discourse, the OKC remains a Warnerian *counterpublic*. For Fraser, realising a plural public sphere requires four post-Habermasian conditions.¹⁰⁰ Of those, the fundamental ones of acknowledgement and effective equality are lacking, as the Otherkin's emic discourses are either unheard (of) or invalidated by etic ones (psycho-medical). Thus, further strategies for growth within or beyond online spaces could include additional awareness-raising, through objective outsiders or insiders;¹⁰¹ confronting given antagonistic discourses (as recommended by Scribner: p. 13, note 69); and stressing positive spillover effects of Otherkinism.

In the course of this paper, the Otherkin emerged as a complex counterculture, which has its place in a public sphere rooted in "democratic theory and practice"¹⁰² – assuming that it is healthy for progressive and egalitarian societies to keep interrogating their limits. By virtue of its ontological richness, this community questions several of those: the functions and meanings of spirituality in a secular world; the nature and sources of human knowledge; the validity of mental health epistemologies, affecting many other publics; the inclusion of marginal groups in a globalised, multicultural, digital age. It can clearly be associated with constructive effects of social reflection. Maximising those would perhaps require a tipping point of legitimisation; or, at any rate, deeper and more disciplinary diverse attention than has so far been lent.

Conclusion: The Masquerade of Mundanity

Peter Steiner's abundantly tweaked joke that 'On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog' can be subverted once more: this time, to stress the relief to be found when 'On the Internet, *everybody at last* knows you're a dog'. In the first instance, this may happen within what one author calls the *carnival of community*: "Bakhtin describes the carnivalesque as an institution of society that inherently undermines the dominant cultural narrative.[...]With the freedom of the Internet, there is essentially a constant carnival[...] of] identity and personality[...]being reinterpreted"¹⁰³ on the basis of independently chosen, culturally subversive rules. As one such alternative community, the Otherkin are indeed able to evade both overt and covert structures of mainstream normative power, as identified by e.g. Richardson.¹⁰⁴ But where to go from there is a more complex matter – which this paper has attempted to progressively address.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. FRASER Nancy, *art. cit.*, pp. 62-77. (1) Effective social equality, no mere 'bracketing' of inequalities; (2) acknowledgement of multiple publics; (3) acceptance of the flexibility of the frontier between public and private issues; (4) appropriate and constructive relations between opinion-forming and decision-making publics.

¹⁰¹ Cf. The Otherkin Community, Inc., Wiki, '[The Otherkin Community, Inc.](#)', *art. cit.* The OKC "will welcome the input of skeptics". It also argues that "[strong], intelligent and confident individuals who identify as Otherkin need to come forth and explain their ideas, opinions and beliefs in a respectable and intelligent manner."

¹⁰² YOUNG Iris Marion, *op. cit.*, *ibid.*

¹⁰³ ALTMAN Eric Stephen, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. RICHARDSON John E., *art. cit.*, 2007, pp. 29-32.

As a corporation, The Otherkin Community, Inc. faces a double bind situation of external contestation and internal fragmentation. Hence, its rules-based approach and borrowing from mainstream registers and instruments of respectability allow it to perform a space designed to be both convivial and critical, an ‘online discourse community’ for self-reflexive, pragmatic and didactic purposes. If one admits with Warner that a public *is* the discourse that it shapes (p. 5), then this is clearly a first step toward this public’s empowerment: “[dialectically] related to other forms of social transformation, discursive change is seen [in the humanities tradition] to participate in broader struggles for a more equalitarian society”¹⁰⁵.

Yet the production of discourse involves the articulation of knowledge, which in the case of the Otherkin is both epistemologically and ontologically challenging. Leading ontologies – spiritual/metaphysical and scientific interpretations of Otherkinism – imply a re-enchantment of sorts, driven by “the interaction of secularisation with individualism and consumerism”¹⁰⁶. It translates into the freedom to construct one’s own beliefs, up to the ever-shifting limits of objective knowledge. But articulations of the Otherkin identity claim with external structures of meaning can elicit etic as well as emic opposition. Such articulations also vie with outsider-imposed correspondences, which quash the identity claim as such. Further analysis of specific outer discourses drawn into the discussion, such as those of neo-pagan or transgender publics, could thus be useful to assess areas of overlap and friction in relation to the Otherkin discourse. Likewise, in-depth analysis of the community’s own identity discourse is yet to be carried out. It could cast light on the degree to which Otherkinism is a process of self-actualisation, and by what means this is realised. Internal diversity should be taken into account.¹⁰⁷

Mundanity, a somewhat spiritual/metaphysical emic term that can be used to refer to non-Otherkinism,¹⁰⁸ may represent the polar opposite to this community’s re-enchanted culture. The online environment has offered the OKC practical ways to overcome it, and empowers its members to both formally and existentially articulate their truer identities – whichever orders of logic these are premised on. To the community’s insiders, the masquerade therefore takes place *beyond* its borders. For outsiders, this is exactly the perspective shift required to engage in meaningful epistemic dialogue on any of the many themes touched upon by the Otherkin. As always, in anthropological and social interest, this is the most challenging and fruitful step.

¹⁰⁵ CHOULIARAKI Lillie, *art. cit.*, 2011, p. 16.

¹⁰⁶ CUSACK Carole M., *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith*, Ashgate, UK, 2010, p. 142.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. ROBERTSON Venetia, *art. cit.*, 2015: as ‘kintypes’ include animals, mythological beings, aliens, machines, plants, fictional characters, etc., such distinctions might provide a basis. Many times referred to, the (emic) works of SCRIBNER Orion, [available online](#), are a rich reference for scholars interested in Otherkin studies.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. SCRIBNER O., ‘A Directory of Otherkin Writings and Other Works’, *op. cit.*, p. 8: yet the word ‘mundanes’, for people not identifying as Otherkin, is rejected by some emic authors for its “offensive connotations”.

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Appendix

The Otherkin Community, Inc.: 'OKC Rules and Regulations'

OKC Rules and Regulations

Announcement end: Mon Jul 20, 2037 4:59 am



Below are the new community Rules and Regulations.

- 1. Post an Introduction.** An introduction is how people will get to know you, so make sure your first post is an introduction telling us a bit about yourself. It's only polite. This requirement can also be found in our Terms of Service found here: <http://otherkincommunity.org/wiki/TOS>
- 2. Respect others' beliefs.** Not all otherkin share the same beliefs. In addition, not everyone within the community is otherkin. If somebody does not share your beliefs, respect that. Respect, however, does not mean sharing these beliefs.
- 3. Do not present belief as fact.** Do not state that something is factual unless it can be proved to another person. Not everyone will share the same beliefs, so do not present them as being true to anyone besides yourself.
- 4. Keep claims you can not back up to a minimum.** Some otherkin will claim to have done something or be something that they are unable to back up. We discourage this, both to protect members against false information and to prevent you from being mocked and/or looked down upon because your statements are not believed. If you cannot prove it, don't present it as factual.
- 5. No harassment.** Community staff will make every effort to ensure all members feel safe and at home within the community. If a member is harassing you or making you feel uncomfortable in any way, please contact a community moderator. Also see our off-site harassment policy found here: <http://otherkincommunity.net/topic5520>
- 6. Do not insist you are correct on inconclusive material.** Much of metaphysics / otherkin is theoretical and unproven, therefore all statements should be expressed as opinion or belief. Staff will speak out against statements that are phrased as facts (unless evidence is provided to support the claim) to encourage members to build their own beliefs and explore other possibilities.
- 7. Staff.** Members of the site staff have the final word regarding site issues. We are open to discussion, but not argument. If you feel that a staff member has broken a rule, PM a site administrator and/or report the post. Public arguments regarding staff behavior is prohibited and should be dealt with via private message.
- 8. Language.** Profanity is strongly discouraged, keep all language PG-13. We also expect everyone to use. Business English is to be used to the best of your ability. This includes proper spelling, grammar, and no slang or chatspeak. We understand that not everyone is a native English speaker. This is why we encourage you to use browser-based spellcheck or a word processing program.
- 9. Tone.** Emotion, tone, and intent do not translate well into text. Therefore, assume that people are posting from a neutral standpoint. If you are unsure what emotion, tone, or intent a member is using, ask, don't assume.
- 10. No sexually explicit material.** The Otherkin Community is no place for such material. This includes, but is not limited to, images and stories of people in sexual situations, as well as sexual comments toward others. This does not include (but be very careful when contributing) artistic contributions (such as nude art) that do not include sexual situations, but should not be posted outside the "Expressions" forum and the subject description should include a warning that the post includes nudity. Discussions on reproduction are allowed so long as it does not exceed a biological discussion. Use common sense when posting. If this becomes a problem, no artistic material will be allowed.
- 11. One account per physical body.** This prevents account sharing, ban evasion, etc.

The above Rules and Regulations apply to the chatroom and to all members on the forum, staff included.

Thank you.

 Posted: Tue Jun 10, 2014 3:19 pm