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# Feeling Otherwise: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of Queer and Trans Youth of Color Who Create and Embody Fursonas

by

Hazel Ali Zaman

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Social Work and Social Research

Dissertation Committee:
Ben Anderson-Nathe, Chair
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Portland State University
2024

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## Abstract

Queer and trans youth of color are often the target of surveillance, bullying, discrimination, and abuse. However, in an attempt to navigate such violent and discriminatory circumstances, the queer and trans youth of color in this dissertation found refuge in furry art and performances, both online and offline, where they were able to express themselves freely and thus acquire a sense of belonging among others with similar experiences. In this dissertation, "a furry" is used to refer to an individual who self-identifies as one who has an affinity for anthropomorphic animal characters. A common practice among furries is creating a fursona, or a furry persona, which serves as an anthropomorphic animal representation of oneself. Each fursona is unique to the individual, allowing for complete customization to reflect personal needs and desires. This dissertation seeks to explore the role of the fursona for queer and trans youth of color in order to inform professional educators, social workers and child and youth care workers on the empowering and transformative aspects of creating and embodying anthropomorphic animals. Utilizing hermeneutic phenomenological research methods and drawing from queer and queer of color theoretical frameworks, the dissertation seeks to explore the essence of creating and embodying the fursona in order to explore its function for queer and trans youth of color in navigating, resisting, and alleviating anti-queer and trans violence.

This dissertation identifies three main themes from the results of this study related to the creation and embodiment of the fursona for queer and trans youth of color: 1) The fursona was used to explore different ways of existing in the world and to expand the

participant's ability to express queer and trans desires, 2) the fursona was used as a way to help the participants navigate negative emotions such as pain, stress, trauma, depression, and anxiety in order to escape certain conditions and process trauma, and 3) the fursona was used to explore one's individual relationship to sex and their sexuality in creative and powerful ways in safe and comfortable settings. From the themes, this dissertation seeks to highlight the importance of play and fun in creating and embodying a fursona which is understood as a powerful and creative act for freely feeling queer and trans desires.

The result of this dissertation focuses on the ways in which queer and trans youth creatively utilize furry art and performance to radically assert agency within oppressive environments for survival. In considering its implication for professional practice this dissertation emphasizes that the furry acts featured in this study are not solutions to stopping the continued erasure and silencing of queer and trans of color life. Instead, they are rather survival practices for navigating and mitigating various iterations of anti-queer and trans atmospheres that are felt in the everyday. This dissertation therefore argues that in supporting queer and trans youth of color in their efforts for self-expression and affirmation, creative and undomesticated pursuits for agency and autonomy should be valued and supported as they are proven to be a vital practice for sustaining queer and trans of color life.

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to everyone who has ever called themselves a furry.

You have all changed my life and I wouldn't be here without you.

## Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful and extremely appreciative for the many people who supported me through this wild adventure. I am also forever appreciative of all the furries of color that generously donated their time and energy for this project. Thank you.

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I want to give a special thank you to the members of the Academic Animals group chat who have been in conversation with me, endured my annoying coffee inspired rambles, and supported my work throughout and beyond this study. I also want to acknowledge all of the furries in the Portland, OR and Seattle, WA area who I have had

the pleasure of knowing and running into at various homes, raves, parties, and conventions in the Pacific Northwest. Thank you. Also, a special collective thank you to all of the furries I have had the pleasure to meet in VRChat throughout the years during the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic. And thank you to all the furries, furs of color, critters, therians, mutts, sparklefurs, puppies, scalies, dragons, pokefurs, kid furs, littles, middles, therians, plushies, warrior cat furs, and all those who I have not listed here but have met across various platforms and at various events. This project would not exist without all of you. Thank you for changing my life :3

Finally, I want to express my deepest love and appreciation to my parents Nazim and Idie Zaman, and to everyone in my extended family. Your excitement for my scholarship and academic career made this experience even more special, thank you. An additional thank you everyone who supported me as I came out as trans and began my medical transition during the second year of my doctoral studies, your kindness meant everything to me. Last, I would like to thank my friends, lovers, and my wife Katy Campbell, who have all supported me at every turn. Thank you all for your warmth, your kindness, your love, your care. I would not be here without any of you.

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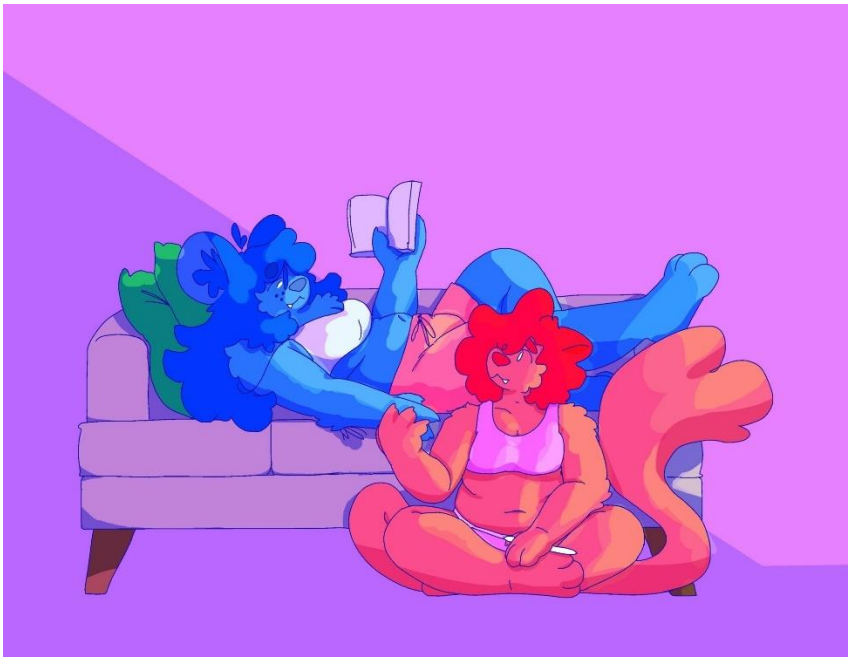
# Chapter One: Introduction

**Figure 1**

*Poly and Mouse*



*Note:* [Digital art], by Valentine, Untitled, 2022.

Shown in the image above is an everyday event captured between Valentine and her partner Mouse. Mouse, putting aside her book, and Valentine, her iPad, are both for the moment holding hands as they look into each other's eyes tenderly. Illustrated by Valentine, the piece shows a moment of intimacy between the couple as they pause their individual activities to appreciate one another. When I asked Valentine about this image, Valentine noted that everything within the image, the moment, the couch, the shadow, and the light coming into the room due to large sliding glass doors that open to a balcony, is based on a real memory which took place in a real location, her old apartment. However, the individuals that are presented in this artwork, both Valentine and Mouse, are personified as anthropomorphic animal characters, Mouse a mouse and Valentine a

cat. While the setting is based in Valentine's old apartment, and the moment based on a memory, human bodies are replaced by animal-like bodies, or bodies that are a blend of non-human animals with the human. This anthropomorphic adaptation is due to the fact that both Valentine and Mouse are furries, or those who broadly have an affinity for anthropomorphic animal characters which they express themselves through.

In looking back, Valentine stated that she remembered this piece being "significant" and "super important" to her long-term relationship with Mouse. Early in their friendship, Valentine "caught feelings" for Mouse quickly which was expressed through art of their fursonas together. Valentine explained that before meeting each other in person, and before their romantic relationship had begun she would often draw both her and Mouse's fursonas together. The reason for this practice, as explained by Valentine, is that it "was one of the main ways I expressed my love for Mouse as a friend and eventually as more than that." As an expression of love, the artwork that Valentine creates allows her to not only feel that love, but to express it through an imagined creation that presents a truer representation of her felt self as an anthropomorphic cat, or her fursona. For Valantine, her fursona is used in her art as a way for her to express parts of herself that are not reliant on dominant structures that had previously defined her everyday existence such as her assigned sex at birth and her legal name. Instead, the fursona allowed Valentine to imagine herself in a way that she had power over. As expressed by Valentine, she "didn't have to be just one thing." She also stated that she could be seen and understood as more than just her "deadname," and beyond the simple dichotomizing of gender through presenting as either "a boy" or "a girl." Instead, the

fursona for Valentine allowed her to be whatever she wanted. By drawing herself as her fursona, Valentine described how she could express herself through her fursona in ways that she cannot “in real life.” “In real life” Valentine does not have fur, and cat ears, and a tail, but through creating art Valentine is able to show Mouse how she sees expresses herself, or as stated by Valentine a way for Mouse to “really see me.”

The fursona is an imagined figure that anyone can create. For example, think about an animal you connect with. Now think about how that animal would look if they were you. What kind of ears would you have? If you had a tail, would it be long or short? Would your fursona wear the same clothes as you or perhaps something different, maybe nothing at all? What kinds of things do you like and how could that be expressed through your fursona? Do they have the same name as you, or would you choose a different name? Is your character more masculine or feminine, or does it blend those two together in a way that feels more representative of how you feel? This practice of creating and then embodying becomes useful as a way to present as one wishes. However, the questions I asked here for the reader can for many be difficult to answer and express openly because of one’s inability to perform these aspects of themselves freely at their school, at their workplace, at home, and/or with their friends, partners, family, etc.

Reasons for one’s inability to express oneself so freely can come from various social pressures to conform to ones assigned name and gender at birth, but also one’s environment and how safely one can push against powerful expectations that often intersects with political efforts to punish and erase such acts. Yet, the fursona often finds itself in digital spaces among others who are seeking to distance themselves from similar

limited perspectives and cruel circumstances. Many therefore seek refuge from the confines of their immediate setting and find a way to live and express themselves otherwise on the internet. For example, in creating a fursona, one's ability to embody and thus be seen as a transgender lesbian cat girl, is often unquestioned, welcomed, and reciprocated among other furries. In reflecting on this creative process, Valentine uses the word "magical" and "powerful" to describe what the fursona has offered her: the ability to be truly seen and to also see others as they wanted to be truly seen.

When I created my fursona I remember thinking about this process as somewhat parallel to creating a character in a video game. Some video games allow you to create your own character to play with in their world. You can pick their name, gender, hair style, skin tone, weight, etc, in a way that better represents who you are. I remember when offered this option in video games I would always create feminine characters because I could safely express that part of me through a sort of virtual embodiment. Simply put, if I had the option to be a girl I would take it. This was of course before I realized I was transgender and not presenting as a women, but little slivers of possible feminine embodiments that would make me feel who I desired to be felt life giving. The fursona is similar but instead of embodying a figure within the confines of a video game, I am able to embody my fursona to interact, engage, and create relationships with others where I would be seen and understood as a woman. Also, unlike a video game, the fursona allows me to create my own style, my gender, and my sexuality in ways that stretch beyond what is possible on a virtual scale or a graph. In creating a fursona, or a figure that I wanted to create that would present how I truly felt and wanted to be seen, I

created a transgender lesbian cat girl that I talked through, acted through, lived through, and felt through while others acknowledge and reciprocated this performance with their own fursona. With this freedom I could try out different ways of looking, moving, talking, and feeling with others that I felt were true to how I wanted to be seen and understood. After years of embodying my fursona, creating new fursonas, and engaging with other furries, I learned more about myself and those around me in ways I was never offered before. In short, creating a fursona was a way for me to express queer and trans desires that no other ways or words could express.

As a way to express herself fully to others, the fursona is a powerful imagined figure for Valentine that she often used to share parts of herself with others. With Mouse, Valentine was for the first time able to share with someone else who she truly is and how she wants to be understood. In addition to expressing the self, the fursona offers a way to expresses queer and trans feelings, specifically for Valentine her love and care for her friend and future partner Mouse who in also being a furry is aware of these creative expressive maneuvers. The fursona is therefore more than just a figure for expressing the self, it's a way for queer and trans youth of color to see and be seen, feel and be felt. In looking to Valentine, artwork that features furry figures, or anthropomorphic animal characters that represents wholly or parts of the self, gives life to one's love for themselves and for others by creating meaningful moments between individuals through their fursona. In other words, in looking to the picture that introduces this study, furry artwork that features fursonas has the ability to make queer and trans friendship, love, care, intimacy, and life possible through the artwork and its queer and trans relationality.

Where queer and trans of color life is constantly being contested in social and political spheres, the fursona for many has become a way to give breath to often isolated and repressed expressions.

This study seeks to explore this expressive phenomenon, specifically the experiences that make up the powerful artistic acts and performances that go into creating and embodying the fursona. The reason for this particular exploration into the artistic and performative through the fursona is what I have had the pleasure to witness in spaces where queer and trans youth of color have fostered environments for creative projects to thrive and give life to those who are most often struggling to maintain their right to exist and thrive. For surely within practice-based fields in which social workers, child and youth care providers, and educators reside, the art and performances that queer and trans youth of color craft to expresses themselves must be a site of inquiry in considering a new approach in providing support and empowering individuals while also attending to environmental forces that hinder one's ability to live their life fully.

## Context of Study

The context of this study begins with the spread of COVID-19 in the early months of 2020 together with the rise of political movements as a respond to various neglectful and brutal systems of surveillance and governance under the Trump administration. Unable to balance the weight of the daily news that all carried with it a death count, I was angry, furious and frustrated, but also scared for my life and for the lives of those around me. The fear of the unknown, specifically the fear of how suddenly life was changing and the collective panic that ensued, quickly began to make me feel immensely unstable.

Alongside the virus, many of those around me were risking their lives in a constant fight against oppressive systems that were continually, without consequence, reproducing circumstances of violence for those most marginalized in our society. In response to the constant feeling of both being targeted and neglected by the state in a time of sustained uncertainty couped by state sanctioned brutality, I decided to withdraw deep into online worlds and digital spaces which allowed for a momentary escape from being perceived and exposed to violent and fearful conditions that constantly consumed my daily life. It was at the nexus of dread and terror that retreated into the internet and found furry.

I had seen furry art before, and I was not a stranger to furry gatherings online as I had retreated into them before when I began to realize at quite an early age that I was attracted to men. To expand, witnessing and engaging with furry art offered countless possibilities for me, specifically a way for me to escape into parts of myself I often felt I was not able to express such as my at the time confusing sexual desires and messy gendered feelings. Within furry however, I was able to present and become a part of me that I always felt made sense but also felt dangerous, or that made me feel at first scared but later free to feel parts of me that were hiding from being perceived as gay, feminine, and undesirable. During the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, furry had made a reappearance in my life as a way for me to retreat into a community of individuals that were able to express themselves freely with one another in an honest and mutual way. When I began to reengage with furry in early 2020, I was still undecided on what I wanted to explore for my dissertation. However, after witnessing countless queer and trans people of color come together during one of the most tumultuous times of our lives

through furry, I felt that the ways in which young people are able to thrive within such circumstances was worthy of inquiry. Together with my experience witnessing in the moment furries come together and my past experiences as an educator and youth care worker witnessing young people engage with furry through art, I wanted to explore what furry art and performance *does* for the queer and trans youth of color. The context of this study is therefore rooted in reflecting on my own process of creating and embodying various fursons but also meeting and connecting with other furries who were also creating and embodying fursonas in digital spaces during the beginning of the global COVID-19 pandemic and continually for three years.

At first, this curiosity in furry produced the foundation for a pilot study on queer and trans people of color who self-identify as furries during the beginning of my doctoral studies. During the COVID-19 pandemic I found myself utilizing furry avatars as a means for staying connected with others online. In attending furry conventions in virtual reality to spending most of my free time talking with other furries in furry Telegram group and furry Discord servers, I began to see how important these spaces were for queer and trans youth of color. From these experiences, I had made the decision to engage in my furry curiosities which have all been present throughout my life. but had become so prominent at the beginning of this study. These engagements therefore led me to move towards first forming a pilot project on what furry means for queer and trans people of color.

This study is the result of an IRB approved pilot study (PI: Dr. Miriam Abelson) which sought to investigate how the fursona is being used and explored by queer and

trans people of color with a focus on race and gender as intersecting factors for engagement. The pilot study took place in late 2019 and ended in 2021. I conducted, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed 30 interviews, which opened the door to more curiosities that would inform a larger. The research questions focused on how fursonas and fursuits are used by queer and trans people of color both in physical and digital spaces while also asking if race plays a role in using and/or exploring the fursona and fursuits in their world-making practices. The interviews took place online over various digital communication platforms, such as Zoom, Discord, and Telegram. The pilot project led me into a deeper curiosity into lived experience and performance which I decided were not addressed adequately in the initial pilot study. For example, the interview protocol for the pilot study focused on the individuals' race and gender as potential impacts on their experience in the furry fandom. While the interviews were rich and full of depth, most of the interviews were focused on social exclusionary elements within furry, specifically pointing to racist and transphobic trends within various aspects of furry and community spaces. In framing race as a factor influence in how the fursona was being used and explored, the pilot project answered the initial research question, but conversations outside of social exclusion and simple descriptions of how the fursona was used would quickly dive into what furry *felt* like and its impact on the individual's personal growth and their ability to express themselves. For example, open-ended questions in my interview protocol, such as "*how* has being a furry impacted your overall well-being?" would be answered but ignite deep and personal reflections and memories that due to their depth were beyond the scope of the initial study. I realized quickly that in

asking "*how* is the fursona used and explored" felt like a misdirection with investigating the fursona deeply where in asking *how*, participants provided the answer but were often motivated to contextualize their felt relationship to their fursona(s) with such depth. In looking to where participants were taking me in their descriptions throughout our conversations, I began to become inspired by what the fursona *felt* like and how those aspects are essential in understanding its power for queer and trans people of color. Therefore, I turned to an interest in lived experience and its relationship to the material conditions of queer and trans youth of color as a way to attend to the richness given to me by furries within their beautiful descriptions. In short, through a redirection towards one's felt relationship to their fursona, my focus on the fursona began to shift towards what does one's fursona *do,* where *doing* furry through the fursona focuses on the *felt* aspects of fursona creation and embodiment.

In addition to the interviews gathered, towards the end of the pilot project, during the fall of 2021 I attended Anthro Northwest, a furry convention in Seattle, Washington. During the three-day event, I hosted a short BIPOC meet and greet that garnered a large attendance which included many friends and acquaintances from across the Pacific Northwest. This meet and greet, and my experience in listening to the stories many furries shared with me during this event, was important because I began to realize how central performance and feeling is to furry experiences. The sensorial experience of being not only present around furries but a part of a furry convention as a furry was productive for me in realizing how embodying and thus performing myself through my fursona with others was central in understanding how important the fursona is for all of us. While the

pilot study sought to explore a generalized experience of people of color who are also self-identified furries and how the fursona was being used, it did not engage with elements of the furry lifeworld and its sensorial aspects which I quickly realized were all essential in exploring the everyday lived reality of self-identified furries who are also queer and trans people of color.

The proposed research study shifts away from the pilot study's inquiry into simply *how* individuals construct their fursona and their experience in the furry fandom, to focus instead on lived experience and furry performances in order to explore what the fursona *does* for queer and trans people of color. In other words, instead of asking *how* one constructs their fursona, this study seeks to explore how does one *feel* when constructing and embodying their fursona. This reorientation emphasizes the felt realities and sensorial elements of queer and trans youth of color worldmaking practices and performances which I argue allows for a fuller grasp on the fursona's impact on queer and trans of color daily life and wellbeing.

## Research Question

This study explores the question "what does the fursona do for queer and trans youth of color?" Through hermeneutic phenomenological research methods, informed by queer and queer of color theoretical frameworks that align with a relativist ontology and a constructivist epistemology, I attempted to answer this question by looking to the essences of the lived experience of creating and embodying the fursona. The queer theoretical frameworks used within this study center performance, or the gestures that constitute queer and trans of color life, as central to making sense of the ways in which

queer and trans people respond to the world around them. I therefore believe that performance, as explored by queer theorists, allows for a unique look into the felt realities of queer and trans youth of color which I argue can uniquely position social workers, educators, and child and youth care workers as adequate advocates for queer and trans youth of color life.

## Academic Significance

This study hopes to highlight and uplift minoritarian knowledges and productions; or people of color/queer of color knowledges and productions, which are often "misheard, misunderstood, and devalued" (Muñoz, 2005, p. 121) within majoritarian institutions such as the academy. The performances that are documented and discussed in this dissertation explore queer of color youth performances, their social relations and world making practices, that are the blueprint for minoritarian self-creation and community formation. Such performances are believed to constitute minoritarian identities and worlds which are central in this study. In short, queer and trans youth of color performances with the fursona are a way to look into queer and trans youth ways of being in the world together that are absent, obscured, devalued, or ignored in social work and youth care practice and research. This study therefore seeks to provide social workers, educators, and child and youth care workers with alternative ways of approaching queer and trans youth of color art and performances by looking to lived experience as a source of knowledge and critical insight.

Currently, there is only one peer-reviewed article on furries directed at social workers and health professionals (Roberts, Plante, et al., 2015b). Published in *Health &*

*Social Work* through NASW (National Association of Social Workers) Press, a department of the National Association of Social Workers, the article discusses "strategies for health professionals to engage with furries in a clinical setting and to uphold unconditional positive regard" (Roberts, Plante, et al., 2015b). The article outlines how the furry fandom, and participating in furry acts, can be a source of positivity for the "furry client" and supports a way to "experiment with and form a coherent and stable sense of identity" (p. 5). While there has been some academic scholarship on furry, these sources are limited and constrained disciplinarily and thus unable to fully capture the experiences and feelings of queer and trans youth of color who utilize the fursona. Along with limited scholarship on furry, there is also limited scholarship on the experiences and feelings of queer and trans youth of color. Together, scholarship which meets at the intersections of furry research and queer and youth of color research is limited and in need of further inquiry. Therefore, this project seeks to fill a gap of knowledge and to counter privileged knowledge where both have the potential to greatly inform social work and youth care professionals who engage with queer and trans youth of color. As a way to decenter privileged knowledges in social work, this study seeks to be in conversation across various disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields, such as critical youth studies, gender studies, queer studies, cultural studies, childhood studies, child, youth, and family studies, and social work. Instead, a flexible multidisciplinary study is needed to step outside of canonical social work theories on youth and instead look to a variety of disciplines to address the messy acts and felt realities that queer and trans youth of color experience with the fursona which has been absent in social work research.

## Definitions

*Furry and Furries*

In attempting to define furry in relation to its use in describing someone, I use the term "a furry" in this study to identify those who self-identify with the term furry to describe their affinity for anthropomorphic animal characters. For this project I understand the fursona, or furry persona, as a manipulation of cultural aesthetics, performances, and structured meanings, often from, but not limited to, animated media with anthropomorphic animal characters. I also understand the vast array of movements, gestures, and performances that a furry engages in through the fursona, or anthropomorphic animal characters, as *furry acts*. This approach to what a furry does as acts is inspired by queer engagements within the field of performance studies where acts produce something into the world. In defining furry in relation to its use as a community, such as the furry community, I position the acts of those within the furry community as a collection of "worldmaking" acts that "establish alternative views of the world" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 195) through their continual reproduction by individual. An example of such acts is within the collection of movements that make up the process of creating a fursona, or a furry persona, which is defined here a self-created nonhuman animal character that can be used to embody and interact with others who do the same.

As a self-making practice, the act of creating a fursona is also often a creatively cooperative process that includes immaterially visualizing and then materially manifesting a furry character. I understand that these deeply personal worldmaking acts establish furry "counterpublics" (Berlant & Warner, 1998) or furry spaces, furry communities, furry events, furry relationships, and other furry social formations, that

make alternative ways of being, becoming, and belonging through nonhuman animal figures possible. However, as furry expands and moves continually over time, the term furry is messy and can only attend to a broad understanding of those who engage with art practices and creative engagements with anthropomorphic animal characters. Therefore, I understand furry to be a constantly changing and mercurial term in which there is no essential understanding of what a furry is and what furry is. In understanding furry as a definition that is continually being defined by both self-identified furries and those outside of its social spheres, this study does not seek to answer the question "what is a furry". Instead, in acknowledging furry as a continually shifting term used to describe a collection of individuals and acts that look to anthropomorphic animals, I instead allow its untamed presence within this study and look to those who have engaged with its creative offerings, queer and trans youth of color. Further explorations of how furry has been defined by other furries will be expanded on in the literature review.

*Queer and Trans People of Color*

The category queer and trans people of color is understood in this study as complex and constantly in motion. As a phrase that attempts to capture a category of people, I want to break down how I understand this category in order to consider its meaning in this study. People of color is conceptualized within this study as a political identification that is in no way relational to the biological or geographical. The contemporary term people of color has its roots in black feminist movements of the late twentieth century that since has entered the everyday language of politics. The term first gained national attention at the National Women's Conference in 1977 who proposed the

Black Women's Agenda that sought to build a movement in solidarity with other women of color (Starr, 2023). People of color is therefore understood as a term that describes those impacted by a history of colonial and imperialist violence that continues in various forms of state violence. Rather than a static category, the term people of color is used as a placeholder for the shifting aspects of those who are a part of an oppressed ethnic group that face various forms of racialized violence. In other words, the term people of color is used to describe broadly those who experience racialized violence due to their ethnic status as non-white subjects.

Queer and trans people of color is understood similarly as people of color but seeks to group together the experiences of those who are impacted by racialized violence and gendered violence. Queer and trans people of color is therefore also used here as a placeholder for shifting aspects of the experiences of those who are marginalized due to their ethnic background, gender, and sexuality. The term queer, in relation to an identity, is used here as a broad umbrella term to describe sexual and gender identities other than straight and cisgender. The term queer is understood here as a reclamation of a word used that has been used as a slur to violently marginalize those who are not straight or cisgendered. In being reclaimed, those who are lesbians, gay, bisexual, and transgender may all identify with the word queer. However, queer is used as a way to broadly express that sexuality and gender is complicated and changes over time and does not fit into tidy categories such as male, female, gay, straight. The term trans is used here to represent a broad range of gender identities and collective identities that include, but are not limited to, those who are transgender, transsexual, trans men, trans women, but also identities

such as genderqueer, intersex, agender, two-spirit, genderfluid, and cross-dresser (Tompkins, 2014). Queer and trans together are used as a fluid term that attempts to leave room for continuously felt realities that stray beyond a straight and cisgendered way of being and knowing the world. This includes leaving room for possibilities outside of the attempted categorization of queer and trans experiences through a hierarchical linear acronymization queer and trans identities (eg: LGBTQIA2S+). In other words, queer and trans together seeks to allow for everything that falls under that which is not straight or cis and all that cannot be confined to a shiftless and static identity category.

*Youth*

When using the term "youth" and attempting to define a youth range, I also rely on a critical youth studies (CYS) perspective which addresses "youth" as a period that is socially constructed. First, CYS is the interdisciplinary field of academic inquiry that asks "[w]hy are we conducting youth studies and what do we do with it?" (Ibrahim, 2014, p. 15). As a critical pivot from educational research on youth that has been "besotted with neoliberalism, myopic positivism, and self-limiting class practice improvement techniques" (Willis, 2014, p. 14), CYS seeks to alternatively articulate critically informed theory and conduct research that understands youth as an evolving concept dependent on various sociopolitical contexts instead of a psychologically based category. As outlined by Awad Ibrahim,

> Epistemologically, CYS sees youth as action; as a performative category; as an identity that is both produced through and is producing our bodies and sense of self; as an agentive, ambiguous, fluid, shifting, multiple, complex, stylized, and

> forever becoming category. It is more than a transient, dependent, and age-specific category. (Ibrahim, 2014, p. 16)

As a performative category, age becomes examined critically. In attempting to define the ages at which one can be defined as a young person, CYS literature acknowledges that youth is a socially constructed concept in which one defines youth age range as always shifting and changing. However, in this study I take from James Côté, who states that "the full age range of the youth period as found in the range of world cultures is recognized as spanning approximately from ages 14-30" (Côté, 2014, p. 9).

CYS's epistemological frameworks come from a history of critical scholars interested in how child and youth are researched from various disciplinary fields. From the New Childhood Studies (James et al., 1998; Lesko, 2001; Prout & James, 1997) and the Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE) movements (Bloch, 1992; Cannella, 1997; Swadener & Kessler, 1991) to the works of feminist psychologists (Burman, 1994; Walkerdine, 1993), CYS was built upon critical scholarship that sought to challenge adult-centered studies on children and youth that were dominated by universalizing and naturalizing developmentalist narratives. As a critical study of youth that takes from postmodernist and feminist poststructuralist scholars, the CYS project continually seeks to denaturalize categorical terms that define youth, such as adolescence (Lesko, 1996), and instead emphasize that the "youth" category is "a social construct that takes on different connotations at different periods in history" (Kellner, 2014, p. 22). In short, CYS understands youth as those constituted by restrictive psychological frameworks and consequently the subject to regulation by adult authoritarian regimes. To

both acknowledge and attempt return autonomy to youth, CYS seeks to engage in youth-centered and socio-centered research that is informed by critical theories which seek to challenge modernist conceptions of young people and youth cultures.

*Queer and Trans Youth*

Researchers across the social sciences have addressed queer and trans youth in different ways. Broadly speaking, there are discrepancies in how researchers have defined, studied, and theorized sexuality, gender, gender identity alongside age, race, class, ethnicity, etc. As queer and trans youth become a popular subject of inquiry, the language used to describe and interpret their experiences have differed due to varying theoretical and methodological frameworks in their research. For example, as described by Cris Mayo (2017), "categories that seem to get stabilized in empirical work are destabilized in theoretical and narrative research" (p. 530). While some have used the term "queer youth" as a way to denote "young people who identify in ways that exceed the boundaries of straight gender and/or sexual categories" (Driver, 2008, p. 2), terms like "sexual minority youth/adolescents" have been used to denote youth with "same-sex romantic attraction" that "sets them apart from their peers" (Miller et al., 2006, p. 112). This "setting apart" follows in the trend that the term "sexual minority youth" is used to denote "a deviant outsider within the realm of youth studies" (Driver, 2008, p. 3).

The term "sexual minority youth" is a scientific classification constituted within psychoanalytical investments to make queer and trans youth behavior legible for adults (Rasmussen et al., 2004). I argue that this reduction of queer and trans youth to "sexual minority youth" forecloses "the ambiguous, desiring, relational, and ephemeral

dimensions of their experiences" (Driver, 2008, p. 3). Additional arguments that critique the use of "sexual minority youth" point to how qualifying those who "self-identify" without considering those who have "thought of having sex with someone of their own gender" will limit and under-represent the overall population of youth with same-sex attractions (Savin-Williams, 2001, p. 9). Therefore, the term sexual minority youth is limited as it relies on strict gender and sexual categories where fluidity is often reduced to predetermined questionnaire options that narrowly describe sexual and gender identities.

Another example of limiting terms is "adolescent sexual minority males" (ASMM), which has the potential to leave out the experiences that reside on the margins of this category (such as transgender males, males who are questioning their sexuality, gender questioning males, etc). Such a reliance on categories and reductionist definitions of the subject is rooted in objectivist epistemological assumptions that directly relates to a postpositivist theoretical framework which situates the scientist as an objective analysist that understands scientific knowledge as being mostly accurate and certain (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, scientifically constructed knowledge about queer and trans youth that are reduced to "sexual minority youth" assume stability and universal consistency across scientific studies.

In this study, my use of "queer and trans youth" seeks to contrast positivist reductions and allow for fluidity and flexibility as it focuses on what cannot be captured within scientific classification. The study therefore uses the term "queer and trans" to identify those who are broadly queer and/or transgender, or those who from marginalized gender identities and sexual orientations who are not cisgender and/or heterosexual. In

relating to queer and trans youth, I take from Susan Driver who utilizes the term queer youth to represent those who "exceed the boundaries of straight gender and/or sexual categories" (Driver, 2008, p. 2). Individuals who fall under queer youth, as further elaborated by Driver,

> encompasses those who name themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, intersexual, queer, and/or questioning (GLBTTIQQ) without necessarily being confined to a narrow set of terms (Driver, 2008, p. 2)

My modification to Driver's queer youth is the addition of "trans" where I understand that not everyone that identifies as queer identifies as trans. My use of queer and trans youth is also inspired by the emic, or specifically from the youth who have utilized this term to define themselves. For example, RECLAIM!, A mental health non-profit that supports queer and trans youth, addresses their use of queer and trans youth by stating on their website that,

> We have chosen to use the term "queer and trans youth" because this is how the youth we work with overwhelmingly self-identify and prefer to be named. Self-determination—including the power to define oneself—is a heavy source of both historical oppression and survival/resistance/healing. For many youth in our communities, the term LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) is a label that has been put on them, while the terms "queer" and "trans" are chosen and preferred. (*Overview: What we do*, 2022)

This study therefore supports new terms and implements youth formed or supported neologisms, or newly coined words or expressions, that address and reject zombie categories, or categories that “once had life and meaning but for many now mean very little” (Plummer, 2005, p. 358). In short, this study’s use of queer and trans youth relies on self-constituting identifications and conceptualizations due to the term chosen in this study seeks address zombie categories by referring and relying on newer categories that better resonate with the diverse aspects of queer lives (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019b).

## Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

For this study, the review of related literature is focused on texts that attempt to describe, historicize, and articulate furry acts and performances. Due to the lack of academic scholarship on furry and self-identified furries, the first section of this literature review goes over general concepts and keywords that are necessary in understanding the topic of this study from various sources. The second section of this review briefly discusses public perceptions of furry, specifically views on furry conceptualized and perpetual by the media and popular culture which have produced various stereotypes and misconceptions on furry. Finally, the third section of this review explores scholarly engagements with furry and self-identified furries. The third section describes broad themes and dominant narratives on furry in academic literature. In addition to an overview on academic scholarship, I attempt to describe the limitations of current scholarship and dominant narratives on furry.

### Furry, Furries, the Furry Fandom, and the Fursona

Due to the limited and narrow scholarly writing on furry, this introduction on furry, furries, the furry fandom, and the fursona relies heavily on independently published literature, anthologies from non-academic publishing houses, blogposts, archived oral accounts and "grey literature." Grey literature can be defined as all "[t]hat which is produced on all levels of government, academics, business and industry in print and electronic formats, but which is not controlled by commercial publishers" (Giustini, 2012). This includes academic papers such as: dissertations, conference papers, ongoing research, and theses which, due to the limited scholarly engagement with furry, are

included in this review of literature on furry. In addition to grey literature, I prioritize literature from furries on furries or publications that highlight the voices of furries. The choice to introduce furry from this approach is to highlight the long and continued history of furries accounting for their own experiences within their own "textual communities," or "communities that emerge when people are brought together through a shared text, a shared set of texts, or a shared set of reading or writing practices" (Eichhorn, 2001, p. 566). As elaborated by Eichhorn (2001), textual communities "are unique in their ability to link people across geographic boundaries, and in the emphasis, they place on reading and writing as forms of human interaction and community building" (p. 566). This also includes virtual textual communities such as "electronic chat rooms and interactive websites" and self-published zines (p. 566). An emic approach to this introductory literature review allows for furry to be conceptualized as a complex assemblage of different views, perspectives, and feelings that are not always consistent, coherent, and stable. The word emic is rooted in anthropology to describe culture in terms of its internal elements or starting from a "blank page" and "allowing participants to define and explain the concepts of interests in their own words" (Punnett, BJ et al., 2017, p. 4). Because this study is focused on performance and lived experiences, this section first prioritizes a review of literature and media produced by those who engage with the furry acts and self-identify as furries.

Furries have over time attempted to describe in various ways the collective performances, practices, aesthetics, desires, and histories that make up what is understood as furry. To account for the history of furry, self-identified furries have written about

their own experiences and shared this information through published anthologies (Howl, 2015a, 2017; Weasel, 2020a). Some of the anthologies used in this review of furry literature come from the furry publishing house Thurston Howl Publications. Self-identified furries have also written books exclusively about their furry experiences as a way to give insight into furry, furries, and the 'furry fandom' (Strike, 2017). Self-identified furries have also been a part of extensive research projects that have sought to understand furry from psychological and sociological perspectives (Gerbasi et al., 2008; Plante et al., 2016). Self-identified furries have also collected historical artifacts, accounts, and oral histories as a way to create historical archives of furry (Patten, 2012, 2017a). Self-identified furries have also theorized ways to understand furry experiences (yerf, 2020). Self-identified furries have also self-published their accounts and have told their stories through various methods, such as YouTube videos, blogs, podcasts, zines, art, fiction, poetry, performances, etc. Because of the immense amount of information produced about furry from self-identified furries, this section of the literature review will focus on the complex ways self-identified furries have written about themselves and their furry experiences through various forms of literature.

### *The Fursona*

A common practice that many furries take part in is the creation of a fursona (Coyote & Risher, 2020; Nyareon, 2015; Strike, 2017). According to furry literature, self-identified furries create a "fursona," or a furry persona (Nyareon, 2015), to represent the self which can be manifested materially (e.g.: fursuit, art) and/or immaterially (e.g.: mental image, imagined). The fursona is unique to the individual allowing for a complete

customization of a character that reflects various individual needs and desires. Ways one manifests their fursona materially is by creating, or commissioning, artwork of their fursona which can be used in various ways in digital and physical spaces. In describing the focus of art in the furry fandom, furry Nyareon outlines the many ways art plays a major role in creating a fursona,

> Many furries take to the artistic side so as to develop and share their vision of their creations; those who are less talented will often pay to commission a more talented artist than them to draw their characters based on either a description or a reference sheet. Some artists have allowed free lineart to be accessible online so that people without the talent of drawing could use it as a template to begin a creation, adding their own colors and patterns and so can then present it as their reference sheet for future artwork. (2015, p. 8)

Due to the amount of labor and individual energy that goes into creating the fursona, creation tends to be a "meaningful and deeply personal process" (Nuka, 2015, p. 117). Because art is prioritized as a main way to manifest the fursona, many are drawn to the ways one can express themselves through art in the furry spaces where when exploring furry art "the ideas are seemingly endless" (Nyareon, 2015, p. 7).

There are many reasons why one would want to create a fursona. In an attempt to describe these reasons, Jonathan Vair Duncan (2017) has playfully outlined the three types of fursonas that are the most common in the furry fandom. Duncan describes the three as: 1) the ideal, 2) the paradigm, and 3) the avatar. While a concrete framework may be limiting in describing fully the ways in which furries utilize the fursona, this

framework can be useful in understanding common themes in the creation processes of a fursona. According to Duncan, “The ideal” fursona is geared towards individual wish fulfillment, where the fursona is an “ideal” goal to work towards even if the character traits are exaggerated and unattainable. “The paradigm” fursona is based on abstract ideas where the fursona represents expressions (such as fear, positivity, dominance, etc.) that manifests impossible but creative character designs (such as *macro* characters, or characters that are larger than normal). “The avatar” has minor differences or minor exaggerations between the individual and the fursona, and they tend to be a one-to-one reflection of the individual with minor additions to the character (such as a tail, wings, etc.). Duncan makes sure to note that these three fursona types are not mutually exclusive, and all three can combine and overlap in creative ways.

*The Fursuit*

One way a furry can manifest and embody their fursona is by “wearing attire suited to the [furry] fandom in the form of attachable tails, ears, paws, or even an entire fursuit” (Nyareon, 2015, p. 9). As further described by Nyareon,

> Fursuits are the physical representation of a fursona or character, typically made from upholstery foam and faux fur. Many of the furries see these as the best form of realizing a fursona, and thus many want to have a fursuit. However due to the complexity in making a fursuit which is presentable and durable, many people end up looking to experienced and talented fursuit makers to create their fursuits. (p. 9)

Wearing a fursuit, or engaging in fursuiting, is one way self-identified furries can *become* their fursona (Strike, 2017), but not all furries wear fursuits, as fursuits are expensive. Some self-identified furries create or purchase partial fursuits or "partials" that "feature a head, tail, foot paws, and hand paws with arm sleeves" which can be "worn with normal clothing and saves on cost" (Nyareon, 2015, p. 10). Partial fursuits can also form around "a wardrobe reflecting their character's personality (creative, like a Dalmatian firefighter, or a top-hatted and tuxedo-wearing canine)" (Strike, 2017, p. 241).

Self-identified furries have often reflected on the purpose of fursuiting in relation to its benefit for the individual. Furry Televassi suggests that fursuiting, along with roleplaying and art commissioning, can potentially be "liberating because they thwart surveillance" by "obscure[ing] the individual" where "the fursuit appears to be a mask that grants autonomy because it obstructs vision" (Televassi, 2017, p. 14). Such a bodily obstruction and masking of oneself has led to self-identified furries reflecting on the benefits of fursuiting in public spaces. For example, Zantal Scalie explains that being able to embody a fursuit gave them the ability to "truly let loose," a common narrative with self-identified furries where fursuiting "enables people to have more courage and lower inhibitions" (2015, pp. 100-101). As reported by Scalie, self-identified furries may "feel more attractive" in their fursuit, or "they feel more comfortable as their fursuit, but it always seems to increase self-confidence and help people relax" (p. 101). There are also many different kinds of fursuit styles such as "Toony, Realistic,… Quadsuit" (Nyareon, 2015, p. 10) and "Kemono." "Fursuit parades" are a popular event at furry conventions where furries can "celebrate and admire fursuits" by coming together and

showing off their fursuit en mass in large walking parades often at a furry convention (Dallas, 2015, p. 88). Such events show the different ways self-identified furries embody their fursona through the fursuit and one can witness “all manners of species and combinations thereof, differing costume styles from realistic to the cartoony” (p. 89).

### *The Furry Fandom*

Furry literature also illustrates how many furries identify with being a part of what is called the “furry fandom.” In relation to fandom studies, Henry Jenkins (1992) defines fans as those who have an intense bond with a particular media property. Jenkins also defines fandoms as those who claim a common identity and shared culture with other fans (1992). While the furry fandom carries the term “fandom” in its name, the many aspects of fan culture that intersect with furry are complex and messy. The performance of cosplaying, or costume play – the practice of constructing costumes inspired by fictional characters and embodying those characters (Scott, 2015) – has been seen as an activity that both overlaps with and is separate from furry (Crawford & Hancock, 2019). While furries have constructed costumes of fictional anthropomorphic animal characters from specific media properties, the fursona does not rely on a specific media property. Fursonas can instead be a manipulation, a hybridization, or absent of any media properties. While anime, video game, science fiction, and countless other fan(dom)s and their media properties have inspired furry creations, furry is not media specific. Instead, the fursona has the ability to recycle, recode, and reinterpret media properties for individual desires.

Furry's resistance towards a universal media property complicates its relationship to fandom as defined by fandom studies. In other words, one does not need to engage with any specific media properties to be a furry. It is within this resistance, or existing inside and outside of fandom/not-fandom, that furry scholar Silverman (2020) suggests the furry fandom "queers" traditional conceptualizations of fandom. Silverman also suggests that understanding furry as a defined fandom, community, culture, etc., may be limiting to understanding the furry experience. However, "furry fandom" is a stenographic term used by many furries to identify the larger furry community in which it is used in this study similarly even as it holds many contradictions and linguistic complications.

Furries have also written extensively about their own history. Furry and historian Fred Patten has extensively outlined the history of the furry fandom (Patten, 2012, 2015, 2017a, 2017b). Fred Patton, along with other furry historians and archivists, suggests that the furry fandom first got its name from its members being fans of anthropomorphic animal characters in the mid-1970s. The furry fandom also has its history in being a sub-community within the science fiction (Sci-Fi) fandom. At science fiction conventions, small interest groups of artists, writers, and fantasy role-players would split off into furry clubs hosted at furry hotel room parties. Most of these smaller clubs and room parties were focused on "funny animal" cartoons in comics and animated movies that focused on anthropomorphic animals (e.g.: Balto, Robin Hood, The Secret of NIMH). "Funny animal" is an anthropomorphic animal character in funny situations such as Micky Mouse. As these gatherings would grow, furries began to organize and create larger

events focused on everything related to funny animals and thus furry that expanded on being not only fans of anthropomorphic characters, but creating their own characters, roleplaying as their own characters, and some living through their own characters in various ways. Furry conventions, like other fandom conventions, would provide space for themed panels and community meet-and-greets. Furry conventions are also spaces for others to share, trade, and buy furry art and materials at an organized market place commonly known as a "dealers den." Furry conventions are also spaces where furries are able to wear their fursuit, show off their furry materials, and participate furry activities such as the "fursuit parade," dance competitions, and furry parties along with countless other furry activities that are not listed here (Dallas, 2015).

In relation to the growth of furry, the first furry convention, ConFurence Zero in Costa Mesa, California, attracted 60 attendees in 1989 (Patten, 2012) in comparison to Mid-West Furfest in Rosemont, Illinois which attracted 11,019 attendees in 2019 ("Midwest FurFest," 2021). In the United States, there are an estimated 56 active furry conventions, and globally 135 as of 2020 (*List of Conventions by Attendance*, 2020). The first organized furry convention outside of the United States was The First British Furry Mico-Con in 1992 (Patten, 2017). Later, furry conventions would spread to different countries mostly in the global north. The first furry convention in Mexico, ConFurtiva, started in 2008 leading to many other furry conventions in Mexico, such as Confuror and Furry Summer Mexico (*ConFurtiva*, n.d.). The first furry convention in Japan, Japan Meeting of Furries (JMoF), started in 2013 leading to other conventions in Japan such as Kemocon and Kiegukemo (*Japan Meeting of Furries*, n.d.). The first furry convention in

Brazil, Brasil FurFest, started in 2016, leading to another convention in Brazil such as Furboliche (*Brasil FurFest*, n.d.). While these are only a few examples, furry conventions and gatherings have been, and continue to be, organized in various ways across North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia (Patten, 2017). Most recently, due to the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic, many took advantage of the technology in Virtual Reality Chat (VRChat) to organize and create furry conventions such as Furality, Furry Valley Virtual Con, and VR Japan Meeting of Furries.

Furry literature also highlights how furries have populated the internet from its early beginnings to communicate, share ideas, and build community. In the early 1990s, furries were able to meet in the online roleplaying game platform known as MUCK (or the contested Multi-User Created Kingdom) where furries created one of the oldest and largest online communities called FurryMUCK (Patten, 2012; Zambuka, 2015). FurryMUCK was one way for furries to be introduced into the furry fandom which allowed for one to roleplay as their fursona in a text-based setting (Strike, 2017). Overtime furries created many ways to create communities on the internet through instant messaging software, online furry chatrooms, online furry forums, and online roleplaying video games. Online gaming platforms allowed furries to embody their fursona and roleplay with other furries by creating a digital avatar (e.g.: VRChat, Second Life). Furry websites became another way for one to learn more about, and participation in, furry (e.g.: as Yerf, YiffCo, VCL, FurAffinity) (Patten, 2012; Strike, 2017)(*History*, n.d.; Strike, 2017). Furries today can now be found across various social media platforms (e.g.: Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) (Zambuka, 2015). Furries continue to

populate, modify, and exploit the capabilities of the internet, social media, video games and other types of digital technologies as the furry fandom continues to grow and expand into various online and virtual spaces.

Furry literature has also noted that the inclusion of queer and trans people in furry fandom (Roo, 2015; Shoji, 2015; Takaa, 2015; Zambuka, 2015). Such minoritized populations have often thrived and found ways in the furry fandom to create fursonas that are queer and trans as a way to see and feel themselves positively represented and actualized (Pfingston, 2020; Shoji, 2015; Takaa, 2015). Because of this presence of queer and trans people in the furry fandom, it has often been understood as a "safe haven for members of the queer community" (Zambuka, 2015, p. 65). As explained by Zambuka, the furry fandom has also been a site for LGBTQ+ community formation that allows for a multitude of ways to express queer and trans performances and desires safely and to share queer and trans experiences,

> It is becoming more and more common that trans* artists are more sharing with their personal lives, including transitions they might be undertaking (both mentally and physically), which facilitates a broader understanding of the trans* and queer communities, as well as helping other individuals going through similar things to not feel so isolated, even if they might be offline or outside the fandom. (Zambuka, 2015, p. 65)

Zambuka's words highlights how the furry fandom has also been a space that has at times offered community resources for queer and trans people. Many also believe that "[n]o one gives you a hard time for being gay, straight, transgender, lesbian, bisexual" in the

furry fandom and “members of minorities and people who had been outcast can often turn to the [furry] fandom for support” (Shoji, 2015, p. 14)(Shoji, 2015). In other words, not only is the furry fandom for those who are fans of the anthropomorphic, it allows for queer desires to be pursed and welcomes “folks whose attitudes and values differ from the population at large” (Strike, 2017, p. 47).

*Furry and Sexuality*

Because of the overwhelming acceptance of queer desires, furry has been acknowledged by many as an impactful element for their sexual self-discovery and in their continued sexual self-expressions (Carlson, 2011; Howl, 2015b; Shoji, 2015; Thiger, 2020). For example, furry Shoji states how “being a furry helped me come to terms with all the pressures and difficulties of being a young gay male” (Shoji, 2015, p. 14). Furry Wolfy RedWolf states how gay furry art “awakened him, in his mid-fifties, to an attraction to other men” (Carlson, 2011, p. 198). In another example, furry Thiger notes that,

> I kept telling myself I was straight, even though I focused more and more on the men in the videos I watched. Gfur, or gay furry art, then, acted as the perfect gateway…cartoony animal faces were less threatening than real men’s, and it helped me slowly come nearer and to terms with everything that I was. From there, I discovered the furry community, and met lifelong friends and my boyfriend. (Thiger, 2020, p. 26)

Gay furry art, much like erotic online roleplay, can also let “furries embody their desires into their fursona and liberate themselves from the norms of everyday life” (Shoji, 2015,

p. 15). These accounts from self-identified furries convey the feeling that the furry fandom is an accepting community that is open to sex and sexuality. In other words, "[s]ex and sexuality are simply not taboo topics for furries" (Howl, 2015b, p. 49). Instead, sex and sexuality are celebrated, as shown in Figure 1, and has been explored in various ways through the creative abilities of the fursona, the fursuit, furry art, furry literature, and various other furry technologies.

Many self-identified furries explore sex and sexuality in various ways that are both common within the furry fandom and in new ways that are being (re)created by self-identified furries every day. From *Omaha the Cat Dancer* in *Bizarre Sex* to *FurNography* and *The Mature Funny-Animal APA*, erotic anthropomorphic imagery in the furry fandom has been present since the early 80s (Patten, 2012). In 1989, at ConFurence 0, furry Robert Hill dressed up as Hilda the Bambioid, a dominatrix deer which is noted as being the first erotic fursuit in the furry fandom (O'Purr, 2018). Within the furry fandom, sexual terms such as "yiff" and "murr" have been used by furries to denote sexual acts and sexual sounds (Howl, 2015b). The furry fiction website Yiffstar (now sofurry.com) "became the largest repository of adult furry stories, with thousands by the mid-2000s" (Gold, 2015, p. 30). Kyell Gold also notes that furry erotic fiction books made up "40% of the books for sale in furry fandom" (Gold, 2015, p. 29). Furry erotic fiction, as described by Thurston Howl,

> does something that gay porn just doesn't: it enables for sex to be integral to a meaningful LGBT relationship, whether it is for young or mature audiences. College-aged furries can read about coming-out and sexual intimacy in the same

> novel now, something that can be notably harder to find in mainstream fiction…one can see how sex…functions as an integral, or at least important, aspect of real-life relationships that mainstream literature usually does not capture in the same way. (Howl, 2015b, p. 50)

These examples show that sex and sexuality have been present throughout furry history and continues to be explored in various ways. For example, a common art and performance that some furries engage in with their fursuit is "murrsuiting," or the name given to specific sexual acts that involve the fursuit. To elaborate, a "murrsuit" is a term used by furries to differentiate a different kind of fursuit practice which involve someone who uses their fursuit for sexual desires or fursuits that are made explicitly for sexual purposes (Howl, 2015b). In acknowledging the ways in which furries engage with their sexuality through furry and their fursona, it is important to also note that many furries have stated that the "sexual side" of furry is not a part of their experience but recognize its presence within its spaces. For even though many self-identifying furries engage with erotic furry art, furry erotic fiction, and through furry erotic roleplay and murrsuiting, these practices are not fundamental to the furry experience.

While many furries do not incorporate sexual elements into their furry experience, there are many furries who do participate with furry in sexual ways which can intersect with various sexual communities. Parts of the furry fandom share a historical, and continual, convergence with various sexual communities and networks that have created a link to individual desires. In a study on pup play (or puppy play) – a sexual activity focused on "a person losing their inhibitions and behaving like a dog" (*What is human*

*pup play?*)(*What Is Human Pup Play?*, n.d.) – a participant notes how there were similarities between the pup and furry community but also how the two communities are quite different. While the pup community is explicitly different from the "furry fandom", furry can exist, or be seen as present, in various sexual communities. In one study discussing the pup dynamics and interactions within various pup spaces, a furry made the differentiation that "[f]urries identify more with the animal and the more aesthetic aspects" arguing that there were similarities, but that pup play was more related to adopting a submissive participant for play (Wignall & McCormack, 2017, pp. 805-806). In another study, a non-furry participant noted that in the pup community there are "a lot of furries that are also pups" (Lawson & Langdridge, 2020, p. 587) which highlights the intersecting desires between furries and pups for wanting to behave like a dog. From these examples, furry is not understood as an essential part of pup, nor is it completely separate or outside of the pup community for individuals, instead furry mingles within and outside of such spaces. To elaborate, some furries have the ability to function both separately from specific sexual communities and within them depending on individual desires. One way furries have engaged with sexual communities outside of pup is through erotic literature. As a way to combine various "kinks" and sexual fantasies such as pup play, pony play and BDSM with furry characters and stories, furry literature borrows and thus situates itself within sexual communities and networks while also embodying and engaging with the fursona and furry art (J. W. Thurston & Minde, 2018; Weasel, 2020; Wozzeck, 2020). There are also sexual activities that can be understood as kinks that are specific to furries, such as, but not limited to, those "fascinated by an animal's leathery

pawpads…[where] they may collect art of anthros showing off their foot pads or own a fursuit with realistic looking (and feeling) silicone imitation pads" (Strike, 2017). However, one's attraction to "pawpads" may not be furry specific but has the potential to mark one as furry – for furry has often been associated with anyone's sexual relationship to animal attributes and the animal figure. Furry is not inherently "kinky" or sexual though, and furry sex is not inherently separate from other sexual communities, for many furries overlap their furry worldmaking practices with sexual desires which in turn can overlap with various sexual communities.

*Furries of Color*

While the furry fandom is understood by many as an accepting community without fantastical limitations, recent conversations have sought to highlight various issues regarding race and representation in the furry fandom (negasi_alaala, 2020; Pibblebitch, 2020; Weasel, 2020b, 2021). People of color who self-identify as furries, or "furs of color," have populated the furry fandom since its beginning and many today come together in various furry spaces. Notable people of color in furry history include, but are not limited to, Ken Sample "Ken Coug'r," Albert Temple "Gene Catlow," Malcolm Earle "Max Black Rabbit," and Dominique McLean "SonicFox" to only name a few. However, as noted by negasi_alaala, while the furry fandom is mostly welcoming, "it seems that's mainly the case if you can pass as white or white-mixed" (2020, p. 11). Such frustrating feelings are not uncommon among various furries of color. For example, furry Weasel, in a review of the furry documentary *The Fandom* (Coyote & Risher, 2020), reflects on how race is often dismissed by others in the furry fandom,

> An issue that has stayed constant within the furry fandom is colorblind racism. It's easier for us to discuss sexuality and gender as part of our identities and part of our characters' identity, but the moment we start approaching race, it gets ignored. I've heard explicitly from members of this community that, "You're a furry; race shouldn't matter." Meaning, the moment we create our "fursona," the color of our skin is stripped away. (Weasel, 2020b)

Colorblind racism, as explained by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006), is a raceless framework of understanding racial inequality that excuses white people from being responsible for the statues of people of color. In highlighting the issue of colorblind racism in the furry fandom, Weasel critiqued a lack of representation and the erasure of people of color in white curated furry histories which reflects that "the [furry] fandom isn't interested in any voice of color" (2020b). For example, Weasel notes how in *The Fandom* (Coyote & Risher, 2020) Ken Sample, a black furry who created the first fursona was only discussed in the documentary for "a few seconds" (2020b). Weasel elaborates on this missed opportunity in the documentary to expand upon the influence that people of color had in furry history by noting how "Ken Sample set up a key component to the fandom, but not even the white people who mentioned him said more than 'he did this thing and we wanted it'" (2020b).

Furs of color also highlight how race and culture are often sidelined due to the fantastical and escapist elements that come with furry. While "escape" from reality and living in a "fantasy" are often associated reasons why one would participate in the furry fandom (Keefur, 2015; Kouri-Towe, 2020; Nuka, 2015), some furs of color have noted

that it is impossible to escape their racialized and cultural realities. Instead, as explored in the furry zine *HERE.* that focuses on "celebrating poc in furry" (Pibblebitch, 2020), it is emphasized that culture, roots, memories and skin "merge with fur" where "experience, is never detached from reality" (p. 4). While an escape from reality may be pursued by many, negasi_alaala counters this narrative in relation to race and culture by understanding that "politics isn't exactly avoidable because our very existence is politicized by the people around us" (negasi_alaala, 2020, p. 13).

Furs of color also point to how instead of race being sidelined, race in the form of explicit racism has continually been present in the furry fandom. Accounts from furs of color have emphasized how racism is used to limit self-expression and cultural celebration in the furry fandom. negasi_alaala notes that "[b]lack furries get told that we can only have African mammals as fursonas, or that Black people hair can't work on a fursuit" (2020, p. 12). These reoccurring instances and narratives within the furry fandom outline how,

> Despite the inclusivity of the fandom, or because of it, racism is not only persistent, but largely ignored. If we want an inclusive space, this is something that should be discussed and dealt with openly. How can we possibly have a truly positive fandom with blatant bigotry being swept under the rug? I know many furries would rather this be a fun, happy, loving, politics free space for everyone to enjoy, and use it to ignore the issues happening right under their noses. (negasi_alaala, 2020, p. 13)

Such racial and political limitations often expose the hidden racist rhetoric within the furry fandom that has demystified its all accepting standard. However, despite the "blatant bigotry" and "ignored racism" often felt by furs of color within the furry fandom, people of color continue to populate furry spaces, reveal racist rhetoric, push back against white supremacy, create their own spaces, and create forms of mutual aid within their own communities for furs of color.

This review of literature from self-identified furries frames furry as a complex experience that allows for countless ways to express the self through the fursona. It also reflects the often fluid, ever-changing, and subjective meanings that encompasses furry, while highlighting sometimes contradictory and conflicting furry experiences. While limited due to the immense amount of literature produced by self-identified furries, this review intended to give a brief overview of how self-identified furries have accounted for their own experiences while acknowledging that everyone experiences furry differently due to its focus on self-expression and individuality. In short, self-identified furries have accounted for their own history that started in the early 80s with small in-person gatherings to now hosting their own furry themed conventions where in 2019 Midwest FurFest had an attendance of around eleven thousand members. This review also situates the furry fandom as a large community that is typically accepting of those who are queer and trans, but also points to how parts of the furry fandom have been inattentive and harmful to racial and cultural identities. However, in being an accepting community, furry literature highlights the gender and sexual explorative elements that can be accessed

through furry in which many self-identified furries experiment with gender and sexuality in creative ways.

In conclusion, the furry fandom is growing, and furries have been at the forefront of producing their own knowledge in various ways to account for the often-misunderstood limitlessness of furry. However, while the furry fandom continues to grow, it has gained the attention of those unaware of its existence and outside of its social spheres in conflicting ways which have been both helpful and harmful to furries. The next section of this review will focus on public perceptions of furry which historically has framed furry as "a weird sex thing."

## Public Perceptions of Furry

Those looking into furry from the outside may wander into a furry convention and expect "rooms to be dimly lit and for the corners to be filled with couples–or groups–of costumed folks engaging in kinky sex" (Soh & Cantor, 2015). A reason for such an assumption is due to the ways in which furries have been portrayed in popular media and culture. Furry researcher Courtney Plante, or "Nuka," states that the narrative in which "[a] non-furry might assume that furries wear fursuits for sexual gratification" is rooted in media representation that has "popularized the idea that furry is a fetish" (Plante et al., 2017, p. 169). While some furries participate in sexual activities, public perceptions often focus on its sexual elements. Therefore, furry continues to be perceived as "weird" (Kaplan, 2017). Such public perceptions often confuse or frame all furries as sexual deviants and furry as an exclusive nonnormative kink or a fetish-based phenomenon (Gormley, 2021; Gurley, 2001; O'Leary, 2019) which has had an impact on how furries

are understood and seen by the public. While some recent reports on furry in the media have strayed away from the narrative that furry is a fetish (Herzog, 2017; Siclait, 2020), other reports still frame furry as "just a fetish" (Plante et al., 2017) and an unusual behavior that is most often associated with older white men who are often loners that seek to escape their reality.

In looking back in television history, exaggerated media portrayals of furry have situated self-identified furries as a shocking element to dramatic story driven plots for television shows. For example, in one of the first public explorations of furry in the television show *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, furries are depicted as sex obsessed, childlike, and criminal. Furries are portrayed in the same episode as dysfunctional, infantile, plushie-crazed loners who are gender confused and animal obsessed. These messages of furry as nonnormative are made clear after a forensic scientist scans a fursuit with a blacklight and says, "what ever happened to normal sex?" (Zuiker et al., 2003). This popular media portrayal, among many others, all weave together within a collection of narratives that names furry as strange, fascinating, and appalling all at once.

In the past twenty years, furries have also been featured on television and in the news in negative ways. In an episode of *The Tyra Banks Show* titled "Is Your Sex Life Normal?," the host Tyra Banks introduces furry by stating that all furries have "sex dressed in animals costumes" (Banks, 2009). In 2017, New Milford Councilman Scott Chamberlain resigned after the exposure of his "animal costume fetish," even after stating that his relation to furry had "nothing to do with sex" (Miller, 2017). In a 2021 interview on UK's *This Morning*, Co-Host Holly Willoughby tells furry Pop, "I think a

lot of people who will be watching this and wondering ‘hang on a minute what this is all about, is this a fetish thing, is there a bit more to this story?’” (Gormley, 2021). Some self-identified furries are also aware of these narratives and understand that “the term ‘furry’ can hardly be spoken in public without someone assuming you’re talking about a fetish” (Howl, 2015b). While some furries have sex in fursuits, also known as ‘murrsuiting’, these fetish focused narratives situate furry as a purely taboo topic that has negatively impacted self-identified furries since its emergence.

## Academic Engagements with Furry

Public perceptions of furry have not only drawn attention from the public in sensationalized ways, but it has also drawn scholarly attention in ways that have both perpetuated and destigmatized furry stereotypes. It has only been within the last two decades that furries have been the subject of scholarly inquiry. Due to the recent interest in furry, the literature on the experiences of self-identified furries is especially limited. However, the scholarly encounters with furry that do exist span various disciplinary fields that engage furry from different theoretical perspectives. While some scholarly articles investigate furry because of its sensationalized status, other studies, specifically from scholars who are self-identified furries, seek to destigmatize furry behaviors and stereotypes. In this section I start with the small number of earlier studies that have occasionally mentioned furry in passing as they sporadically occured in their data. Because of these limited and cross disciplinary engagements, this literature review seeks to both outline already produced knowledge on furry as well as continued gaps of knowledge on furry.

*Early Scholarship*

Early scholarly engagements focused on furry as an online phenomenon that has been the target of harassment and violence (Brookey & Cannon, 2009; Kendall, 2002). While these studies do not center furry, accounts within these early studies describe how furries were disapproved of in online communities resulting in a "rift" between furries and anti-furries. In one account, objections to furries in online MUDs, or the text-based roleplaying virtual worlds called "Multi-User Dungeons, Multi-User Dimensions, Multi-User Domains," came from their "overly cutesiness of cuddle animal characters and explicitly sexual descriptions and behaviors" which were perceived by some nonfurries as "disgusting or immature" (Kendall, 2002, p. 45). Research revealed that furry were also seen as abhorrent in such digital spaces which resulted in various campaigns against furry communities and individual furries online. In another account of furry discrimination online, a study captured how furries, or those who are "the queerest of the queer" online (Brookey & Cannon, 2009, p. 158), were also being targeted in the online virtual world of Second Life. Some furries in Second Life engaged in online sex which some users found to be a "form of bestiality" (Brookey & Cannon, 2009, p. 158) which eventually led to an administrative restriction on all sexual activity in Second Life. In addition to the ban, anti-furry reactions in Second Life were specifically hateful as some called for a "taking down [of] sick sexual fetishes" where the derogatory term "furfag" (Brookey & Cannon, 2009, p. 159) was often used to denote furry behaviors and those who called themselves furries. Such hate led to parties in Second Life where, for example, an intersex "[f]urry avatar had been tied to a bed, murdered and disemboweled,

and the room had been smeared with her blood" and "attendees…were invited to have sex with the virtual corpse" (Brookey & Cannon, 2009, p. 159).

Other examples of furry hate described in Second Life was detailed in the construction of the "furry death camp," which consisted of a space where violent imagery against furries was constantly present which coincided with the formation of the anti-furry group Personal Nullification who claimed to fight for "a world free of furfaggotry" (Brookey & Cannon, 2009, p. 159). In elaborating on the derogatory term "furfag," Brookey and Cannon (2009) note that,

> its use is significant because it associates Furries with another marginalized sexual minority, specifically gay men, and repurposes a homophobic slur. Furthermore, this association takes on greater significance when Furries are thought to participate in bestiality: social conservatives and the politicians who represent them often equate sodomy and bestiality, and suggest they are equally morally reprehensible (both are non-procreative). The term fur fag makes the same association, indicating that there is little difference between homosexuality and bestiality, and that the only difference between a fur fag and a fag is the fur itself. Just as violence is perpetrated against ''fags'' in RL, ''furfags'' have also been subjected to violence in SL." (pg. 159).

These early studies highlight a history of discrimination against furries but are limited in scope due to furries not being the center of their inquiry. Instead furries are a sidenote as these projects focused instead on what happens in online communities broadly.

*The International Anthropomorphic Research Project*

The vast majority of scholarship on furry has been produced by the International Anthropomorphic Research Project (IARP). In an attempt to "inform the general public's understanding of furries" and to "prevent additional distortion and sensationalism of the Furry Fandom" (Gerbasi et al., 2008, p. 199), social psychologists and human developmentalists, from the IARP, also known as FurScience, began a scholarly mission towards understanding furry behavior through science. With over 35 articles and book chapters in their name, the IARP is productive in producing articles that are focused on exploring furry from an applied social psychological perspective. Most of the studies from the IARP follow the same quantitative methodological procedures in which they construct a survey, distribute to participants, and then report on their findings through a systematic statistical analysis. It is also important to note that some of the members of the IARP team are self-identified furries, including Dr. Courtney Plante "Nuka" who is often noted as being "one of the world's leading furry researchers" (Tierney, 2016). The IARP is also responsible for the largest scientific study on furries to date where they first approached furry as those who are interested in both anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, or Anthrozoomorphism. Anthrozoomorphism was later used by the IARP to explore the interests of "furry fandom members" through their "interest and relationship with nonhuman animals" (Roberts, Plante, et al., 2015a, p. 533). Due to IARP's ability to conduct such large studies and being noted as the first scientific study on furry, their initial article *Furries from A to Z* (Gerbasi et al., 2008) is often regarded as being a foundational citation for all studies on furry.

Their first article *Furries from A to Z* (Gerbasi et al., 2008) represented the results of their initial study that was conducted in 2007 at a furry convention in the United States where 2,500 participants took a survey with the goal to understand "what is meant when an individual says, 'I am a furry'" (p. 199). From this question, the study had four major objectives that connected general behaviors to "personality" and "gender identity" "disorders." The first two objectives were addressed by testing furry stereotypes, through surveys, to determine common denominators by asking if furries were more likely to be men or women, enjoy sci-fi, be "homosexual," wear glasses, have beards, wear fursuits, and work as scientists or in computer related fields. The first two objectives also asked if furries, as children, enjoyed cartoons and if they consider themselves to be "completely human and would be not at all human if possible" (p. 199). The last two objectives of the study focused on if furries were "perceived as having behavior commonly seen in personality disorders" and if furries "report connections to their identity species that parallel aspects of gender identity disorder (GID)" (Gerbasi et al., 2008, p. 200).

The results of their initial study showed that a large number of the furry participants interviewed showed a "remarkable" parallel that matches the criteria for the diagnosis of gender identity disorder, thus furries could tentatively be described as having the condition coined by the IARP called "species identity disorder (SID)" (Gerbasi et al., 2008, p. 220). This finding is troubling for many scholars as it seeks to frame furry behavior as a diagnosable disorder which was understood by the team as those who are living as the wrong species. For example, Jessica Ruth states that in relation to the IARP alongside her own studies on furry,

> One of the main concerns that I had with the work of Gerbasi et al. was the use of phrase “species identity disorder” for two major reasons. First, it denotes pathologization of a fan and, second, it uses a human versus animal binary. This is problematic when it comes to my classifications on Furries, either as fans or as post-humans. (Austin, 2021, pp. 41-42)

While many come to different conceptualizations of what constitutes a furry, many agree on the IARP’s past errors in pathologizing furry behavior by suggesting the potentially diagnosable condition “species identity disorder.” However, SID would not go unnoticed. A critique by animal studies scholar Fiona Probyn-Rapsey (2011) would quickly point out its problematic construction alongside the highly “controversial” diagnosis of GID. Probyn-Rapsey first notes a lack of history in relation to GID and its highly disputed past in Gerbasi et al.’s article. Probyn-Rapsey emphasizes GID’s inclusion in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* in 1980 until 2013 and its negative impact on queer and trans people by systematically pathologizing (2011). In a review of the criteria for GID, Probyn-Rapsey also highlights, via Eve Sedgwick, how GID points to a social investment in gender norms and speculates what would be the social investment for human norms. In considering GID’s parallel with SID, she focuses both on the diagnosis of SID and its potential treatment,

> [m]ight [SID] treatment follow a similar pattern [as GID], including, perhaps, redirecting a child’s attention away from cross-dressing as an animal, limiting the influence of humanimal creatures like stuffed toys, companion species, Disney

> characters, and the characters on Sesame Street, as well as Arthur, Skippy, the Muppets, Angelina Ballerina, and Olivia? (Probyn-Rapsey, 2011, p. 298)

Ignited by the suggested SID, Probyn-Rapsey details further in her critique of the IARP's study a large number of considerations when looking at this groundbreaking study. For example, Probyn-Rapsey analyzed the lack of a clear theoretical establishing framework for how the IARP understands the human where instead "phrases like 'objectively human' and '100% human' remain a priori assumptions" (Probyn-Rapsey, 2011, p. 299). Survey questions were also critiqued as participants only had three possible answers: "heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual" (Gerbasi et al., 2008, p. 206) which Probyn-Rapsey argued are "recognizable" and "normative" terms that end up "excluding and pathologizing what is left out" (Probyn-Rapsey, 2011, p. 300). How IARP researchers approached their participants sex and gender was also critiqued as the study confessed that fursuits made it hard to identify one's sex. Probyn-Rapsey responded to this by stating that,

> Isn't this precisely one of the reasons for the costumes? To deflect the assumption of traditional "human" gender norms? Implicit in the costume's "interference" with what the psychologist needs to know (male or female?) is the assumption that "seeing" a person confirms "his" or "her" gender identity. (Probyn-Rapsey, 2011, p. 299)

In short, Probyn-Rapsey's article on the limitations of IARP's initial study critically interrogates its methodological structures and its lack of addressing a historical context in relation to its suggested diagnosis SID which seeks to parallel GID. This is one

of the first critical engagements with the IARP's work which was necessary in informing future furry research.

The IARP continues to publish where future articles have focused on providing health care professionals with information on furries. One article describes how many furries report feeling significant social stigma which has led them to not reveal their furry identity to mental health professionals (Roberts, Plante, et al., 2015b). The goal of the article was to familiarize health practitioners with the furry identity in order to "improve the quality of care for furries seeking treatment for unrelated conditions" (p. 1). Because "no article exists that covers these issues in a social work or clinical journal" (p. 2), the article uses past data to describe furry in a destigmatizing way highlighting the positive impacts that come with being in the furry fandom. While this article aims to not pathologize furries, the IARP still casts furry as an "unusual identity" and frequently uses "unusual" to describe furry behaviors.

In a critique of the use of the use of "unusual," Jessica Ruth Austin (2018) states that, "the ascription of 'unusual' to all furries is problematic in fan studies research terms because this is pathologizing the fan" (p. 59). Austin also notes that the study emphasizes furry as a strict identity where in contrast some furries understand their engagement with the furry fandom as a mere hobby, not an identity. While the study seeks to promote positive awareness about furries, they constitute furry as a fixed strange other therefore limiting fluid and individualized furry behaviors as a static "unusual." Within the label of "unusual," the IARP article relates furry identity to sexual identities, or that "[t]he furry should be accepted as a part of a client's personality in the same way one would accept a

client's sexual orientation." (Roberts, Plante, et al., 2015b, p. 7). The article then suggests practitioners use "safe space signs (for example, a paw print sticker), such as those used to indicate nonjudgmental attitudes about sexual orientation" (p. 7). While the article attempts to situate furry as not a dysfunction and instead calls for clinicians to "recognize that the [furry] fandom may be a source of resilience for a furry client" (p. 8), the IARP still frames the furry within an "unusual identity" framework.

The majority of studies by the IARP rely on research designs rooted in quantitative social psychology that use mathematical modeling and statistical analysis. Most IARP studies also rely on social psychology theoretical frameworks that center a participant's psychological need and their group membership and identification status through "optimal distinctiveness theory" (Reysen et al., 2015b), "psychological essentialism" (Plante et al., 2015), and the "social identity perspective" (Ray et al., 2017; Reysen et al., 2015b, 2015c; Reysen et al., 2017; Roberts, Plante, et al., 2015a). A social identity perspective is one that combines social identity theory and self-categorization theory which "allow researchers to explain psychological processes within and between groups" (Reysen, 2015, p. 130). Through the social identity perspective, the IARP sought to understand how personalities change between contexts over time and how one's context influences "the relative salience of his or her different identities, which, in turn underlies his or her behavior" (Reysen et al., 2015c, p. 92). These theories focus on a collectivist approach to social psychology which are used to "explain a wide variety of social psychological phenomena within the furry fandom" (Reysen et al., 2015a, p. 135). In addition to their peer-reviewed publications, book chapters by the IARP reiterate their

social psychology quantitative and qualitative findings in furry anthologies (Gerbasi et al., 2017; Gerbasi et al., 2020; McHugh et al., 2020; Nuka, 2015; Plante et al., 2020; Reysen et al., 2015a; Roberts, Plante, Reysen, et al., 2015). In short, the IARP rarely strays away from its social psychology frameworks and quantitative research designs, with a few qualitative exceptions, while maintaining a steady membership of those who have been publishing through the IARP since its formation. Because of their continued prevalence in the furry fandom and in social psychology, The IARP continues to dominate the study on furry in which they have retained themselves as the spokespeople on the subject matter.

While the IARP makes a considerable contribution to general demographic descriptions of furry and highlights the positive outcomes that come with furry, it is often limited by their quantitative research designs and theoretical frameworks that are rooted in social psychology. As other studies on furry across various disciplines have appeared in the last ten years, they are often overshadowed by the IARP's dominance as an empirical authority on furry. However, recent critiques have shed a light on the need for more interdisciplinary scholarship that seeks to engage furry from different perspectives in order to grow a more robust understanding on furry.

### *Recent Scholarship*

Other studies where furry has been a central topic for academic inquiry has spanned across the 2010s with scholars approaching the topic from various disciplinary fields (Carlson, 2011; Healy & Beverland, 2013; Soh & Cantor, 2015). However, most recent scholarship on furry, from non-furries, have often appeared as a result of broader

studies that do not center furry. While not central in these studies, the accounts in the following literature highlight more contemporary views on furries and how they are being perceived within the social sciences and related fields (Bardzell et al., 2014; Bryant & Forsyth, 2012; Jenzen, 2017). For example, in some studies in which furry is merely mentioned, the focus is primarily on furry behaviors, specifically their sexual engagements. For example, in a study on "deviant lifestyles," the authors described how some furries "attach a sexuality to their activity" and engage in alleged "fur-balls" or furry group sex parties (Bryant & Forsyth, 2012, p. 531). Another study focuses on "creative intimacy practices" in Second Life that describes the act of "yiffing" or "furry sex" as "transgressive explorations of the sexual potential of the avatar" (Bardzell et al., 2014, p. 3947). Other studies revealed a focus on the positive impacts of the furry community for LGBTQ+ youth. For example, one study has highlighted how some LGBTQ+ students were able to engage in creating furry art and fiction at school as a form of positive queer expression (Check & Ballard, 2014), while another study emphasized how the furry fandom offered a way for trans youth to explore issues around trans identities and queer sexualities online (Jenzen, 2017). These studies, while only briefly mentioning furry, engage with furry from various social science perspectives which offers some insight into furry but ultimately limited understandings in their brief engagements.

Appearances of furries in academic literature have also been explored in queer and posthumanist scholarship which has introduced new ideas on furry in relation to sex, gender, and nonhuman desires (Chen, 2012; Ferreday, 2011). Carlson (2011) focused on

how "[p]erforming an animal identity provides a way out of human norms that have become unduly restrictive and often enough has nothing at all to do with animals" (Carlson, 2011, p. 195). Carlson's study is framed through a posthuman perspective which claims that furry identities challenge what is "human." Another study that explored the video game *The Endless Forest* offered a brief posthumanist engagement with furry, specifically furry characters called cervines that "often display transgender characteristics as well as having the ability to shift species" (Ferreday, 2011, p. 221). While including furries, but thinking more broadly about all those who desire to "become deer," Ferreday makes the argument for "becoming deer" as "nonhuman drag" or "a kind of human-to-nonhuman cross-dressing that queers the boundaries of the human" (Ferreday, 2011, p. 222). In the humanities, a brief mention from queer scholar Mel Chen (2012) describes furry as a "posthumanist subculture" and "queer or trans animal affinities" that "are based in targeted, and somewhat partial, slides down the animacy hierarchy" (p. 105). In this text however, Chen focuses on the "sexual subcultures of furries" or "those who are turned on by dressing as animals or having sex with someone dressed as an animal" (p. 105). Chen connects furry sexual subcultures with BDSM subcultures "insofar as both can engage in enriched animal figuration" (2012, p. 105). To elaborate, Chen borrowings from Carlson and cites "theatrical animality" to describe such performances as they provide "a way out of human norms" and "have long-provided humans with temporary escapes from the Human" (2011, p. 195). While Chen makes valuable points about what furry "costumes partially enable" in relation to his animacy theory, his limited engagement with furry, which focuses on "furry sexual subcultures, shows that there is a

need for a more nuanced and robust analysis into furry and various furry performances and acts. The scholarship and studies that mention furry provide useful information on furry experiences, but they are limited because of their brief encounters that do not allow for a richer exploration into the complexity of furry.

*Furries on Furry*

Most recently, scholars who are also furries have made academic contributions that seek to pave new paths in the topic area from various interdisciplinary fields to tackle areas not yet covered by the IARP or other studies on furry. For example, self-identified furry yerf introduced an alternative framing of furry in contrast to scholarship that have sought to define the furry subject. In yerf's work, titled On Furry, she frames furry as a "collection of technologies" (2020, p. 4), or "furry technologies", which are theorized as worlding devices, or devices that build worlds, relations, and understandings of subjects and objects. yerf's writing on furry technologies borrows from Tom Boellstorff's (2015) use of technologies, or techne, which is defined as "the art or craft, to human action that engages with the world and thereby results in a different world" (p. 55). In Boellstroff's study on the role of techne in the online social communication platform Second Life, he notes "how residents emphasized notions of creativity and making things in a range of contexts, including not just virtual objects but their virtual embodiment as avatars, their online friendships and relationships, and so on" (2016). yerf argues that furry technologies act similarly where furries do not only create spaces and things but embodiments, relations, and realities through the fursona and the fursuit. yerf goes on to argue that furry technologies can also be used to further understand furry as malleable and flexible where individual use of the fursona has infinite possibilities. For yerf,

theorizing furry as a technology is a way to explore how individuals engage with the fursona for their own desires which strays away from a need to reduce furry to a certain subjectivity. As elaborated by yerf,

> I argue that there is no furry subject, no furry subjectivity; I deracinate furry from the normative academic frame that (pre)(over)determines what furry is and what furry does. I apply my theorization of furry as technology to show how heterogenous groups and individuals engage furry technologies on their terms, to their own ends, with their own politics, and informed by their actual subjectivities. (yerf, 2020, p. 18)

yerf's writing on furry technologies is proposed by her as a more "ethical" way to research furry and a critique the ongoing trend in academia that "situates furry as their object of study" (2020, p. 5) which she suggests overtly or covertly seeks to define a furry subject. yerf's work offers an important critique of dominant scholarship on furry which allows for new possibilities for thinking and engaging with furry in academia at a time where there has been limited engagement.

Other works by furry academics and scholars in the most recent years hail from the humanities where furry is critically examined through frameworks that seek to give depth to the transformative aspects of furry. Text is central in analysis for many contemporary furry scholars where a considered history of furry becomes a site for an affective exploration of transformation. For example, Kameron Dunn (2022) has attended to furry via fandom studies by looking to the history of furry and its collection of transformative aesthetics which he defines as a text. Throughout Dunn's scholarship he

carefully details what furry can offer the studies of fans and fandoms by highlighting the transformative aspects of "animal representation" (2022) overtime. For instance, in utilizing poststructuralist frameworks and literature from animal studies to approach furry aesthetics, Dunn points to the transformative work of the fursona as a means for undoing identity where some transgender furries have used their fursona "to explore the trans facet of their identity and embrace it" (Dunn, 2022). Similarly, Brandy J. Lewis's forthcoming dissertation (2024) also looks to the history of furry and its texts to explore the ways in which fans utilize furry to feel what cannot be offered within what the "normative, mundane culture cannot provide" (Lewis, 2024, p. 104). For Lewis, comics and zines become the creative ways in which the furry community have strategically responded to dominant culture by looking to the imaginative, fantastical, and speculative within furry as a way to feel what was thought to be impossible within the normal. Dunn and Lewis both offer depth and closeness when engaging with furry texts to respond to the often briefly engaged realities of those who self-identify as a furry within prior scholarship. As research on furry begins to gain even more attention across various fields, scholarship on furry by furries has become an important movement in addressing the many gaps within past research that continually allows for a misunderstanding of furry and furries to prevail in our most dominant circles in not only academia but across various public spheres.

## Chapter Three: Theoretical Frameworks

Theoretical frameworks provide a particular philosophical perspective, or lens, through which to examine a topic (Crotty, 1998; Given, 2008; Moon & Blackman, 2014). The following theoretical frameworks describe the philosophical stance that supports my chosen methodology (Crotty, 1998, p. 7). These perspectives represent a system of values that I adhere to which reveals the assumptions I bring to this study in relation to queer and trans youth of color who utilize the fursona. The following theoretical frameworks are rooted broadly in queer of color theories and rely on postmodernist, poststructuralist, LGBTQ+ theoretical and activist, and US women-of-color theoretical and activist philosophies (McCann & Monaghan, 2020). Together they address everyday life, performance, and feeling in relation to individual lived experiences which come together to frame a queer methodology and phenomenological research methods for data collection and analysis. However, I use these theories in flexible and imaginative ways so as to not limit or obscure the subject matter I intend to explore.

The theoretical frameworks that are derived from queer of color theories guide this study focus on performance and lived experience. In this section I review a critical strand of queer theory, queer of color critique, and three theoretical considerations from a collection of queer of color theorizing. I first summarize José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification (1999) along with Martin F. Manalansan's theory of "queer as mess" (2014, 2015b), and then a collection of theorizing around "queer anarchism" or a queer theory of the wild (Halberstam, 2020b; Hartman, 2018; Muñoz, 2018; Nyong'o, 2013). Each theoretical framework situates queer and trans of color art and performance as

central to exploring queer of color life and lived experience. Before outlining each theoretical framework, I will first summarize queer theory's historical trajectory alongside a history of queer of color theorizing and its relevance to each framework presented in this section followed by its application to this study.

*Queer of Color Theorizing*

Queer theory emerged within queer studies in the early 1990s as the North American response, primarily within the humanities, to the limited "lesbian and gay" studies (Plummer, 2005). Within queer studies – the examination of issues related to identity, sexuality, and LGBTQ+ people and cultures – queer theory was developed as an analytical viewpoint that uses poststructuralist philosophy and analysis to question the socially constructed categories of sexual identity (Branch, 2003). Queer theory quickly developed as a critical lens to question not only sexual identities, but all categories which are seen as "stable, transhistorical, or authentic" (Somberville, 2014, p. x). In other words, queer theory can be understood as a postmodernist and poststructuralist analysis applied to sexualities and genders that seek to dispute traditional appeals to ontological coherency and universal truth that underlie modernist thought (Nash, 2010; Plummer, 2005). The assumptions I bring into this study therefore rely on queer analytical challenges to stable identity, specifically gendered and racialized identities.

Critiques of queer studies and queer theory highlighted how the field and its frameworks were unable to consider scholarship that sought to explore and address racialized sexualities. To intervene and highlight these limitations, queer of color theorizing, and the fields of inquiry known as Black Queer Studies and queer of color

critique, would soon address a needed shift in queer studies and consequently influence future developments of queer theories. Black Queer Studies served as a critical intervention between black studies and queer studies and began to engage critique queer theories from a critical race and intersectional perspective to address its limitations (Cohen, 1997; Holland, 2005; Johnson, 2001, 2003; Riggs, 1991). For example, E. Patrick Johnson questions the consequences in de-essentializing gender and race within oppressive regimes by asking curiously what "are the ethical and material implications of queer theory if its project is to dismantle all notions of identity and agency?" (2001, p. 5). These conversations started a necessary shift in queer studies that led to various critical debates and conversations on queer intersectionality which asked,

> what does queer studies have to say about empire, globalization, neoliberalism, sovereignty, and terrorism? What does queer studies tell us about immigration, citizenship, prisons, welfare, mourning, and human rights?" (Eng, et al., 2005, p.2),

E. Patrick Johnson also sought to build on Butler's theory of performativity by claiming that "blackness" has no essence and is performatively constituted (Johnson, 2003; Viego, 2005). However, Johnson first addresses Butler's theory of gender performativity by noting that it fails to address the material reality of people of color which in turn fails to both address "real injustice" and to be "deployed in the service of dismantling oppressive systems" (2001, p. 10). Johnson, while "swayed by Butler's formulation of gender performativity," was "disturbed by her theory's failure to articulate a meatier politics of resistance" (p. 10). Johnson critically suggested that the body,

> has to be theorized in ways that not only describe the ways in which it is brought into being, but what it does once it is constituted and the relationship between it and the other bodies around it. (Johnson, 2001, p. 10)

As an alternative to a queer theory limited in its capacity to "accommodate the issues faced by gays and lesbians of colour who come from 'raced' communities" (2001, p. 3), Johnson proposes "quare studies" to adequately theorize racialized sexuality, where it combines theories of performativity with theories of performance. In other words, theories of performance take into consideration the context and historical moment of the performance while accounting for the temporal and spatial specificity of the performance. Through quare studies, performance theories acknowledge the "discursivity of subjects" while unfixing "the discursively constituted subject as always already a pawn of power" (Johnson, 2001, p. 12) highlighting how discourses also have the potential to disrupt power in subversive ways. Johnson's focus on gays, bisexuals, lesbians, transgendered people of color, and how racism and classism affect how they experience and theorize the world, is in line with how other Black queer scholars and queer of color scholars began to critique the white dominated terrain of queer studies in the 1990s and early 2000s.

An additional critique of queer theory and queer studies during the late 1990s was its dominance of white queer scholars who were interested in white queer subjects (Eng et al., 2005; Ferguson, 2004; Hames-García, 2011; Johnson, 2001; Perez, 2005). As articulated by Johnson (2001), queer theory had failed "to address the material realities of gays and lesbians of color" (p. 5). These critiques focused on queer theory's "canonical," or white, genealogies and presuppositions that led to scholarship that was "directed

toward analyzing white lesbians and gay men" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 10) or scholarship that "sounds like a metanarrative about the domestic affairs of white homosexuals" (Eng et al., 2005, p. 12). A lack of engagement with US women-of-color feminism and queer theories of color within queer studies. When women-of-color feminism and queer theories of color were used in queer studies, it is noted that those theories were misread and misinterpreted (Martínez, 2010) and "adored from a distance" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11). Queer of color scholarship at the time "seem[ed] to be rarely, if ever, useful to white queer theorists, except insofar as our words can be tucked into footnotes to support their claims" (Hames-García, 2011, p. 26). These "exclusionary operations" (Eng et al., 2005, p. 3) lacked both an engagement with race and class while at the same time promoting a supposedly raceless, but implicitly white, subject for the field (Hames-García, 2011). Simply put, a major critique of queer studies and queer theory at the time was its tendency to homogenize all formations of identity under "queer" in which race was often excluded, ignored, and/or devalued. Gloria E. Anzaldúa eloquently elaborates on the totalizing impulse behind "queer" by stating that,

> Queer is used as a false unifying umbrella which all "queers" of all races, ethnicities and classes are shoved under. At times we need this umbrella to solidify our ranks against outsiders. But even when we seek shelter under it we must not forget that is homogenizes, erases our differences. Yes we may love members of the same sex but we are not the same. (Anzaldua, 2009, p. 164)

In response to these critical observations and critiques, queer of color critique (QOCC) had become the collective interdisciplinary response to the "ambivalence within queer

studies about the connections that sexuality has to other modes of difference" (Ferguson, 2018, p. 2).

In his groundbreaking book, *Aberrations in Black*, Roderick A. Ferguson (2004) calls to assemble a mode of interpretation "made up of women of color feminism, materialist analysis, post-structuralist theory, and queer critique" (2004, p. 149). While Ferguson, along with Muñoz, helped pioneer the term QOCC, its critical concepts were already established by Black Feminist lesbians, Chicanas, and queer of color activists and scholars. For example, QOCC follows in queer theory's concern for the disruptive, deconstructive, and radical possibilities of transgressive gender and sexual formations within oppressive patriarchal and heteronormative regimes (Brockenbrough, 2015; Butler, 1993; Eng et al., 2005; Warner, 1993). QOCC also draws specifically from US women-of-color feminism in the early 1970s and 1980s that focused on a critical identity politics of difference that acknowledges intersecting subjectivities and systems of oppression in order to expand and radicalize gender, sexuality, and identity formation theories (Anzaldúa, 1987; Crenshaw, 1991; Lorde & Clarke, 1984; Sandoval, 1991). US women-of-color feminism would be a key element of QOCC as many understood their collective work to be "an intellectual corrective to queer theory's failure to consistently engage intersectional analyses" (Brockenbrough, 2015, p. 30). Queer of color critique also takes root in an "effort designed to address connections between race, sexuality, and political economy" (Ferguson, 2018, p. 2). In other words, along with addressing issues in queer studies, queer of color critique speaks to the political, economic, and social issues that surround queer of color life across historical and contemporary contexts. By

focusing on the dynamics of capitalist nation-building and the state's regulation of minoritized subjects (specifically queer and trans people of color), queer of color critique sought to unveil the social and historical forces that have produced marginality (Ferguson, 2004).

The purpose of looking to queer of color theories as a framework for inquiry is due to its continued focus on the body and the relationship the body has to the world around it, specifically minoritized (queer and trans of color) bodies within oppressive systems and structures of transphobic, homophobic, and racialized violence. In looking to the body and its contextual arrangements geographically, historically, and politically within the confines of the state, queer of color theories becomes a rich site for research as it focuses its attention on the material conditions of queer and trans people of color as they maneuve through systems of oppression and structures of violence. My inquiry on queer and trans youth of color who are also furries is aimed at what the fursona does within such violent public spheres as a way to illustrate the ways in which art and performance are used as a resistance and survival strategy. Therefore, I pull from two key queer of color theories and a queer theory anarchism to frame my research methodology, both of which attend to queer and trans of color art, performance, life and lived experience within oppressive patriarchal, heteronormative, and capitalist regimes.

## Disidentification

> "I always marvel at the ways in which nonwhite children survive a white supremacist U.S. culture that preys on them. I am equally in awe of the ways in which queer children navigate a homophobic public sphere that

> would rather they did not exist. The survival of children who are both queerly and racially identified is nothing short of staggering." (Muñoz, 1999, p. 37)

Emerging out of performance studies, critical race theory, US women-of-color feminisms and a critical review of queer theory, Muñoz (1999) offers a theory of disidentification to "contribute to an understanding of the ways in which queers of color identify with ethnos or queerness despite the phobic charges in both fields" (p. 11). Muñoz's theory has been critical in the formation of QOCC as it offered a nuanced framework for scholars to explore the "material realities produced by the hegemonic ideology that work for and/or against minoritarian subjects" (Eguchi & Asante, 2016, p. 175). In other words, as a theory inspired by US women-of-color feminism and queer scholarship, disidentification formed as an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991) to identity formation that takes into account a multiplicity of interconnecting identity factors, or specifically the multiple ways in which one locates the self within systems that negatively target queer and trans people of color. To adequately address queer and trans youth of color performance and practices, I use disidentifications to focus on intersectional and collective resistance strategies rather than a framework of queer of color identity as one of victimhood.

Muñoz's theory of disidentification contributes to Pêcheux's theory of the same name (1982) which describes three modes of subject formation through ideological practices. Within this framework, the first mode is understood as "identification" or "assimilation" where the "good subject" chooses to identify with dominant identifications

and ideology. The second mode is where the "bad subject" resists and rejects dominant ideology as a way to "counteridentify." Disidentification is the third mode where the subject deals with dominant ideology by "neither opt[ing] to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly oppos[ing] it; rather, [it] is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11). The third mode is a site of both resistance and complicity where subjects negotiate strategies of resistance within dominant public spheres. It is in the nonnormative third mode of identification that queers of color (or "minoritized subjects"), through a hermeneutic of interpretation, production, and performance, fashion and enact selfhood within a heteronormative and white supremacist U.S. culture (or "majoritarian regime").

The theory of disidentification is used to illustrate how queers of color activate their sense of self in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny (Muñoz, 1999). By "recycling and rethinking encoded meaning[s]" (1999, p. 31), disidentification is a performance that produces both a critique of dominant ideology and a powerful site for self-creation. For example, a queer person of color may identify with an object that is invested with power, such as a homophobic or racist object, but to disidentify with said object is to recycle and transfigure its meaning in the world in potentially self-expressive ways. To elaborate, disidentification is outlined by Muñoz as a process that,

> "…scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower

> minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture." (Muñoz, 1999, p. 31)

Muñoz gives the example of performance artist Marga Gomez who at a young age caught homophobic imagery of "truck-driving closeted diesel dykes" (p. 3) on her television. It is in looking back to this television viewing that Gomez remembers being "mesmerized by the lady homosexuals" (p. 3). Muñoz explains that her desire to "want to be one" is understood as a disidentifactory desire for a toxic representation. In being inspired by such toxic representation of "lady homosexuals," Gomez reconfigures the harmful stereotypes presented to her understands them instead as sexy and glamorous instead of pathetic and miserable. This reconfiguration and disidentification with a history of lesbian stereotyping from the public sphere becomes crucial to Gomez's identity as a lesbian. Therefore, disidentification as a theoretical approach allows for a rich analysis of both the strategies in which queer and trans people of color navigate dominant cultural logics and the ways in which they establish new selves, worlds, and relations.

Performance is also central in Muñoz's understanding of disidentification. Performance is understood here as speaking to how we fulfill social norms through our ways of walking and talking and "doing" selfhood "that makes one's self legible and acceptable to the social world" (Tompkins, 2015, p. 184). Performing difference however, such as "being brown," is understood as being "theatrical" or "to be unapologetically visible in a world that would much rather you were invisible, or even

dead" (2015, p. 184). Disidentification is the performance of doing selfhood that works with and defies dominant cultural logics. In enacting disidentification, such performances engage in "worldmaking" or the practice of creating "worlds of transformative politics and possibilities" that alter dominant logics and map out new futures. In other words, Muñoz explains "worldmaking" as,

> The concept [that] delineates the ways in which performances – both theatrical and everyday rituals – have the ability to establish alternate views of the world. These alternative vistas are more than simply views or perspectives, they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of "truth" that subjugate minoritarian people. (Muñoz, 1999, p. 195)

Therefore, disidentification is a performance that queer people of color use to access new avenues of selfhood, community, and possibilities. This project utilizes disidentification as a concept of doing queer of color selfhood through performance that allows for a textured vocabulary for describing queer and trans youth of color's self-understanding and in creating new perspectives, ideologies, realities, communities, and possibilities.

There is evidence that using disidentification as a theoretical framework is necessary in exploring the strategies and techniques queer people of color use to express selfhood and create new worlds in a heteronormative and racist society. For example, disidentification has been useful in exploring the complex ways Latino gay men have resisted heteronormative spaces in higher education by negotiating their queer and racial identities in performative ways (Duran et al., 2019). When discussing space, disidentification has also been useful in exploring the ways in which undocumented queer

people of color repurposed norms and ideals to create spaces for themselves (Sandoval, 2019). Disidentification has also engaged with online performances in which one "recreates selfhood and build[s] a powerful peer network to participate in debunking the dominant readings" of the LGBT community in Indonesia (Triastuti, 2021). The articles demonstrate that considering disidentification as an analytical framework has potential in engaging with new ways in understanding the experiences and feelings of queer and trans people of color as they navigate various sociopolitical contexts.

This study frames the queer and trans youth of color practice of creating and embodying a fursona through Muñoz's theory of disidentification to attend to the material impact of the fusona. Identity in this study is therefore not understood strictly in terms of gender being enacted through discursive limits, it is also understood as a performative "doing" that collides with social and historical political contexts in which identity performances are created with and against dominant logics that give way to creatively resistant acts for of doing selfhood. In short, to explore the experiences of queer youths of color, I engage with disidentification to account for the complex ways queer and trans youth of color perform, and thus feel, their sense of self through the fursona. The following theory, queer as mess, additionally seeks to address queer and trans youth of color performance and feeling. However, queer as mess focuses specifically on how this study situates queer of color life in order to adequately explore queer of color lived experience. While disidentifications strictly addresses, in this study, minoritarian subject formation through the performative negotiation of "working on, with, and against"

majoritarian sensibilities and its material impact on the subject, queer as mess seeks to address how this study frames queer of color life and queer of color feelings.

## Queer as Mess

> "Mess is a productive pivot for analyzing queerness, especially in apprehending lives lived through and despite the discomfort of disorderly domestic quotidian arrangements and the burdensome weight of structural condition as evident in queer lives lived in precarity." (Manalansan IV, 2015b, p. 568)

I use Martin Manalansan's (2015b) conceptualization of queer as mess, or mess as queer, to account for bodily knowledge, habits, composers, feelings and affects that animate queer of color life. Queer as mess refers both to the "material and affective conditions" of queer subjects, and "an analytical stance that negates, deflects, if not resists the 'cleaning up' function of the normative" (Manalansan IV, 2015a). Manalansan suggests that "mess, clutter, and muddled entanglements are the 'stuff' of queerness" (2014, p. 94). As a theoretical framework for this study, I focus on Manalansan's mess as an anti-normalizing vantage point that recognizes and centers the "underrecognized practices, stances, and situations that deviate from, resist, or run counter to the workings of normality" (2014, p. 97). Borrowing from affect theory and material culture studies, Manalansan's aim with mess is to "account for, and give flesh to, those marginalized queer lives that dwell in disorder and chaos" (Bravo, 2016, p. 1). Through Manalansan's mess, I understand queer and trans youth of color as those who disorder normative understandings of youth desire, behavior, and life in which queer and trans youth

activities and actions with the fursona makes a “mess” of identity, orientations, and status.

Queer conceptually, as understood by Manalansan, is “about messing things up, creating disorder and disruptive commotion within the normative arrangements of bodies, things, spaces and institutions” (2015b, p. 567). Inspired by Michael Warner’s (1993) words that “being interested in queer theory is a way to mess up the desexualized spaces of the academy, exude some rut, reimagine the publics from and for which academic intellectuals write, dress, and perform” (p. xxvi), Manalansan situates mess as a queer project that “unsettles” the normal which produces productive possibilities for people who have been “left out, displaced or dispossessed” (2015b, p. 567). To account for the ways in which queer and trans youth of color experience life, mess speaks to the “sensorial funking-up dimensions” (2015b, p. 567) of queer life as it disorders cultural standards where beyond its heteronormative wake lies alternative possibilities for living.

Mess also contributes to the critical questioning of value systems that “prioritizes order and rational organization of space, objects, and people” (Bravo, 2016, p. 7). The destabilizing aspects of queer theory embraces mess to resist traditional organizational techniques that seek to decipher queer life into coherent and organized structures that often sanitize life and limit queer possibility. In other words, mess redirects our attention to the queer sensorial, and in wading into such affective experiences, rather than “cleaning them up,” we allow for a prioritizing of texture in inquiry. As argued my Manalansan, a focus on affective textures becomes valuable in thinking about ordinary

habits, rituals, and things as potent sources of insight about queer and trans youth of color experience, resistance, and marginality (2014).

Manalansan utilizes queer as mess to understand how queer people are perceived as messy and those who make a mess of the normal which gives way to other ways of being and relating. Manalansan specifically references reality television shows to emphasize their role in transforming the improper subject (the messy, slutty, butch, fashion victim) into the proper subject (feminine, clean, pristine, chic fashionista). He argues that reality television shows act as a social intervention in which messy bodies, messy objects, and messy spaces are "cleaned up" while depicting the messy subject, and their messy lives, as "impossible" or "untenable" to justify reformation and to constitute a standard of desirability. As elaborated by Manalansan, the narrative of these reality television shows situate the messy subject as not understanding "the very idea of normative value" (2014, p. 98). However, the messy subject is instead understood through Manalansan as engaging in "the very stuff of queerness" because the impossible is alternatively seen as a "productive orientation towards bodies, objects, and ideas that do not toe the line of hygiene, 'practicality' or functionality, value, and proper space/time coordination" (2014, p. 98). While messy lives are often met with the exclamatory narrative of "how can they live like this?" (2015b, p. 577), queer as mess argues that this narrative's "very sense of impossibility or untenable chaos lies at the heart of a queer worlding" (2015b, p. 577). Queer is used here to denote queer life and how queer people have experienced and co-created alternative realities through art, family, networks, etc. to resist heteronormative life scrips.

Similarly, some of those who have been identified as furries have also been marked as those who live messy and impossible lives. For example, in the documentary television series, *My Strange Addiction,* furry Lauren explains her fursuit and its use along a narrative of "addiction." As Lauren walks around in her neighborhood and goes to the bowling alley with her family in her fursuit, these experiences are overlayed with snapshots of gawking spectators and commentaries that are concerned about Lauren's behaviors. When the show acts to intervene on Lauren's "obsession" by assigning her a therapist, the normalizing message from the professional is directed at how the fursuit is being used to "avoid," "hide" or "escape" their "own perceived inadequacy." While Lauren also discusses how she feels more expressive and confident in her fursuit, the therapist pushes Lauren towards a future in which she can express herself without such a technology that is seen as a hindrance to her wellbeing. In other words, her fursuit is understood to be an impossible technology for dealing with reality. However, Manalansan may argue that Lauren's use of such an impossible technology positions her in a queer location outside of the normative that has the ability to question and manifest a way to navigate reality beyond dominant forms of self-expression, being, and world-making. This project therefore seeks to not pathologize the fursona or explain its meaning. Instead, this project seeks to explore what a fursona does, and can do, for individual queer and trans youth of color through Manalansan's queer as mess.

In thinking with Manalansan's conceptualization of queer mess, I also look to how mess has been engaged within the social sciences. Manalansan draws from sociologist John Law (2004) who argues that traditional social science methods

inadequately deal with “the messiness of life” and that dealing with things that are “complex, diffuse and messy” (2004, p. 2) are often beyond the abilities and tools that are offered through strict methods. The urge to describe simply does not work “if what they are describing is not itself very coherent” (Law, 2004, p. 2). In a call to “remake social science that is better equipped to deal with mess, confusion, and relative disorder” (Law, 2004, p. 2), Law purposes a new approach that focuses on “using methods unusual to or unknown” to us in order to understand parts of the world that are not caught in ethnographies, histories, and statistics. However, Law does not permit unclear or poor methods, but makes space to allow for everything that escapes order, categorization, and classification. In other words, Law explains that he is not resistant to clarity but insists on remaining curious to mess in relation to social science methods:

> No doubt some things in the world can indeed be made clear and definite. Income distributions, global CO2 emissions, the boundaries of nation states, and terms of trade, these are the kinds of provisionally stable realities that social and natural science deal with more or less effectively. But alongside such phenomena the world is also textured in quite different ways. My argument is that academic methods of inquiry don’t really catch these. So what are the textures they are missing out on? (Law, 2004, p. 2)

This project asks the same question to previous studies on queer and trans youth experiences: what are the textures that current studies on youth are ‘missing’? In wading into the “missing,” or the “complex, diffuse, and messy,” this project looks to theories interested in performance to explore “texture.” Therefore, this project embraces mess as a

way to get closer to the textures of queer and trans youth of color life which are often limited and dismissed by traditional social science inquiry.

## Wildness

> "Numbers tame the wildness of life outside the normal... The 'civility' of numbers obscures the inherent messiness and always tainted qualities of social life outside pristine norms." (Manalansan IV, 2018, p. 492)

Building off, and drawing from, queer as mess, a queer theory of wildness is used in this study as a theoretical framework to specifically address my focus on furry acts by queer and trans youth of color. To elaborate, I frame my perspective on furry acts around a collection of queer scholarship on the "wild" or "wildness" which seeks to account for the anarchic and bewildering aspects of furry acts. Wild theory comes from a collection of critical engagements from queer scholars who have sought to develop a theory of "queer anarchism" (Halberstam, 2020b; Hartman, 2018; Muñoz, 2018; Nyong'o, 2013). As a way to "open a conversation across queer studies, ecology, aesthetics, animal studies, disability studies, and critical race studies" (Halberstam & Nyong'o, 2018, p. 138), wild theory seeks to explore the resistance to social norms by engaging with the potentialities of the "wild" and its unpredictability. While acknowledging how the wild has been situated opposite to the civil to subjugate queer and racialized subjects, the wild is reengaged with to instead explore its critiques of orderly regimes and colonial authorities. These queer engagements with wildness are postcolonial and decolonizing interpretations that are drawn to its "unsettling" potentialities that can give a new vocabulary for thinking about sexuality, race, gender, coloniality, ecology, destructive

urges, and bewildering desires. In short, a queer theory of anarchy, or wildness, allows for a way to awkwardly frame without limiting "the unknown and disorderly" (Halberstam, 2014, p. 147) and "the chaos of the everyday" (Muñoz, 2018, p. 655).

To elaborate on wild theory, queer theorist Jack Halberstam directs our attention to Foucault's conceptualization of "an untamed ontology" (1970), or the idea that in our search for naming, ordering, and knowing reality, there is always something outside of the classifiable, the recognizable, and the legible. According to Foucault (1970), within the 17th and 18th century, colonial explorers began to investigate the world through the knowledge production of classification that established a new episteme, a principled or universal system of understanding in which true knowledge is considered to reside oriented around an order of things. As argued by Foucault, and later taken up by Halberstam, if an order of things has been imposed then there *must* be a disorder of things that upsets it outside all that has been classified. Halberstam elaborates on wild as an untamed ontology that holds a bewildering promise for thinking about life, being, and futurity outside of the ideological frame that we have inherited (2020a). Halberstam additionally states that,

> Wildness names simultaneously a chaotic force of nature, the outside of categorization, unrestrained forms of embodiment, the refusal to submit to social regulation, loss of control, the unpredictable. (Halberstam, 2020b, p. 3)

In thinking with a queer theory of wild, there is possibility in its meaning for exploring not only worldmaking but world unmaking and the chaos that resides outside and within orderly systems of classification in ruining and creating new worlds.

As an example of using wild, in relation to queer studies, Halberstam has argued that the term "queer" has been "domesticated, or is now being used interchangeably with 'gay' to describe homo-normalizing political agendas" (Montford & Taylor, 2016, p. 8). "Going wild" is proposed by Halberstam as an unruly alternative to what was promised in "queer" where instead "wild" addresses the unpredictability to resist social norms. However, wild does not replace queer, instead it seeks to "rewild" or "feralize" queer theory from domestication. As wild signifies all that is outside of civilization in a modern sense, wild can be a way to explore queer anarchic realities that are understood as unruly or undomesticated. In other words, "queerness without wildness is just white homosexual desire out of the closet and in sync with a new normal" (Halberstam, 2014, p. 140).

An element of wild that Halberstam deploys in his work is "going feral," or a "returning to a less tamed or untamed state after domestication" (Montford & Taylor, 2016, p. 9). For Halberstam, going feral is a mode of mess making, similar to Manalansan's conceptualization of mess, in a world fixated on order. However, going feral does not mean going completely wild. Instead going feral is the perpetual failure or refusal to be completely domesticated. To elaborate, failure here refers to a theory of "queer failure" or failure as a queering mode. Conceived by Halberstam (2011), queer failure highlights a mode of non-conformity/non-belonging in which he uses failure to focus on its resistant possibilities as a space for collective mobilization in which "all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner" (p. 120). This project focuses on elements of failure and disorder within going feral that is present within furry that bewilders identity categories and classifications. It is

important to note that going feral is not inherently subversive or politically charged, instead feral represents “tears in the fabric of order” (Halberstam, 2020a) that acknowledges other ways of being in the past and points to possible new ways of being in the future. In other words, going feral in relation to this project is understanding one’s desire to engage with furry as a potential desire to fail domestication, or escape from domestication and to engage in a disruption that attempts to go beyond frames of reference and systems of classifications towards new possibilities. Therefore, going feral is also taken up in this study as a way to situate furry, or everything that is understood to be furry in its limitless definition.

Through a theoretical framework of wildness, furry acts are understood in this study as a feral desire, or a desire to be messy, deliberately obscure, disorderly, and untamed as a way to move towards other ways of being and understanding the self, relationships, and reality. For example, Probyn-Rapsey articulates a potential purpose of the fursuit as it happened to conceal the gender of many subjects which confused the psychologists in the IARP study during their data collection. Probyn-Rapsey stated that in interrupting the “psychologists need to know,” the fursuit purposefully deflects “the assumption of traditional ‘human’ gender norms” (Probyn-Rapsey, 2011, p. 299) and interferes with the psychologists ability to “see” and “confirm” gender identity. In other words, the act of donning on a fursuit is understood here a way to engage in the messing up, or the making obscure, of gender that gives way to undomesticated possibilities of being, expressing the self, and relating to others. Through this obstruction of being scientifically perceived, furry acts are understood in this study as being disruptive,

bewildering, and chaotic, which allows for a potential (re)imagining of the self and a reality beyond the status quo. In other words, furry acts as feral desires are understood in this study as a way to engage with and get closer, or "more nearly" (Pérez, 2020), to queer utopian feelings, temporalities, realities, and possibilities for queer and trans people of color. In referencing the Muñozian phrase "more nearly," Pérez (2020) notes that "'More nearly' is a grammar of searching, of moving closer to the idea or a semblance of it, slowly defining yet maybe never arriving or outright failing" (2020). Furry acts is therefore in this study understood as not necessarily a utopic act but an act that is pursed to reach for utopian feelings.

I also utilize a wild framework to frame furry not as an identity or a category in which we organize certain behaviors as "furry." Instead, this framework situates furry as acts which are messy and undomesticated that acknowledges its unruly, or never at rest with order, existence. Similar to queer acts, furry acts are understood in this project as not "epistemologically framed and grounded," but instead are understood as "performatively polyvalent" (Muñoz, 1996, p. 6) and fundamentally indeterminant. While studies have sought to define and measure furry, this study strays away from such attempts to "civilize" or produce universal truths about furry and the fursona. What a wild theoretical framework allows for instead is a way to explore the alternative ways of doing, being, and performing self that are ruinous and beyond the familiar. Manalansan's also engages with wild similarly as a way of being and surviving as "mismeasures" that defy the "seemingly logical or rational impulse to assess" (2018, p. 496). Manalansan elaborates on mismeasures by situating them as wild and messy realities that refuse measurement,

> Wildness and mess are tactics that either go against or at least coexist with the modern normative inclination to clean, to temper, to count and be counted, to be visible, to be valued and to value any phenomena on the basis of standardized units and scales, and to refuse the concomitant compulsion to clean, tame, and domesticate. (Manalansan IV, 2018, p. 496)

In other words, numbers may "get in the way of obtaining a sensitive, visceral, affective, and emotional literacy about the struggles of queer subjects such as immigrants, people of color, and single mothers on welfare" (Manalansan IV, 2018, p. 492). Therefore, furry acts, situated through wildness as a theoretical framework, are understood as feral performances that come with complex and unruly sensorial textures. By looking to furry as acts and performances, this phenomenological study understands furry as messy and disorderly, and utilizes wildness to account for the sensorial dimensions of queer of color anarchy and queer of color lived experience.

## Chapter Four: Queer Methodology

Methodology dictates how inquiry should proceed, which encapsulates an analysis of the study's assumptions, principles, and procedures for a particular approach to inquiry (Schwandt, 2007). A research methodology can also be described as a strategy or a plan of action that shapes the choices and the particular methods and links them to desired outcomes (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, the following is a rationale for methodology and methods that connect to this study's ontological, epistemological, and theoretical assumptions. As a queer researcher, I draw from "conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations" (Browne & Nash, 2010a, p. 4) as a way to structure this study's methodology and thus its practices and perspectives.

Queer scholarship is understood in this study as messy scholarship, or scholarship that deals with untidy issues, such as desire, sexual practice, affect, sensation, and the body (Love, 2016). Queer scholarship also retains its mess-making qualities as it seeks to resist "normal business in the academy" (Warner, 1993, p. xxvi). Queer theorist Michael Warner elaborates on mess-making by stating that,

> For academics, being interested in queer theory is a way to mess up the desexualized spaces of the academy, exude some rut, reimagine the publics from which and for which academic intellectuals write, dress, and perform (p. xxvi).

Messy is both what queer scholars are and how we approach and design queer research and write scholarship. Therefore, in considering the subject matter for this study and my own queer presence within the academy, I celebrate its messiness and situate this study

within the developing sphere where queer research methodologies, practices, and methods continues to sow and grow tension with how we conduct research and write scholarship (Brim & Ghaziani, 2016; Browne & Nash, 2010b; Ghaziani & Brim, 2019a; Love, 2016; Ward, 2016). As a starting point, this study follows in prior queer research practices as outlined by Jane Ward (2016), who suggests that queer methods are: 1) intersectional as a way to "investigate the ways that imperialism, settler colonialism, white supremacy, poverty, misogyny, and/or cissexism give shape to queer lives and queer resistance"; 2) intimate, reflexive, and/or collaborative; 3) conscious of sex practices, bodies, and desires and their place within the asexual realm of the academy; 4) interdisciplinary; and 5) "focused on fluid or 'messy" categories, shifting classifications, and people and practices often illegible within prevailing disciplinary schemas" (p. 71). Therefore, this study's methodology, structured around the experiences of queer and trans youth of color who utilize the fursona, engages in queer practices supported by a carefully chosen set of ontological, epistemological, and theoretical frameworks.

A queer methodology also promotes what Ward describes as "a praxis aimed at undoing prevailing assumptions about epistemic authority, legitimate knowledge, and the very meaning of research" (2016, p. 71). Because queer studies has its theoretical roots in activism and resistance, queer theorist Heather Love notes that queer theorists and researchers have "always maintained skepticism and even hostility toward the business of academic life" (Love, 2016, p. 347). Therefore, queer researchers often interrogate the assumptions and consequences of mainstream research agendas that seek to categorize, organize, clean up, and "impose order on the slovenly queer" (Love, 2016, p. 346). Queer

researchers alternatively "seek to investigate that which cannot be reduced to, and at times contest, traditional forms of data collection," and question "the place of social 'science' in understanding social lives by challenging the tenants of social science research, such as rigour, clarity and the possibilities of 'knowing' social life" (Browne & Nash, 2010a, p. 13). For example, Muñoz questions what is considered "proper evidence" and challenges traditionalist scholarly archives and methodologies as being dismissive of "alternative modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance" (1996, p. 10). This study looks to performance as evidence, specifically queer performances that often slip away from containment and reside outside of what is often considered "proper evidence." Queerness has never been "proper," or it often complicates and unsettles the appropriate, therefore this study's methodology seeks to address its centering of improper evidence through a performance-based understanding of queer acts as ephemeral and fundamentally indeterminate.

In conclusion, because this study explores the experiences of queer and trans youth of color, I employ a queer approach to methodology that focuses on performances and the lived body, or the body as "not fixed but continually emerg[ing] anew out of an ever-changing weave of relations to earth and sky, things, tasks, and other bodies" (Bigwood, 1991, p. 62). Straying away from disciplinary stability and coherence with social work and related practice-based fields, I identify this study's messy, eclectic, and interdisciplinary methodological approach as one that queers "normal" methodological structure. I understand this approach necessary in researching queer lived experience as the fluidity of queer life necessitates a fluid methodology and flexible methodological

practices. This study's queer methodology therefore relies on epistemologies that emphasize ways of knowing derived from individual experience, along with theoretical perspectives developed from queer and trans of color scholars that attend to performance.

## Ontological Assumptions

Ontology is defined as "the study of being" and is concerned with "the nature of existence" (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). In relation to research, ontology is the claim researchers make regarding reality and how scholars approach their research through ontological assumptions (Moon & Blackman, 2014). In short, ontology addresses a researcher's definition of the nature of reality and the assumptions that come with that definition. In this section, I identify my assumptions about the nature of reality within a relativist position.

A relativist ontological position "argues that reality exists in the mind" where each individual creates their own version of reality (Moon & Blackman, 2014, p. 1170). Relativist positions also argue that realities change or that they are "historically and culturally effected interpretations rather than eternal truths…and that at different times and in different places there have been and are very divergent interpretations of the same phenomena" (Crotty, 1998, p. 64). Relativist researchers are often noted as ascribing "a greater role to emotions, cultural background, social norms, and experience and presume individuals make decisions in complex, contextually dependent and potentially unpredictable ways" (Moon & Blackman, 2014, p. 1171). Therefore, a view that multiple interpretations of reality exist is central to a relativist ontological position in which such a

view would embrace complexity rather than try to disaggregate and simply explain phenomena.

## Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemology is defined as "being concerned with providing a philosophical ground for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate" (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). In other words, epistemology,

> …is concerned with all aspects of the validity, scope, and methods of acquiring knowledge, such as, with what constitutes a knowledge claim; how knowledge can be produced or acquired; and how the extent of its applicability can be determined. (Moon & Blackman, 2014, p. 1171)

In short, epistemology is the study of knowledge and asks, "what does it means to know something." Since validity, scope, and methods are central, epistemological assumptions are then reflected in the theoretical perspectives, methodology, and methods of the study (Hiller, 2016). Therefore, in this subsection I will identify, explain, and justify the epistemological underpinnings of this study through a constructivism, a qualitative paradigm, that influences the methodological structure of this study.

A constructivist epistemology argues that reality is created from the mind through social interactions and that knowledge is produced by human consciousness. As further described by Kerry E. Howell, "[c]onstructivism understands reality as being locally constructed and based on shared experiences [where] groups/individuals are changeable" (Howell, 2013, p. 88). The view that one actively engages in the construction of their own subjective world is often in contrast to the view that objects and events have

universal meanings. This view then frames knowledge as constructed through our own individual subjective realities. In other words, constructivist epistemologies, rooted in the interpretive turn towards an understanding of phenomena rather than an explaining (Costantino, 2008), is often in contrast to positivist epistemologies. Where positivism asserts that knowledge about reality can be obtained objectively through observation and experimentation, constructivism asserts that knowledge is constructed individually through social interaction. For example, those who observe the same event may each have a different memory, meaning, and description of the same event because each person has constructed in various ways its meaning based on the world we personally inhabit (Burr, 2004). Constructivism also understands that knowledge is contextual, which "varies over time and space and between social groups" (Summer, 2006, p. 92). Therefore, constructivism makes no clam about a singular objective reality or nature due how we each construct our own subject world through individual experiences. A constructivist epistemology is, therefore, idiosyncratic, or relating to the individual.

In relation to this study's research methodology, a constructivist epistemology is situated here to increase an understanding of a particular phenomenon through thick descriptions. Because research grounded in a constructivist epistemology does not seek objective truth, research relies on a diversity of interpretations of reality which are transactional, or knowledge which is formed through interactions. Therefore, a constructivist epistemology situates a study where the researcher attempts to construct an impression of the world as the participant sees it. This construction of impressions is formed and influenced by both the participants and the researcher in which "research

results are created through consensus and individual constructions, including the constructions of the investigator" (Howell, 2013, p. 88). In short, a constructivist epistemologically informed methodology acknowledges that it is impossible to form a study in search for a single explanation for a complex phenomenon experienced by various individuals.

Constructivism underpins a range of perspectives in the social sciences, including phenomenology, which this study relies on in its inquiry into individual lived experiences. In the next section I outline phenomenology and its relationship to this study's research methodology and methods. Phenomenology is used to explore both the individual meaning-making activity of the individual mind and the collective generation and transmission of meaning. In other words, this study emphasizes the importance of culture and context in understanding individual sense-making. Therefore, I look to phenomenology as a relativist and constructivist informed philosophy. In addition to an outline of phenomenology, I also look to queer and trans scholarly engagements with phenomenology to structure a study that adequately addresses individual queer lived experience.

## Phenomenology

> Phenomenology is primarily a philosophic method for questioning, not a method for answering or discovering or drawing determinate conclusions. But in this questioning there exist the possibilities and potentialities for experiencing openings, understandings, insights—producing cognitive and noncognitive or pathic perceptions of existentialities, giving us glances of

> the meaning of phenomena and events in their singularity. (Van Manen, 2016, p. 29)

Phenomenology is the study of human experience with a focus on how people experience the world around them (Smith et al., 2009). While there are many different emphases and interests among phenomenologists (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1982; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Sartre, 1956), they all share an "interest in thinking about what the experience of being human is like" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 11). Phenomenology can also be explained as the study of "essences," and seeks to broadly put essence "back into existence" as a way to "account for space, time and the world as we 'live' them" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. vii). In relation to phenomenology, essences are understood as the structures of lived experiences, the nature of a phenomenon, "which makes some-"thing" what it is" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 10). Phenomenologists are therefore those who ask what is the very nature of a phenomenon, or what makes some-"thing" what it is, which is done through phenomenological human science inquiry. Such inquires, including this one, study lived or existential meaning and attempts to describe and interpret given meanings by those who experience the phenomenon. Phenomenology is therefore a type of study that attempts to illustrate the structures of lived experiences as we live them in our lifeworld.

An important element of phenomenological study is its focus on the lifeworld, or the everyday world, which is defined as "the intersubjective world of human experience and social action" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 177), or the world as we immediately and directly experience it in the everyday. In relation to phenomenology, the lifeworld is "the location

and context for lived experience" which is "central to phenomenological inquiry" (Anderson-Nathe, 2008, p. 28). A phenomenological approach to qualitative research situates experience and lifeworlds as complex and "invokes a lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and meanings, which are unique to the person's embodied and situated relationship to the world" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 21). In short, as a qualitative method, phenomenology seeks to identify a phenomenon as an object of human experience and describe its essence (Sloan & Bowe, 2013). Because of its focus on the experience of being human, phenomenology has the potential to examine qualitatively the lived experiences of queer and trans youth of color who engage with the fursona.

*Merleau-Ponty and Trans Studies*

Due to this study's focus on queer and trans youth of color, this project's methodology is accompanied and inspired by queer and trans theoretical and methodological engagements with phenomenology. I specifically look to two trans studies scholars, Henry S. Rubin and Gayle Salamon, who both draw from phenomenology to explore and understand different forms of gendered embodiment. In explaining the potentially useful ways phenomenology can be receptive to trans studies, Salamon writes that phenomenological accounts can provide a way to explore trans embodiment through its "insistence on the importance of embodied experience to understanding the nature of the self, others, and the world" (2014, p. 153). To elaborate,

> [P]henomenology offers an expansive conception of the body in which it is more than merely its materiality, emphasizing the importance of how one feels in and senses with and inhabits one's body. The phenomenological claim that the body is

> not just something I have or use, not merely an object I haul around, but is rather something that I *am* allows an understanding of the body as defined and constituted by *what I feel* and not simply *what others see.* (Salamon, 2014, p. 154)

Inspired by Merleau-Ponty, Rubin and Salamon's application phenomenology in trans studies is argued as a useful tool for viewing gender and sex as felt and gestural rather than determined by the biological or purely the discursive. As suggested by Rubin and Salamon, phenomenology offers a way for studying trans subjectivity through personal accounts of the lived experiences of trans life, which can provide a more legitimate knowledge of trans embodiment. However, privileging lived experience through phenomenology is not a turn away from the contextual, or social and political factors that both impact and constitute trans life. Rubin instead proposes that phenomenology may address the limitations of discursive and genealogical inquiries that have traditionally dominated critical scholarship in queer studies and within the emerging field of trans studies.

In the introductory issue of Transgender Studies Quarterly, it is noted that Henry S. Rubin's foundational article "Phenomenology as Method in Trans Studies", was the "first piece to explore the ways in which phenomenology offered methodological resources to the newly emerging field of trans studies" (Salamon, 2014, p. 154). In Rubin's groundbreaking article, he argues that phenomenology is "committed to lived experience as one legitimate source of knowledge" which provides useful tools for research in trans studies due to its focus on individual accounts as a way to return

"legitimacy to the knowledge generated by experiencing the 'I'" (1998, p. 217). Rubin describes phenomenology as being "methodologically descriptive…while pointing out the critical possibilities that result from the subject's negotiation with the world" (Rubin, 1998, p. 267). A crucial part of this subject negotiation is the body which Rubin argues holds "the ultimate point of view on the world" (2003, p. 26). In the phenomenological tradition, Rubin recognizes the body as "epistemologically significant" where body is understood as continually confronting "the world as a series of essences that are contingent upon an embodied location" (2003, p. 26) which when used a framework for inquiry has the ability to fully recognize "transexual life projects" (2003, p. 30).

Salamon and Rubin's argument for privileging the perspective of the body and lived experience as a way to explore trans embodied experiences is drawn from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology which understands that "one's own account of one's own positioning is more accurate exactly because one is the only person who can inhabit that individual position" (Salamon, 2014, p. 154). Therefore, the privilege and focus on the individual's account is hailed as being a valid and authentic source of knowledge of a phenomenon which has been often ignored in queer and trans scholarly investments in the discursive turn. However, Rubin does not contest such modes of critical inquiry. Rubin situates his argument for phenomenology in trans studies by highlighting the ways in which phenomenology and Foucauldian discursive genealogy and analysis, who both hold differing philosophical approaches to inquiry, are not incompatible but in fact are "complementary" methods for analysis. As noted by Rubin, both can be useful in that "[d]iscursive genealogy can historicize phenomenological accounts, while

phenomenology can insert an embodied agent-in-progress into genealogical accounts" (Rubin, 1998, pp. 278-279). The embodied agent-in-progress for Rubin becomes a powerful way to explore the embodied experiences of those who are physically transitioning by understanding that individuals are continually changing while within institutional power structures and not removed of their context. My turn to Rubin's application of phenomenology, which understands identity as "neither reifiable nor internally stable" (Rubin, 1998, p. 279), comes from a need to theorize queer and trans youth of color experience on its own terms while understanding the subject's relation to the social and political structures in which they reside within. Thus, the importance of trans embodiment and trans lived experiences are central but not in contrast to discursive genealogical accounts.

Gayle Salamon's writing on phenomenology often draws on the work of Merleau-Ponty as well, specifically his approach to the body and sexuality. Like Rubin, Salamon argues that phenomenology can be a useful tool for understanding trans embodiment in that "the body is crucial for understanding subjectivity rather than incidental to it or a distraction from it" (2009, p. 81). Coupling this "expansive" understanding of the body with Salamon's reading of Merleau-Ponty work on sexuality as "ambiguous" and thus confounding the sexual category, phenomenological philosophies become a way of thinking in which *what I feel* becomes "the means for understanding bodies, lives, and especially relationality outside the domains of male or female" (2009, p. 82). She describes further that Merleau-Ponty is "insisting that sexuality is not located in the genitals, nor even in one specific erotogenic zone, but rather in one's intentionality

toward the other and toward the world" (2009, p. 85). This articulation of Merleau-Ponty's view on sexuality as ambiguous acknowledges desire as unpredictable and impossible to categorize. Therefore, in considering the body as individually felt, gender and sex are understood as "delivered to the subject through a felt sense rather than a determined by the external contours of the body," which results in a focus on the "gestural rather than the morphological" (2014, p. 154), or the biological.

Together, both Salamon and Rubin's approach to phenomenology informed my research methods for phenomenological inquiry. As a way to understand queer and trans youth of color beyond simply their categorical memberships, and to consider critically their individual felt realities, trans scholarly engagements with phenomenology allow for a richer perspective on approaching queer and trans life as felt and individual. However, like Rubin, I attempt to weld phenomenology and the discursive together, and formulate a more complex picture of queer and trans of color lived experience which can help in the historization of subjects within a social and political landscape that constitutes their existence. As summed up by Rubin, "[w]ith a combined approach, we can make sense of both the historical horizon of possible identities and how subjects inhabit the positions that genealogies trace" (2003, p. 30). Accompanied by the collection of trans scholarly engagements with phenomenology, in the next section I explore hermeneutic phenomenology as a specific method for adequately analyzing the lived experiences of queer and trans youth color.

*Hermeneutic Phenomenology*

As a method of analysis, hermeneutic phenomenology offers tools for being fully "swept up in a spell of wonder about phenomena, as they appear, show, present, or give themselves to us" (Van Manen, 2016, p. 26). In this study I draw from hermeneutic phenomenology, which Max van Manen describes as a "method of abstemious reflection on the basic structures of the lived experience of human existence" (2016, p. 26). In contrast to phenomenology as a branch of philosophy, Van Manen (1997) distinguishes applied phenomenology as "engaged" which is used to explain the ways one "engages" with experiences and illustrating them in social science research. Lived experience in this study is understood as,

> …the ordinary and the extraordinary, the quotidian and the exotic, the routine and the surprising, the dull and the ecstatic moments and aspects of experience as we live through them in our human existence. (Van Manen, 2016, p. 39)

Hermeneutic phenomenology directly seeks to engage and explore lived experience by first asking the researcher to surrender themselves to a state of wonder in which phenomenological questions are asked to explore what is given in moments of prereflective and prepredicatice experience. For the study, phenomenological questions are rooted in the individual experience of both creating and embodying a fursona which is rooted in my curious wonder into what is this particular experience of embodying a fursona for queer and trans youth of color feel like?

Hermeneutics is the philosophy of understanding (Holroyd, 2007, p. 2) and hermeneutic investigations aim at lived experiences, or ways of being in the world and

their relationships to the world. Understanding human experience in relation to hermeneutic phenomenology is then left to the researcher to explore narratives through an interpretation or a description of the phenomenon. In this study I focus on the practice of interpretation through Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology as a method which is rooted in his influence of Gadamer and Heidegger, who together believed in an interpretivist approach to meaning in which it is both potentially shared and unique but cannot be completely described (Rapport, 2005). This interpretivist view contrasts the descriptivist approach, rooted in the writing of phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1970), that believes description is vital to account for universal essences. The descriptive approach is rooted in a desire for scientific rigor and considers reality objective and independent of history, culture, and context. However, for interpretivists, meaning is subjective and unique and cannot be described. For Gadamer and Heidegger, meaning is informed by the individual's lived experience among history, culture, and context where interpretations of narratives consider these various environments and circumstances. As explained by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin,

> [Gadamer and Heidegger] move us away from the descriptive commitments and transcendental interests of Husserl, towards a more interpretative and worldly position with a focus on understanding the perspectival directedness of our involvement in the lived world – something which is personal to each of us, but which is a property of our relationships to the world and others, rather than to us as creatures in isolation." (Smith et al., 2009, p. 24)

This distinction is important in explaining the hermeneutical elements of the hermeneutic phenomenological method and thus how this study's methods are constructed.

To further clarify the distinction between the descriptive and the interpretive takes on phenomenology, I want to make clear how this study understands "essences." The term essence refers to the essential meanings of a phenomenon. In understanding that phenomenology as a method for researching essences, descriptions of the phenomenon, usually produced by the individual, is necessary in this exploration. The hermeneutic elements of hermeneutic phenomenology seek to go "beyond mere description of core concepts and essences to look for meanings embedded in common life practices" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 728). Hermeneutic phenomenology therefore looks to the not always apparent or visible essences of a phenomenon which can be collected from narratives of lived experiences by the individual. The not always apparent or visible is often seen within immediate experiences without being "obstructed by pre-conceptions and theoretical notions" (van Manen, 1990, p. 92). In other words, hermeneutic phenomenology is focused on what one experiences in the immediate rather than on what one knows.

In sum, van Manen's take on hermeneutic phenomenology is utilized within this study as a way to adequately explore lived experiences through descriptions. In being directly concerned with the human experience lived, the focus is often toward revealing the details of the seemingly mundane aspects within an experience that may be taken for granted in our lives. This endeavor in creating a sense of understanding of a phenomenon starts with lived descriptions from participants of a study. Van Manen suggests that,

> A good [phenomenological] description that constitutes the essence of something is construed so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way.

Therefore, the research methods presented in this study focus on producing rich, deep, and layered descriptions of experiences in the life world of individuals that have created and embodied a fursona. In other words, as I apply Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology as a method for collecting and analyzing lived experience that are focused on queer and trans youth of color lived experience, I specifically target the individual felt relationships with the fursona and their descriptions of furry acts and performances within the life world.

*The Four Lifeworld Existentials*

As I am directed by Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology as a way to explore lived experience, I utilized within this study the four lifeworld existentials as a guide for analyzing descriptions and exploring the structure of the human lifeworld. The four lifeworld existential are defined as "fundamental…themes which probably pervade the lifeworlds of all human beings, regardless of their historical, cultural or social situatedness" (Van Manen, 2016, p. 101). The four lifeworld existentials, or themes, are lived body, lived time, lived space, and lived human relations. In brief, lived body refers to our bodily presence in everyday life, the body as a subject of someone else's gaze, and the ways in which we communicate, feel, interact and experience the world through our lived body. Lived time refers to as time as we experience it, or the subjective

understanding of time and how we experience our temporal world. This includes how the way we feel may impact how we experience time when we are stressed, bored, tired, etc. Lived Space refers to felt space, or our subjective experience of the spaces we inhabit and how spaces can affect the ways we feel and experience particular spaces in our lifeworld. Lastly, lived human relation, or simply lived relation, refers to our communication with others and the relations we engage in and maintain with others in our lifeworld (Van Manen, 2016). Each is used to explore differentiated aspects of lived experience that can reveal richness of meaning for phenomenological inquiry of individual human lifeworlds.

It is important to note that not all lifeworld existentials are separate despite their differences. Instead, they intersect with, and build off of, one another which can effectively illustrate the ways in which human beings fully experience the world, and thus how these four categories are fundamental to the structure of the lifeworld, or our lived world. Therefore, the four lifeworld existentials "all form an intricate unity which we call the lifeworld--our lived world" (Van Manen, 2016, p. 105), and for inquiry these existentials can be used to explore how the individual experiences the world through their body, the spaces they reside in, the temporal realities they engage with, and the relationships they form. Specifically for research, the four lifeworld existentials are used to explore interview data without predetermined themes or codes influenced by theoretical or personal assumptions. In short, the four existentials are a way to look at individual accounts of lived experience without personal impressions. Therefore, as a first step of analysis when engaging with interview data, the four lifeworld existentials

are important in reflecting on individual lived experience as explained in their own words.

# Chapter Five: Methods

> When someone has related a valuable experience to me then I have indeed gained something, even though the "thing" gained is not a quantifiable entity. (Van Manen, 1997, p. 53)

Research methods describe a study's concrete techniques and procedures (Crotty, 1998). This study utilizes qualitative research methods which can be defined as those that "attempt to tap the deeper meanings of particular human experiences and [that] are intended to generate theoretically richer observations that are not easily reduced to numbers" (Rubin & Babbie, 2010, p. 67). The following section outlines this study's qualitative methods which are influenced by a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to collecting and gathering data followed by analysis. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a deep and rich qualitative method for looking both at the self and the participant together and their reflections on life experiences lived.

## Sample and Setting

Furries are among us, everywhere, occupying various spaces and places within contemporary society. However, their presence is often not known or obvious at first. While some furries are more open about being a furry, others are strategically more covert for personal reasons. For example, not everyone wants their furry-ness, or their participation and community involved with furry, to be public due to the often-negative feedback from dominant public and political spheres. Another reason why one's relationship to furry is intentionally obscured is how for many one's furry expression is integrally linked to one's queer and trans identity and expression. Queer and trans life, especially queer and trans of color life, is one continually contested by social and

political forces where queer and trans people have often looked to queer and trans communities for refuge. The furry community, or the various arrangements of furry congregations, is often seen by many as sites of queer and trans refuge. Therefore, this study seeks to explore not one setting, by various settings in which individual queer and trans people exist and also where queer and trans people of color gather in relation to the usage of their furona(s) with themselves and others.

During this study I often found myself in settings where furries gathered due to my own desire to seek refuge, both online and in-person. As I began this project, I looked to furry places where I often mingled for potential participants, but also to furry places that were new to me or places that I would slowly grow familiar to during the three years that this study took place. For example, while at the beginning of this study I relied on VRChat and Twitter as two main sites for recruiting participants, later I found myself at in-person furry conventions recruiting participants. Overall, the sample and setting in this study was reliant on where furries usually mingled and where I personally began to circulate as a queer and trans furry of color myself. In short, I often met furries where they are at, which was behind computer screens, in virtual reality, in direct messages on various social media applications, in-person at furry conventions, and at furry convention room parties.

## Participant Recruitment

In selecting participants for this study, I used purposive recruitment methods where “a judgement or selection is made in relation to the participant's membership of the group or subculture under investigation” (Higginbottom, 2004, pp. 11-12). Purposive

recruitment is useful for phenomenological studies when considering how to gain access to a specific group of individuals and their shared and specific lived experiences. For example, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin explain that,

> samples are selected purposively (rather than through probability methods) because they can offer a research project insight into a particular experience. Most frequently, potential participants are contacted via: referral, from various kinds of gatekeepers; opportunities, as a result of one's own contacts; or snowballing (which amounts to referral by participants). (Smith et al., 2009, p. 50)

I purposively selected queer and trans youth of color (ages 18-30) as participants for this study and make judgements based on the participants age, self-identifications as queer and/or trans people of color, and as furries. I also utilized volunteer recruitment, a form of purposive recruitment, that "usually involves individuals who agree to participate in research, sometimes for payment" (Jupp, 2006, p. 323). Finally, as a way to garner additional participants, I used snowball sampling, or sampling that "is used by researchers who need to identify people who, for one or more reasons, are difficult to find" (Huck et al., 2010, p. 1298) in which identified participants might be asked to identify additional participants for the study. I recruited participants through already formed community bonds within various furry counterpublics. The recruitment process started after IRB approval, and the recruitment stage ran for a total of three months.

## Data Collection

According to van Manen, the goal of an engaged phenomenological study is to gather and collect lived-experience material of different forms (1997, p. 54). Therefore,

this study seeks to pull from an array of different forms of data that attend to experiential accounts or lived experience descriptions in various forms. Along with oral and written descriptions of lived experience, I understand visual art and performance as being a concerted effort to capture life and thus a descriptive form of lived experience. Oral, written, and visual data gathered is also understood as material that once collected is continually transformed from their essential meaning and therefore never identical to the lived experience itself. To elaborate, Van Manen states that,

> All recollections of experiences, reflections on experiences, descriptions of experiences, taped interviews about experiences, or transcribed conversations about experiences are already transformations of those experiences…we need to find access to life's living dimensions while realizing that the meaning we bring to the surface from the depths of life's oceans have already lost the natural quiver of their undisturbed existence.

In bringing to the surface through various collections of lived experience in an effort to access "life's living dimensions," this study also acknowledged the limitation of given or granted descriptions through words and thus looks to the infinite space of the lifeworld for material that may inform the illustration and presentation of the phenomenon. Data is therefore not limited to the participants of this study and what they have given or granted me in our meetings together. I also looked inward and to my own lived experience throughout the study alongside what is given and what I find as a queer and trans person of color, and as a furry.

The types of data collected from the participants include recorded audio interviews, text-based interviews, transcribed interviews, and visual art created, or commissioned, by the participants. Interview data consisted of digital audio recordings, transcriptions in the form of digital text, or text-based interviews. Visual data consisted of drawing, photographs, or commissioned artworks by individual participants in the form of digital images. The types of data gathered from my own self-reflective practice include a collection of field notes that address preconceived biases and beliefs, insider and outsider knowledge, and reflections that occurred during all stages of the study. Field notes consisted of digital journal entries, quickly jotted notes in my mobile device, and self-reflective doodles on my iPad via Procreate. Field notes often rely on personal experience which I use as a starting point when considering all stages of analysis.

I use personal lived experience as a starting point in this study to relate and explore the ways in which I began to approach the topics and themes that arisen throughout all the stages. This method of using personal experience first is important when understanding that my own experiences may also be the experiences of others (1990). As stated by Max Van Manen in relation to personal experience as a way to begin phenomenological inquiry,

> To be aware of the structure of one's own experience of a phenomenon may provide the researcher with clues for orienting oneself to the phenomenon and thus to all the other stages of phenomenological research. (2016, p. 57)

As a participant myself in the world of furry, my orientation towards the lived experiences shared with me are situated through my involvement with the ways in which

individuals navigate and express themselves through the anthropomorphic figure. In other words, as a furry and a queer and trans person of color, my own presence within the collection of data that has been given and granted is not absent. Therefore, it would be amiss to not highlight my reflections on the phenomenon discussed and my own link to the lived experiences shared through descriptions of the participant's feelings and desires. Through my own field notes, journal entries, and messy doodles, I begin from a place of self-reflection of the fursona, what does the manipulation and (re)creation of an anthropomorphic figure do for me as a queer and trans person of color. Then across all states of the study, I reflected on the data collected and the feelings that had arisen within. However, while first beginning from persona lived experiences, this study primarily looks to data that is given and grated through fourteen interviews and a selection of visual art given to me by the participants.

In elaborating on field notes, they are understood as important for analysis as "[t]hey create a record of the study unfolding over time and are exceedingly valuable in analysis" (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018, p. 383). Along with creating a record, field notes are used to "contextualize the study and provide perspective on participants' lives that can be useful when looking at the data in the future or examining perceptions across time" (p. 383). Field notes also were not only text based but visual as I doodled and drew alongside my analysis, usually furry artwork, that reflected the self-reflective process when transcribing and analyzing data. In breaking down the types of field notes recorded, I differentiated two that occurred at different times throughout the study: 1) self-reflective interview field notes; and 2) self-reflective field notes across data analysis. Self-reflective

field notes during and immediately after the interview were intended to detail the overall setting of the interview which provides rich context of the study such as basic participant information, interview setting, initial interview impressions, follow-up questions, and critical reflections on the interview that occurred during and after the interview process. Self-reflective interview field notes allowed for a description of emotions and context not captured by the recording which can be used to reconstruct the conversation in context rather than relying on the interview transcript. Self-reflective field notes across data analysis were also used during the analysis phase in which insights and reflections related to the research and its direction were noted in a journal. Self-reflective field notes across data analysis occurred when reviewing interview data and self-reflective interview field notes. When digitized, all field notes were searchable by keywords and organized by date, participant, and established thematic themes and subthemes.

Data that had coincidentally become a part of this study as I started to collect data was art. During the interviews, many participants voluntarily submitted furry artwork to me, mostly created by the participant, as a way to show what and who they were discussing. In realizing how important their artwork became in contextualizing and understanding their relationship to their fursona, I began to ask participants individually if they would be willing to share artwork of their fursona with me and if they were willing to allow their artwork to be an active part of this study. All participants were enthusiastic about their artwork being a part of this study and were happy to share multiple pieces of artwork that would later assist in analysis. As I began to approach the data and eventually produce themes, it became clear that furry artwork was central in

giving not only context to a particular experienced described but illustrating what the fursona does for that particular participant in relation to how they express themselves. In including furry artwork in this study, I therefore understand the furry art given to me as a text of their individual lived experiences. As discussed by Van Manen

> Objects of art are visual, tactile, auditory, kinetic texts-texts consisting of not a verbal language but a language nevertheless, and a language with its own grammar. Because artists are involved in giving shape to their lived experience, the products of art are, in a sense, lived experiences transformed into transcended configurations. (Van Manen, 1997, p. 74)

Such configurations of lived experiences must be included in this study due to the reliance of visual art to express how one feels and how one wants to be represented with others in furry. Furry artwork was therefore collected as a way to attend to another type of textual data in order to access an important part of life's living dimensions, the free expression of the self.

## Data Management

All data was collected and managed digitally. All data was also accessible at any time through a personal computer in a password protected Google Drive. Included in the Google Drive was the complete collection of interview audio, interview transcriptions, coding memos, field notes, and images provided by the participants. Collected interview audio was recorded in various ways depending on the setting of the interview. If the interview was conducted over Zoom, audio was recorded through a Zoom recording. If the interview was conducted over Discord, or over Telegram, the audio was recorded

with a recording device that had a microphone able to capture the conversation clearly. If the interview was conducted in Virtual Reality, the interview was recorded using a recording device that had a microphone able to capture the conversation clearly. All interview audio data was transcribed verbatim into various Microsoft Word documents for further data analysis. If the interview was conducted without video or audio, a text-based conversation over Telegram or Discord, the conversation would be copied from the text-based application and pasted into a word document for analysis. All interview transcriptions were analyzed through the data coding program Atlas.TI. In addition to interview transcripts, all notes, memos, and journal entries taken by me throughout the study were organized by date in the Google Drive. Any visual representation of participants fursona(s) (drawings/sketchs/digital renderings/photographs) that were given were also securely stored in the Google Drive.

## Interviewing

The purpose of phenomenological interviewing is to "generate detailed and in-depth descriptions of human experiences" (Roulston, 2010, p. 16) which can help "describe the meaning of a concept or phenomenon that several individuals share" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 293). Van Manen adds that phenomenological interviewing serves two functions:

> (1) it may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon, and (2) the interview may be used as a

> vehicle to develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience. (Van Manen, 1997, p. 66)

In looking to the two functions that Van Manen establishes for phenomenological interviewing, this study sought to root its interview process alongside these phenomenological functions for gathering in-depth descriptions of lived experiences. In considering the aim of this study and its focus on queer and trans youth of color, I also explain in this section "queer of color interviewing" (2019) which engages with critical methods for interviewing queer people of color, and second the methods for phenomenological interviewing. Thrasher's (2019) conceptualization of queer of color interviewing is a method specifically for queer of color researchers who are interviewing queer people of color. Drawing on Ferguson's (2003) queer of color theorizing and centering the experiences of queer people of color, Thrasher's method interrupts how traditional interview methods are often conducted with a white audience in mind which they argue limits how queer and trans people of color are approached, interviewed, and written about. Thrasher outlines three elements for a queer of color interview:

> the interview needs to be conducted by a queer interviewer of color, conducted with a queer interviewee of color, with an imagined queer audience of color in mind. (On this last point, the actual audience can be anyone, but the interview must be conducted between queer people of color and written with queer people of color in mind.) (2019, p. 237)

Consistent with Thrasher's approach, I framed my interview questions with the intention to center queer and trans of color experience with a queer and trans of color audience in mind.

Thrasher (2019) also suggested that the interview must also submit itself to queer time, to a participant's lived reality in which time and space may not conform to the formal hours or movements of weekly business days. Thrasher's understanding of queer time is rooted in Halberstam's writing on queer temporalities, where "[q]ueer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (2005, p. 1). Thrasher notes that their investigation into the queer of color community around the Pulse nightclub in Orlando submitted to queer time by engaging with participants not at the site of violence during the day, but instead at nightclubs and drag shows during the night. At these sites, queer people of color celebrated queer life and ran fundraisers for the injured where "they'd party until 3 or 4 A.M., before catching a few hours of sleep and getting up to take care of people en route to Disneyland all over again" (2019, p. 241). In being guided by queer time, Thrasher's interview process consisted of not only engaging in the community being investigated and finding participants to interview, but also engaging with queer times and spaces in which an understanding of the ways in which members of a certain community navigate time and space in relation to their material reality. In looking to Thrasher, I deployed queer of color interviewing to attend to both the specific spaces in which queer and trans youth of color, who are also self-identified furries, occupy and gather, and the

times in which they are able to engage with questions that demand attention to their lived experience.

Interviews took place online, over the phone, and in person. I adapted the interview process based on participant comfort, familiarity, availability, and technological accessibility, where participants being interviewed can have multiple options for where and when the interview takes place. Therefore, interviews were not set at a specific location. Various online platforms, such as Zoom, Discord, Telegram, and VRChat, all qualified as sites for an interview to take place as each has the ability for audio and text-based communication. Discord, Telegram, and VRChat were all prioritized as sites for the interview to take place due to their popularity among furries. Prior to the interview, I sent the consent form to each participant for review, and I went over both the consent form before the interview began. After participants were able to review the consent form, I obtained informed consent verbally from the participant before beginning the interview process. Each volunteer participant was offered $30.00 for their time, which was to be paid before the participant interview. This amount was distributed digitally (Venmo, Cashapp, etc) or through gift cards (Amazon). Participants also choose how they would like to be compensated before the interview was able to proceed. Before beginning the interview, data was collected through an interview guide (see Appendix A for the interview guide) that includes an open-ended demographic questionnaire and instructions for a semi-structured phenomenological interview.

The interview guide was developed with influence from Roulston (2010) to allow for a space of intimate telling while at the same time seeking to address the research

question through a series of interview questions and prompts. According to Roulston, "open questions" provide "a broad parameters within which interviewees can formulate answers in their own words concerning topics specified by the interviewer" (Roulston, 2010, p. 12). In looking to "open questions" the interview guide was therefore flexible where questions are not "always asked in the same order [and] the interviewer initiates questions and poses follow up 'probes' in response to the interviewee's descriptions and accounts" (p. 4).

The interview guide also followed a set of procedures that allowed for a process of cooperative gathering data that prioritizes working with the participant in a mutual back and forth. Within it procedures, the interview guide (see Appendix A) followed a set of eight steps with the participant as follows: 1) go over the project and interview process, 2) review consent form and allow for informed consent, 3) pay participant, 4) go through open-ended demographic questionnaire with participant, 5) turn on recording, 6) conduct interview, 7) turn off recording, and 8) end interview.

When meeting with a participant for an interview, I first provided a general overview of the project, including the research question, and the interview process. This included offering the participant time to ask questions about the study along with questions or concerns they have about the process they would be involved in. I also went over details about what institution has approved this study, what the study is for, how the study will proceed after the interview, what the intention of the study and my relationship with the topic of this study. After the first step, I moved onto a review of the consent form and allowed the participants to ask any questions about the form and leave space for

any comments or follow-up questions after they give informed consent. After informed consent, I paid the participant for the interview through the payment option of their choice. After the payment I went over the open-ended demographic questionnaire which is structured to obtain general information on the participant along with their chosen pseudonym for themselves and their fursona(s). At this time, I also left space for the participant to ask any additional questions that they may have after explaining various details about the open-ended demographic questionnaire. After completing the open-ended demographic questionnaire, I notified the participant that I was going to begin recording, or that I will save the text-based conversation and start the interview.

The interview process, once in conversation with a participant, was inspired by a phenomenological study on HIV prevention practice that produced a particular phenomenological interviewing method that asks the participant to tell "stories" of lived experience (Anderson-Nathe, 2006). In looking to Anderson-Nathe, I first recapped phenomenological interviewing for the participant, restated that I am interested in understanding their story and experience, asked the participant if there are any questions, and then started the conversation. The interviews were focused on drawing out stories on how participants' created and embodied their fursona, with particular attention to eliciting rich description rather than a reflection of their experience. This is to keep the participant in the lived experience rather than the reflected attitude. The interview was also structured around drawing detailed descriptions of the experience by emphasizing the five dimensions of lived experience: body, space, time, and relationship, as described in the interview protocol. After the interview is complete, I notified the participant that I

stopped the recording, or have saved our text-based conversation, and left space for the participant to ask any questions or comments about the study or about any part of the interview process so far. After attending comments or questions from the participant, I completed the interview.

## Risks and Benefits

There is potential that revealing any participant's LGBTQ+ identity or revealing their participation in the furry fandom could put them at risk of discrimination. Potential risks were minimized by focusing and prioritizing participant security and confidentiality during all participant involved procedures to protect the participant's rights and welfare. I sought to understand the individual concerns of each participant involved and their needs around safety and security. Each subject's questions and concerns through the interview and study process will be prioritized and attended to. Participants were also be given the opportunity to use pseudonyms and alternative names for their fursonas (furry personas) when given the demographic questionnaire. Any identifying names or handles online was removed across all of the data unless consent was given consent by the participant to share. Privacy was also prioritized within this study as participants were given the choice to consent in revealing their names, the presentation of their online presence, and the presentation of their fursona (furry persona) and fursuit through images. Transcriptions only used pseudonyms, and transcriptions removed any details that would risk identifying the subject outside of the study. This included references to Twitter handles, social media handles, website usernames, video game usernames, Twitch handles, and other handles that would risk identifying the subject outside of the study. This also included any names related to the subject (such as familial, close friends, names of locations that refer to the

location of the subject) and those names will be redacted to secure the privacy and confidentiality of the participant.

The study prioritized the safety and security of the participants involved and sought to understand the individual concerns of each participant involved and their needs around safety and security throughout the research process. In short, risks, discomforts, hazards and inconveniences to the subject are unlikely and were continually attended to throughout the research process. Potential benefits that individual participants may experience during this study were the therapeutic and conversational aspects of discussing experiences and being heard and listened to. Participants also had the opportunity to voice their feelings, opinions, and concerns. These conversations were therapeutic for many as it allowed the participant space to be heard and listened to.

Steps taken to minimize the possibility of coercion or undue influence were evaluated by the interviewer during the pre-interview consent process. I did not initiate the interview process unless the participant reflected full confidence and comfort in their participation in the interview and in the study. I reassured the participant at any time the intention of the study and the expectations that come with consenting to participate. At any time, the participant was allowed to withdraw themselves from the study and stop the interview process.

## Data Analysis

Van Manen (1997) states that phenomenological analysis has the goal to "transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of

something meaningful" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 36). Informed by Van Manen (2016) and Fleming et al. (2003), I borrow from Ajjawi and Higgs's (2015) stages of data analysis rooted in contemporary iterations of hermeneutic phenomenology (see Table 1). The stages of data analysis formed here, specifically the transcription of the data and coding, also reflect a method of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which is used to uncover underlying themes in a given data set.

*Table 1: Stages of Data Analysis Developed for Research*

| **Stage** | **Tasks Completed** |
|---|---|
| 1. Immersion | ▪ Organizing the dataset into texts<br>▪ Iterative readings of texts<br>▪ Preliminary interpretation of texts to facilitate coding |
| 2. Understanding | ▪ Identifying first order (participant) constructs<br>▪ Coding of data using Atlas.TI software |
| 3. Abstraction | ▪ Identifying second order (researcher) constructs<br>▪ Grouping second order constructs into sub-themes |
| 4. Synthesis and theme development | ▪ Grouping sub-themes into themes<br>▪ Further elaboration of themes<br>▪ Comparing themes across sub-discipline groups |
| 5. Illumination and illustration of phenomena | ▪ Linking the literature to the themes identified above<br>▪ Reconstructing interpretations into stories |
| 6. Integration and critique | ▪ Critique of the themes by the researcher and externally<br>▪ Reporting final interpretation of the research findings |

Ajjawi and Higgs's (2015) first step of data analysis consisted of immersing myself with three types of data: the interview transcripts, the field notes done during and after the interview, and the audio recordings. Immersion includes the repeated process of reading and then re-reading again the texts alongside listening to audio recordings and revising interview notes as a way to get a sense of the data, or a "preliminary interpretation of the texts, which then facilitates coding" (p. 623). Notes during this phase

did not only reflect my initial impressions with the three types of data, but also my own self-reflections as I reviewed the data. During the immersion phase, I wrote memos of emerging thoughts during this stage, through a re-reading of the texts and my own reflections. These memos were be stored in a Google Drive.

The understanding phase consisted of creating first order constructs which "refer to the participants' ideas expressed in their own world or phrases which capture the precise detail of what the person is saying" (p. 624). This stage is a type of open coding that seeks to identify the features of the phenomenon they articulate by the participants in their own words in the context of the five dimensions of lived experience. In contrast to the immersion phase, the understanding phase's purpose is to gain rich and more detailed description of the participants' words that has shaped their lived experiences with the fursona as expressed in their own words. This phase consists of "investigating every single section or sentence (the part) to expose its meanings to understand the subject matter" (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021, p. 5). It is important to note that this phase is absent of theoretical and personal knowledge and only relies on what the participants express, again, in their own words.

In stage three, second order constructs, or researcher-based codes established through theory and personal knowledge, are generated and organized. Within the third stage, I organized the open codes from stage two and form categories. Subcategories under the formed categories, based on my theoretical and personal knowledge, will then be established for each interview and then across all interviews. Through the three theoretical frameworks presented in this study, disidentification, queer as mess, and

wildness, and through personal knowledge, I coded (create second order constructs) within these three categories and created subcategories. In other words, subcategories represent the "horizon which were generated using…theoretical and personal knowledge; these [are] abstractions of the first order constructs (Integration)" (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021, p. 6). At the end of this stage, relevant text material (quotes from interview transcripts, sections of interview notes, sections from personal notes) were to be grouped under the second order constructs, or the coded categories and subcategories created within this phase, into subthemes established by my personal and theoretical knowledge. This organization of data was stored on a Google Document.

In stage four, themes were developed from the results or stages one to three of the data analysis. This phase consisted of the "meshing the horizons" or a grouping of the sub-themes into themes which are to be explored deeper. This process also involved an "in-depth interpretation" that sought to "identify meanings that the participants could not articulate, considering the complexity and tacit nature of the phenomenon being investigated" (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2015, p. 625). As explained by Van Manen, constructing and determining such themes, the purpose of themes within a hermeneutical phenomenological study is to "discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is" (1997, p. 107). Further explorations involve a continued reading, re-reading, and listening to all of the data, or following in a process of "continuously moving backwards and forwards between the literature, the research texts and the earlier analysis" (p. 625). The exploration process has the intention of expanding the meaning of all parts of the data collected, furthering

the interpretation process. Stage four therefore resulted in themes on the lived experiences of queer and trans youth of color who are also self-identified furries from the data collected in previous stages.

Stage five involved creating illustrative stories to the themes and subthemes identified from the data collection. In creating illustrative stories, I used themes and subthemes as a base for stories and reconstruct the experiences of queer and trans youth of color who also self-identify as furries, using their own words, to illuminate and illustrate the key findings from the data that explore what the fursona does. During this phase, participant data was repeatedly examined to ensure that the stories I construct are faithful and accurate to the participants' experiences (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2015). This included moving backwards and forwards between the data along with sharing the illustrative reconstructions with the participants for verification. Sharing the data I analyzed and constructed to illustrate the phenomenon with the participants is important in that it may give deeper insights into specific lived experiences from the participants in their own words. This sharing can be used as way to engage deeper with the participant if needed. During this stage, visual media presented by the participants, including art or photos of their fursonas, was used to refer to participant descriptions and thus supplement the findings and prepare for integration.

The final stage, stage six, involved a critique of the themes provided along with a review of literature. This stage also includes my final interpretation of the research findings. During the final stage, I reviewed any recent literature on the topic that has the potential to increase my understanding of queer and trans youth of color experiences with

the fursona. Any recent literature that intersects with the topic of this study was considered for further analysis. Any conferences attended that I presented at and received feedback on were also attended to during this stage. Comments received at presentations were incorporated into the study. In short, the final stage allowed for a final refining of themes and literature along with a final interpretation of the research findings.

In conclusion, the stages presented here provided the proposed project with a hermeneutic phenomenological data analysis that is faithful in the description of the lived experiences expressed. This data analysis method also sought to ensure that both the participants and the researcher are apparent in the research process and in texts produced throughout the study. As described by Ajjawi and Higgs, a study into lived experience through hermeneutic phenomenology is achieved "by the use of rich description and, where possible, the use of participants' words to allow them to speak for themselves" (2015, p. 632). With the aim of exploring the lived experiences of queer and trans youth of color who utilize the fursona, I believe that this study allowed for participants to speak on their feelings for data analysis.

## Self-Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

> Before we ask others to furnish us with a lived-experience description about a phenomenon that we wish to examine, we might do well to try such descriptions ourselves first, so that we have a more precise sense of what we are attempting to obtain. (Van Manen, 1997, p. 64)

I conclude chapter four by addressing the ethical considerations of this study and how I sought to be self-reflexive throughout this study. I first want to address my role as

a queer and trans researcher who is choosing to study queer and trans of color life. In looking to how I approach scholarship and researching queer life, I first look to Heather Love who states that,

> Scholarship always involves the betrayal of the communities whose experience we claim to represent. But for those of us working inside the academy and pursuing academic scholarship, acknowledging that betrayal and its costs is crucial. (Love, 2016, p. 348)

In relation to this study, I acknowledge the potential betrayal of the communities and individuals I studied from the position as a researcher who resides within the same identifying group. In acknowledging that potential betrayal, I was critically self-reflexive in my role as a way to attend to the often-ignored power dynamic between the researcher and the participant. This study therefore sought to continually interrogate the knowledge-power relation between the researcher and those who I studied through a methodological procedure that continually sought to question my presence within its process.

In attending to my positionality as a researcher who is also a queer and trans furry of color, I asked myself "how am I being reflexive?" as someone who has an in-depth connection to many of the participants of this study due to our shared interest and shared knowledge on the subject matter. As a furry, I wanted to make sure my own subjective knowledge on the topic was not overshadowing the descriptions and narratives given by the participants of this study. For a more in-depth approach to addressing reflexivity, I looked to Alison Rooke's (2009, p. 35) writing on self-reflection and researcher identity

in the field. Rooke looks to queer theory and establishes that through a queer methodology, a queer researcher should prioritize:

1. Epistemological openness
2. Attention to one's own subjectivity, personality, and embodiment.
3. Paying attention to the performativity of a self which is gendered, sex, sexualized, classed and generational in the research process.
4. Work from an honest sense of oneself that is open and reflexive, rather than holding on to a sense of self which provides an ontologically stable place from which to enter into the fieldwork and subsequently come back to.

These questions were continually considered throughout the research process which lent itself to a technique of "queer reflexivity" which "entails reflecting on the performativity and closeting of identities over the course of the research process, with particular attention to the ways in which heteronormativity is enacted and resisted in the field" (McDonald, 2017, p. 135). This reflexive process halted various moments where I considered silencing my own queer and trans existence within this work due to various pressures within the social work field that covertly assumes tidy and cleanly research has more value and promise. Overall, a queer methodology seeks to continually understand the researcher-participant knowledge-power relation and the role of the self in the study as a site of inquiry and interrogation.

There are also a number of considerations around my own positionality as a self-identified furry and also as a queer and trans person of color which impacted how I approach various parts of the research process. First, I am a self-identified furry and have

been involved with various furry communities and have partaken in various furry acts since I was thirteen years old. My experience with furry for over two decades may impact my assumptions about furry and also about the lives of those furries I engage with during this study. Second, I identify as a queer and trans person of color which influences how I understand and assume the realities of other queer and trans people of color. This influenced how I engage with participants and the assumptions I make about their experience in this world. Together, both of these shared identities with the participant population may signal a personal investment in the topic of study and thus how I wanted participants to answer interview questions. However, I intended to perform self-reflexive measures throughout the research process and ensure that participant voices are prioritized. As a way to interrogate my own positionality, investment, and proximity to the population I intended to engage with a series of self-reflexive questions both before the interview process and during the data analysis phase.

Before engaging in the interview phrase I asked myself "prephase reflexive questions" rooted in the guidelines on reflexivity and professional use of self in research by Valandra (2012) and answer them as prephase field notes:

1. What do I already know about this topic/idea?
2. What is the source of my knowledge? (formal education, practice experience, third party, self, etc.). In other words, how do I know what I know?
3. How have my personal and professional experiences shaped what I know?
4. What questions do I have about what I know?
5. How does this topic influence my worldview, knowledge, and background?

6. How does my worldview influence the way I experience and/or construct this topic/idea/population?
7. What assumptions, presuppositions, biases, attitudes, and beliefs shape my construction of this idea?
8. What challenges me most about this topic/idea?
9. What am I passionate about regarding this topic/idea?
10. What else can I learn from engaging in this study?
11. How are my life experiences shaping the design of this study?
12. Why do members of this population participate in the research process?
13. What benefits do they receive from their involvement?
14. How can practitioners and researchers work together to encourage this population's participation in research while protecting them from exploitation and/or re-victimization?
15. What difference will this study make to the body of knowledge and to the
16. participants?

The intention of these questions was to be attentive to my biases and beliefs around the experiences of queer and trans youth of color who are also furries and to come to terms with my lack of knowledge on the topic and the participants in this study. These prephase reflection questions therefore sought to address how my biases, beliefs, perspectives, and experiences may impact the interview, analysis, and the research processes. These questions therefore helped me be in dialog with myself and to shed light on my own relation to this topic and my pre-understandings. Throughout the study, I kept

a diary and document my thoughts, feelings, and insights which will be a part of my field notes and thus included in the data that will be analyzed in this study. Valandra offers suggestive reflexive questions not only before the interview process but during the data analysis phase as well. During the data analysis phase I borrowed from Valandra and continually asked myself the following reflexive questions:

1. Whose stories are represented?
2. Whose voices are missing?
3. What are the similarities?
4. What are the differences?
5. In what ways did my presence influence the participants' responses?
6. In what ways am I invested in the study's findings?
7. How did participants' responses after the formal interview influence my interpretations of their stories?

I continually refered to these questions during the analysis phase and addressed them in my field notes and annotations throughout the study.

## Chapter Six: Presenting the Findings and Discussion

The following three chapters, chapters seven, eight, and nine, detail the results of fourteen interviews, and further continued conversations, with queer and trans people of color who are also furries over the span of three years. The results are presented non-traditionally where the findings and discussion chapters are mixed to adequately craft an illustrative text that addresses thoughtfully what was found in exploring the lived experiences of queer and trans people of color who are also furries. Where it is often understood that the findings, an interpretation and presentation of the results, and the discussion, the evaluation of what was found and its relationship to current literature, are separate from one another, in this study they are removed from their siloed positions and instead blended to address the essence of a phenomenon through chapters of creative reflective prose. In writing the following chapters, I was inspired by the perspectives of Max van Manen and who considers phenomenological inquiry an,

> artistic endeavor, a creative attempt to somehow capture a certain phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is both holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive. (Van Manen, 2016, p. 39)

In reviewing, reflecting, and analyzing the meaningful experiences as expressed by each of the participants, I reached for creative and imaginative ways to present their felt realities and lived experiences through a weaving of both what has been given, its relationship to my own self-reflections, and theoretical frameworks that help illustrate the disorderly nature of the essences that follow.

Phenomenological reflection is explained by van Manen as the complex process of trying to grasp the "essential meaning of something" (1997, p. 77). In the phenomenological tradition, this study is specifically focused on grasping the essential meaning of the fursona experienced by queer and trans youth of color by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it. The process of grasping meaning phenomenologically is not "rule-bound" but "a free act of seeing meaning" (1997, p. 79). Therefore, seeing meaning requires one to reflect creatively on the structure of meaning of the lived experience in order to grasp its meaning, its essence. Meaning is understood in this study as something that cannot be simply explained, categorized, or measured due to its subjective nature. The essence of a phenomenon is messy, fluid, disorderly, and never grasped simply. Therefore, within this study the essence of the fursona as experienced by queer and trans youth of color is organized by "themes" that attend to the experiential structures that make up the experience of creating and embodying a fursona. However, this thematic organization is not a conceptual formation or categorical statement that seeks to essentialize the phenomena. As described by van Manen, "lived experiences cannot be captured in conceptual abstractions" (1997, p. 79). Therefore, this chapter does not claim to make universal statements that seek to capture the full mystery of how one experiences the fursona through organized themes. Instead, this study exposes a glimpse of graspable meanings of what the fursona does through the lived experience of queer and trans youth of color who create and embody a fursona. In other words, the findings and discussion section of this study are a result of deep phenomenological

reflection on the direct contact with those who lived deep furry experiences as a way to point to only a partial aspect of this creative and transformative phenomenon.

## Themes and Sub-Themes

> [M]etaphorically speaking [themes] are more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes. Themes are the stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through. By the light of these themes we can navigate and explore such universes. (Van Manen, 1997, p. 90)

In presenting both the descriptions of lived experiences and the performative *doing* of the fursona through interviews and art, themes are used to illustrate the essence of the phenomenon. Before summarizing the presented themes, I want to first outline how this study understands "themes" in relation to the phenomenological organization and presentation of lived experience. Thematic organization is based on significant descriptions that help navigate a slight understanding of the structure of experiencing the fursona. To review, phenomenological themes are understood here as "the structures of experience" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 79). In contrast to themes as concrete *things*, such as an essentialized conceptual formulation or a fixed categorical statement, phenomenological themes are understood as objectless conceptualizations that describes only an aspect of the structure of lived experience that always falls short of being complete. Therefore, the phenomenological themes presented in this study attempts to give partial shape to a specific aspect of queer and trans of color life.

In analyzing the collection of data, it was important to me to allow the descriptions and materials given by the participants to speak for themselves. In seeking meaning in the collections of lived experiences of the furries I interviewed for this study, I looked to the lifeworld existentials as guides for reflection: “lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived human relation (relationality or communality)” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 101). Grounded by the lifeworld existentials, themes arose based on the lived world as experienced in the everyday by the participates which are organized into structures of meanings in order to partially describe the complexity of the fursona lived by queer and trans youth of color. During the study, three phenomenological themes stood out as primary aspects of what the fursona does for queer and trans youth of color that were gleamed through descriptions of lived experience. In isolating themes, I consolidate what I considered to be common feelings that give important insights in describing structures of experiences of creating and embodying the fursona. Within each theme, subthemes appear that expand on the theme presented in order to give depth and richness to the structure of the experience. Together both the themes and subthemes act as stages for presenting lived experiences. Within the themes and subthemes, elements of a discussion and a findings section are bound together throughout as I attend to both without separating them in the pursuit of weaving an illustrative story that speaks to the messy particularities and disorderly desires of queer and trans of color life lived.

Themes are separated into their own chapters, three total, which are individually introduced with an experiential snapshot, or a descriptive narrative, to guide the reader

into the experiential structures that make up the theme. Following the experiential snapshot, each chapter is framed by a set of theoretical considerations by queer and trans scholars that attend to the discussion of the experiential structures that make up the experience of creating and embodying a fursona. To elaborate, the theories chosen for each chapter attend to the importance of the social and political contexts in which the lived experience takes place that are embedded within an individual's being. In addition to situating the participant within the often-tumultuous atmospheres in which queer and trans people of color who are also furries exist, the theories are also intended to assist in showing how I came to make sense of the lived experiences within this study and thus how I discuss the experience I am addressing. Following the theoretical frameworks that were used to make sense of participant lived experiences, I also give my own lived experience to the reader as a connective material to the lived experiences in which I present. Personal narratives were inspired directly from field notes where I often reflected on the experiences that were given to me alongside my own experiences and how they together informed my interpretation of lived experience. Beginning from field notes, personal narratives are the result of organized and formatted self-reflections that are used to introduce the subthemes as a tool for effectively presenting participant descriptions of experiential structures.

The first theme, "this is me," attempts to illustrate a collective feeling between the participants that their self-created fursona is a reflection of them, fully and/or partially. As explored within this theme, the fursona is understood by the participants as a way to continually feel and follow different ways of existing in the world. The theme also seeks

to present the ways in which participants often felt like their fursona expanded on their ability to express themselves which led to experimental ways to explore alternative ways of being. The first theme attends to these felt processes of self-expression and thus the meaning of the fursona for the participants through the common notion that the furson feels like them. Within the theme are three sub themes: “it feels like me,” feelings safe to create me, feeling otherwise, and “humans are boring.” These subthemes focus on lived insights that come from feeling the fursona as “me.” While feeling “me” through the fursona is the overarching notion, within are complex readings of lived experiences that reflect the felt aspects of: coming to “me” through the fursona, feeling safe enough to create a version of “me” through fursona, feeling a truly expressive “me” through the fursona with the self and others, and feeling free to explore beyond domesticated ways of being in contemporary society through the fursona. All are presented as evidence in detailing the structure of the experience of feeling that the fursona is “me.”

The second theme, “falling back,” seeks to present the experience of creating and embodying the fursona in relation to its assistance in navigating “bad feelings.” Within this chapter, I illustrate common participant experiences with the fursona that have assisted in the mitigation and reduction of pain, stress, trauma, depression, anxiety, guilt, etc within their lived reality. “Falling back” was used by a participant to describe this process in which one uses the fursona to potentially relieve oneself from feeling bad. Within the theme are three subthemes: “feeling shitty,” escape, and processing feelings. Since not all experiences of the fursona are the same, each subtheme seeks to give shape

to the diverse structure of the experience of creating and embodying the fursona to fall back onto.

The third and final theme, “walls coming down,” explores the experience of creating and embodying the fursona in relation to the common felt sense of the fursona assisting in the exploration of the erotic. Within this chapter, the messy process of making sex and erotic desires possible through fursona embodiment is illustrated by focusing on sites of sexual discovery where the fursona is used to navigate new sensations individually and with others. “Anxiety and fear” highlights the feelings which many felt before engaging in such messy and disorderly practices. However, after those initial feelings dissipated, many describe how engaging with furry erotics allowed for “making sex possible”, or making what was thought to be impossible now possible through the fursona. Last, “melting and magic” explores the ways in which furry erotics supports a melting of normative assumptions about sex and intimacy while also creating magical moments in which the limited nature of a straight reality is melted away allowing for magical connections and intimacies to exist.

## Description of Participants

In this section I describe my relationship to the individual participants along with general demographics and insights. A total of fourteen furries were interviewed and recorded. Before the interview, each furry was given a general questionnaire which would gather information about their name, their fursona(s) name(s), their age, their sexuality in their own words, their gender identity in their own words, their pronouns in their own words, and their race or ethnicity in their own words.

*Table # 2. Participant Demographics*

| # | Name | Fursona(s) | Age | Sexuality | Gender Identity | Pronouns | Race |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Basil | Sol | 31 | Queer | Nonbinary<br>Gender Queer | They/Them<br>Any | Latino |
| 2 | Filt | Twigs<br>Filt | 22 | Pansexual | Label-less | He/Him | Black<br>Latin<br>American |
| 3 | K9 | Sebastian | 22 | Queer | System of Different Genders<br>Non-Binary Expression | He/Him<br>It/Its | Hispanic<br>Aztec<br>Puerto Rican |
| 4 | Kit | Kita | 23 | Queer<br>Bisexual | Non-Binary | Any | Mixed |
| 5 | Korma | Korma | 29 | Pansexual<br>Ace | Male | He/Him | 100%<br>Mexican<br>American |
| 6 | Kris | Ryde | 30 | Bisexual | Non-Binary | They/Them | Asian<br>American |
| 7 | Miles | Shark<br>Tabby | 21 | Queer | Transman | He/Him | Hawaiian<br>Filipino |
| 8 | Nghia | Mewni | 21 | Queer | Bigender Boygirl | He/She/It | Taino<br>Boricua<br>Cuban<br>Spanish<br>Korean |
| 9 | Piper | Robin | 25 | Queer | Faggy Boywife | He/Him<br>She/Her<br>They/Them | Native<br>Hawaiian |
| 10 | Roxxy | Ride<br>Ramiel | 22 | Bisexual<br>Lesbian | Vaguely Nonbinary | She/They | Mexican<br>Nicaraguan |
| 11 | Skip | Cola<br>Fleabag | 25 | Lesbian | Genderweird<br>Womanish | She/Her | Mixed<br>Macanese |
| 12 | Sky | Geist | 30 | Pansexual<br>Demisexual<br>Queer<br>Gay | Gender Nonconforming<br>Agender | Any | Afghan<br>Japanese |
| 13 | Ty | Kamau | 26 | Pansexual | Nonbinary | They/Them<br>Any | Black |
| 14 | Valentine | Poly | 24 | Pansexual | Transwoman<br>Flower<br>Cat<br>Wizard | She/Her | Latina<br>Latinx<br>Mexican<br>American |

Participants of this study were all self-identified furries, or participants who identified with the term “furry” when referring to themselves and their relationship to the furry community, or the community of those who create and embody anthropomorphic characters. Along with the name they wanted to use for this study, the furries were also given the choice to choose the names they wanted to use for their fursona. While furries often have more than one fursona, Table #1 only shows the name of each furry mentioned fursona(s). Four participants mentioned having more than one fursona while ten focused on one fursona. In relation to age, eleven furries reported being in their 20s, while three reported being in their early thirties. The age shown in Table #1 reflects the age they were when the first interview took place. One furry reported being cisgender, while all other furries reported not being cisgender. Since furries were given the opportunity to describe their sexuality, gender identity, and race and ethnicity in their own words, an array of descriptive terms was used that each furry felt seen and understood with. Following the terms that were used to self-define, furries were asked what pronouns should be used when referring to their art and lived experience.

Not included in the demographic questionnaire is the inclusion of different community identities that intersected with the lived experiences of some furries which are essential in describing fully the furries interviewed for this project. For example, many furries discussed being therian and/or being plural which became present throughout the interviews where common terminology used within those sometimes-intersecting with furry communities would bleed into their lived experiences. The following sections briefly outline these intersecting communities which are necessary to summarize for

presenting data as common terminology is needed to fully understand how a furry's experiences their fursona.

*Notes on Intersecting Experiences and Communities*

During the study, it quickly became apparent that other various experiences of how one experienced the self intersected with how they experienced furry and thus their fursona(s). In other words, many of the participants, throughout my interactions with them, would describe how their fursona intersected with the other ways they experience themselves and thus the communities they engage with where furry was not central but present within. For example, many furries disclosed to me how their fursona was also a way for them to express and explore being therian, otherkin, and/or plural. In this section I want to briefly summarize these common intersecting experiences and communities due to their contextual importance in understanding how the fursona is felt and experienced.

Talking with those who are therian and otherkin for this project was not my first time interacting with those who experience being non-human and identify with those particular non-human communities. Personally, I have often considered myself therian in different parts of my life and when made obvious during my interview many would contextualize their therian experience alongside their furry. To summarize broadly, otherkin are those who feel as not being fully human, or those who feel wholly or partially with being non-human or other-than-human (Baldwin & Ripley, 2020; Grivell et al., 2014). Therians are similar but their distinctive difference is that therians feel as not being fully human and instead identify with a species of a nonhuman animal where otherkin are those who identify with a fantastical and mythical creature. For some

therians and otherkins, the two are distinct and different experiences that are unique and separate from one another, while others see both as blurring and intersecting with one another and thus not so distinct. Therians that I have met both during this study and outside of it have linked how they experience their nonhuman species with how they experience being transgender. For example, many have used the word “species euphoria” to describe how it feels to be seen and experience the species they feel. Within this study, participants have expressed that how they experience their fursona is linked to how they experience their nonhuman species. When mentioned in this study, participants link their non-human identity to their fursona.

Many participants also noted how being plural was crucial in understanding how they experience their fursona. Similar to my experience with those who are therian and/or otherkin, this was not my first time talking with those who are plural. In fact, during the time of the study, and beyond, many of those who were close to me were also plural and the language from the plural community became everyday vocabulary for me. Plurality is understood by many an inclusive term to describe the many experiences of having more than one person or entity sharing one body (Christensen, 2022; Turell et al., 2023). It is understood that being plural “is a self-reported identity, not a specific clinical diagnosis” (Turell et al., 2023, p. 2) where some may have a clinical diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder (DID) or other specified dissociative disorder (OSDD) while others do not. Terms commonly used within the plural community are used to describe the ways in which one experiences their plurality. For example, the terms “system” or “internal family” are often used to describe the collection of entities sharing one body, and

"headmates" or "alters" are often used to describe the individual entities within a system. "Fronting" is used by many to describe which entity is present, and "switching" is often used to describe the experience of one headmate stepping back while the other "fronts." Beyond general terms, everyone experiences their system and their headmates differently, and like a family, each holds their own particularities that evolves over time. As summarized by Turtell et al.,

> There is a diversity of experiences within plurals/systems, such that members of a system may have different gender identities and salience of gender; ages/experience of age; perceived internal appearances; varied beliefs, memories, feelings, and thoughts; and complex interrelationships with other system members. (Turell et al., 2023, p. 2)

In looking to the diversity of experiencing plurality, many within this study experience plurality in their own way through their fursona. For example, in the following chapters, many describe their fursona(s) as being "headmates" or "alters" of a larger system. To elaborate, an individual may have two or three fursonas where each represents a headmate. Also, many personify their system, or their collection of headmates, through a fursona. This becomes useful for many as a way to visualize and organize, and thus understand more fully, each headmate as a separate entity with their own gender, sexuality, age, species, relationships, desires, etc.

Together, these intersecting experiences often congeal together where many who are furries are also therian and plural, which highlights the fluid nature of how one experiences their reality. In the following chapters, many weave together the many

different ways of understanding and experiencing their lived reality through being therian, otherkin, and/or plural. Along with their fursona, it is important to note that being a furry is not an isolated experience and that there many factors that impact one's draw to the fursona which is important to understand before engaging with the results of this study.

## Chapter Seven: “This is Me”

Kris: If you draw a character and say, "this is me" and you do that a couple times, it becomes the truth. If I literally say, "this is me, this not an original character" this is actually me, but it's clearly like a cartoon character with a big old head and it's just a bunch of lines on a screen and I'm like, "that's me and their name is Kris”, that's literally me. This is me, standing next to my friend, and I can draw a cartoon version of my friend, that becomes the truth. That is how it is in both of our minds, and it becomes the reality, and it's just been a wholly positive experience. As opposed to me looking in an actual mirror, and being like, "well, I don't like this part of my body" it's like, I get to decide what I like about myself, and accept it when I do that. It almost feels hokey when I say it, "I’m drawing cartoons, it's not that deep," but it is though.

I feel a sense of affirmation all the time. It's less of something that happens just in my mind, it's a social thing. I definitely feel this with the furry community, that I think the feeling of affirmation comes from myself, personally, but also from other people affirming that as well. And respecting this is how I want to be seen, and how I want to be perceived. And this is what you're looking at and having that being taken seriously. I think a lot of that feeling of validity comes from just feeling like this is how other people accept me, without even it being a conscious choice. It's just like, my friends will just understand that this is me, I’m going to doodle a cartoon of myself, or of a furry character with my friends and be like, "look, it's us," and that being instantly accepted I don't think every space is like that. If you draw cartoon people who don't get it, they're like, "what am I looking

> at," or, "why?" So the fact that I get to go online, and pretty much everyone who is in my social circle, understands, not even consciously, just automatically understands, if this is how I want to draw myself, if I post a character, a picture online, and say, "this is a self-portrait," or, "I doodled myself," and everyone understanding that is you, I think that is the most affirming part of it, for me. It feels like I am in a respected space, where people aren't going to scoff at it, or make fun of it, or be like, "what are you doing, drawing cartoons?" or "why do you look like that?" or anything that pulls you out of that space of just being this. It's just a nice, accepting space.

In this excerpt, Kris explains fursona embodiment as not exclusively the individual experience of becoming an anthropomorphic animal, but also a social experience in which complete fursona embodiment relies on a participatory affirmation of the individual's self-created furry persona. Kris illustrated for me how fursona embodiment is an intersubjective experience, or a collective "affirmation" where the ways Kris wants to be seen and understood are accepted by those who also understand this process. The impactful possibilities in this process, which this chapter is most interested in, are expressed in the following descriptions that describe how one can change how the body is felt and perceived through an anthropomorphic animal figure, where a temporary harmony between how the body is both felt and then perceived through fursona embodiment.

Throughout the interviews, it was expressed that fursona embodiment had the ability to create a sense of harmony between the participate and their body. To illustrate,

Kris notes that fursona embodiment gives way to a feeling of acceptance in how they want to be seen, and therefore when recognized they feel a sense of acceptance of who they are within furry spaces. For Kris, this process is a positive experience, and it does not just exist for Kris, it also exists in all the minds who perceive their fursona. In thinking about this sense of harmony, I look to Hil Malantino who explains that,

> The experience, however durable or fleeting, of being recognized in gendered ways that resonate with how we understand ourselves is a form of legibility that isn't only pleasurable but quite crucial to survival, and this is true for both our own perception of our bodies and the ways in which others perceive them. (Malatino, 2022, p. 29)

While Malatino specifically addresses the experience of being recognized in gendered ways, I want to consider in this chapter the experiences of being recognized in *furry* ways as a similar form of legibility for pleasure and survival. For example, Kris illustrates that being recognized and respected in a *furry* way, through fursona embodiment, allows for similar ways to feel and be seen in the ways they want to whether that is within or beyond gender recognition. Therefore, in this chapter I suggest that fursona embodiment is one way that queer and trans people of color have cultivated a "[form] of self-regard and intracommunal recognition that bolster[s] our ability to see ourselves—and love ourselves, and each other" (Malatino, 2022, p. 29).

In order to situate intracommunal recognition as a site for exploring the question what does the fursona do for queer and trans people of color, I look to Gayle Salamon's

phenomenological writing on gender perception. Salamon first directs us to Merleau-Ponty's work on perception and summarizes Merleau-Ponty's claim that,

> Perception produces our relations with other objects and subjects, and these relations are, finally, the location of the object's meaning. The perceptual truth of the object becomes the creation of its meaning, a meaning that is produced rather than found. (Salamon, 2010, p. 62)

For this study, I understand meaning similarly as produced rather than found, and that meaning, specifically bodily meaning, is cooperatively and situationally produced. In relation to the fursona, the body is reproduced cooperatively and re-recognized and affirmed as one's fursona. In the words of Kris, if you create a fursona and say that it is you, and others perceive you in that way, "it becomes the truth." In looking to Salamon, I relate this process of fursona affirmation to her insights on gender variance in which she states that,

> What one might read from the contours of the body is something less than the truth of that body's sex, which cannot be located in an external observation of the body, but exists instead in that relation between the material and the ideal, between the perceiver and the perceived, between the material particularity of any one body and the network of forces and contexts that shape the material and the meaning of that body. (Salamon, 2010, p. 62)

This chapter explores what this specific process of intracommunal recognition, or bodily recreating and re-recognition, through fursona embodiment within furry spaces does for queer and trans youth of color.

*Framing Subthemes: Sensing and Feeling*

In this chapter I focus on sensing and feeling, specifically the ways in which participants embody the fursona as a sense-making device in order to feel otherwise. My conceptualization of sensing and feeling is rooted in Muñoz's understanding of "queerness as a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality" (1996, p. 6) and how affective particularities can be "descriptive of the receptors we use to hear each other and the frequencies on which certain subalterns speak and are heard or, more importantly, felt" (2006, p. 677). Simply put, in relation to sensing, I understand that "the senses are how we experience, know, and relate interior to exterior worlds, the self to others" which when explored can "describe the politics of being with and being together-in-difference" (Muñoz, 2020, p. x). Therefore, in relation to the narratives that follow in this chapter, I prioritize both the sensorial and the affective.

Eddie Gamboa explores the dark as a constitutive element for queer identities where "in the dark, senses are reoriented, and we learn to sense differently, meaning that we learn to make sense queerly" (2021, p. 92). In other words, the dark becomes a space for sensing making, "a necessary precondition to worldmaking" (92). The following narratives frame the furry spaces participants described in their interviews as dark spaces, or obscured and opaque spaces that rely on learning a new way to make sense of the figurative and literal darkness that furry spaces offer. In exploring the process of fursona

embodiment as a social experience in which legibility is based on becoming a self-created anthropomorphic figure, this chapter is interested in the ways in which queer and trans people of color make sense in the dark through the fursona, and the feelings that occur during moments of disorientation that lead to self-resignification and affirmative social recognition, that can happen within such dark sites of queer and trans refuge.

Sensing queerly is defined in this study as how one understands their reality and performs themselves within it through *strange* methods or *disorderly* practices that result in alternative modes for existing otherwise. An example of such practices can be found in furry spaces and how collective participants of furry spaces, both online and in-person, make sense of one another through alternative methods for recognition based on their fursona. Kris describes this queer method of recognition, or how furries make sense of one another queerly, when they entered a furry convention space for the first time,

> Kris: When I showed up to Furry Weekend Atlanta (FWA), the way that I am online has already become who I am and the one thing I really liked about FWA is that walking around, seeing people, when you meet people, I noticed that they look at your badge, they look at your character, and that is the primary identifier for who you are. That surprises me in a really positive way, that you can go from this is a cartoon character, but I'm in an environment where this is your identity, and when people identify you, they literally identify you in person from an internet character or an internet person, and they see the character, and that's who you are. It really is real life, and when people saw me, the fact that I am Chester to them and to myself, was just a matter of fact.

Kris outlines for us how their way of sensing those around them are reoriented in the furry convention due to the ways in which furries sense and make sense of one another. Standard methods of social recognition are queered, or made strange, in a way that prioritizes sensing wildly, or in a new and disorderly way. As Gamboa describes, "being in the dark can be disorienting, disrupting the repetition that produces our compulsory movement as the body searches its repertoire to improvise new gestures that provide a sense of where, when, and who we are as light fades" (2021, p. 92). The dark is therefore understood in this chapter as a disorientating space where one is reoriented and grounded through furry. As a site that forces the individual to sense queerly through the unpredictable, the dark offers a stage for alternative performances and feral worldmaking practices that attempts to engage with *otherwise* ways of being. In other words, *otherwise* is used here to name the impossible feelings and wilder realities that reside within the dark, or what exists beyond what is thought to be possible within domesticated, or neoliberal and late-stage capitalist, frameworks for life that seeks to violently limit and erase queer and trans of color life. In short, *otherwise* names the playground where queer and trans youth of color make sense of themselves and each other, and feeling *otherwise* is a way for many to gain power and autonomy within the wild and unpredictable. The dark therefore becomes a stage for doing selfhood *otherwise* that continues to thrive in response to the violent and unforgiving forces that fuel contemporary state-sanctioned assaults on queer and trans of color life.

Across the interviews I could not escape narratives, memories, and stories from furries that described how the fursona had changed their life, or made their life more

livable, due to how their characters were used to imagine and sense the self beyond what was thought to be possible in their immediate. The following sections delve into these sense-making practices for creating a way of expressing the self otherwise, where feeling safe to explore the dark was how many were able to freely experiment new ways of being and becoming through their fursona. Central in these narratives are an array of embodied sensations that come with creating the fursona in order to feel otherwise which are central in exploring what does the fursona do for each participant. In short, the following presented descriptions are organized into themes that highlight the fursona as a queer sensing making device that focus on an alternative way to make the self, or the process of creatively feeling otherwise as a way to make sense of the self.

## Personal Narrative

**Figure 2**

*Sibyl in Virtual Reality Chat (VRChat)*

*Note:* [Photograph in VRChat], by Hazel Zaman, 2023.

When I talk with other furries about their fursona, a contextual history of how they found furry, or how furry found them, is often mentioned alongside what informed the creation of their fursona. For many, visual art and media became the primary source of inspiration for creating their fursona, together with an attraction to certain animals and/or fantastical creatures, which was usually rooted in an early exposure to anthropomorphic animals featured in animated movies, video games, and television shows. During each interview, participants would describe how certain parts of their current fursona were pulled from certain characters or animals they engaged with during their childhood or constructed currently from their relationships with animals and/or characters that were manipulated over time through continued revisions where eventually an individualized furry persona was produced for their current desires. Original meaning from the media property, is often removed and retrofitted for individual desires and self-expression. In other words, the furries I interviewed created their own fursona by looking to anthropomorphic animals that are portrayed and animated in popular media. During each interview, participants shared with me intimate stories about how they arrived to their close connection with the characters, or to the animals who impacted how they created their fursona. Due to my position as a furry, and who has a fursona, many of the furries I interviewed asked about my relationship to furry, asked about my fursona, and asked how I came into this particular space that we are all somewhat familiar with as furries. Therefore, I want to first introduce the reader to my fursona and briefly and illustrate what the fursona did for me, specifically what parts of myself are explored in

the embodiment of my furry persona in order to offer a part of myself in this study as the participants have done for me during our interviews and our continued time together.

*I found myself crying in virtual reality. It was the first time I tried on a furry avatar in virtual reality that was designed to look and move like my fursona. The avatar was digitally rigged to move with my head, hands, and body which are all read through a motion tracking device located within the virtual reality headset. After uploading this new avatar and quickly logging into a virtual world to finally get into it, I quickly looked to the closest mirror I could find to witness my new body in real time. In meeting my eyes, I saw looking back at me a version of myself that was represented by an anthropomorphic cat girl with angel wings. A version of me that made more sense to me than when I look at myself in the morning in a different mirror. Watching my new avatar in this virtual space, watching my tail sway behind me, my cat ears move as I touched them with my paws, I began to cry. Looking onto the character I created, I connected with, I lived through in my imagination then suddenly come to life through this new virtual embodiment felt for the moment euphoric. As I started to feel an overwhelming sensation of bodily joy, tears began to slowly pour down my muzzle. Reflexively moving to wipe my tears away, my large paws hit the virtual device covering my face. For a moment I had forgotten where I was, I had been swept away fully, completely taken into a different reality. As I returned to the real world to wash my face, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror in the real world. I saw a familiar figure, but I did not see myself. Looking down at my hands and then looking back to my face, into empty eyes, disheveled*

*and hidden behind a strange beard, I felt bad. I knew that I could not keep living like this. I wanted to change forever.*

*Touching and feeling through my furry virtual avatar felt ecstatic. After experiencing this virtual embodiment, I could not stop thinking about the feelings I had felt, the excitement to be seen and to see myself as feminine, as cute, as a woman, through the fursona. While my new body had been shocking at first to experience, it became a new normal as I spent most nights during the most isolating parts of the COVID-19 pandemic fully embodied and present among others who were doing the same. Over time, I had gained a new confidence to perform and thus embody who I truly wanted to be. It was then that a new voice began to take hold, a voice I did not know I could conjure but I knew I had been passively withholding. My body started to move more freely, I engaged in expressions that I had once muted and shuttered at the thought of when I would have the impulse to perform them in public. In feeling my hips, my chest, my waist through the virtual avatar, as I looked down at myself and witnesses a figure that felt more like me, I found myself feeling more real in the unreal, or the imaginary that many furries created together in order to express such impossible feelings and desires. While among other furries, I was no longer afraid to be myself. I found a new joy is taking selfies with others, smiling, dancing, and singing. I was forgetting slowly why I had been hiding so much of myself as I became more and more present through this angelic creature. Eventually, in late 2021, with the help of my friends and those around me, I decided to start hormone replacement therapy (HRT).*

For many, the fursona offers a way to make sense and feel the self that is not reliant on the immediate. Instead, the fursona for many is used to experience other bodily sensations which are put onto the anthropomorphic figure in order to sense beyond what is thought to be possible, or a way to feel otherwise. Feeling/sensing otherwise in this section refers to feeling future sensations that, in looking to Muñoz (2009, p. 1), are not reliant on the "here and now" but instead on the "then and there." Muñoz describes the "here and now" as a prison house, or "the notion that nothing existing outside the sphere of the current moment, a version of reality that naturalizes cultural logics such as capitalism and heteronormativity" (2009, p. 12). However, the fursona is a device used to feel and sense a "then and there," or "alternate universes that eschew the dominance of the here and now for the force and potentiality of a conjured world of fantasy and magic that is not simply a mode of fantastical escapism but, instead, a blueprint for alternative modes of being in the world" (2009, p. 172). For many of the furries interviewed for this project, the fursona allowed them to feel something more than what was possible in the confines of the immediate. This resulted in feeling otherwise through the fursona as often the first step for all of the participants in imaging the whole self as different than what was initially made to believe is possible which helped them consider future decisions such as trying out a new name, experimenting with gender pronouns, starting hormone replacement therapy, and undergoing gender affirming surgeries. In other words, as the fursona imagines the self otherwise, one is able to use the fursona to sense themselves strangely and thus feel for alternative ways of being and becoming in the world. Embodying the fursona is therefore understood in this chapter as a *wilder* form of doing

selfhood. The following subsections illustrate this lived process of doing selfhood through the fursona where the impossible is attempted to be made possible through a (re)creation of the self that once embodied one can feel and sense another way of being individually and with others.

*"It feels like me"*

I first interviewed Kris in 2021 quickly after I encountered their character Chester on Twitch, a popular online video live streaming service. When I began asking Kris about their character Chester during our first interview, they quickly made it clear that they did not consider themselves to be a furry and that their character was not their fursona. Instead, Kris described Chester as a character that was "functionally a fursona," but different in that it was more of a public figure than a full representation of how they felt. While they are not opposed to the idea of a fursona, Kris, at the time, did not consider themselves to be someone who engaged with furry activities. However, despite their feelings around furry and how they use their character in public, they do feel included in the "furry community." Kris is a live streamer on Twitch where they play video games as their character Chester, a small "fratboy" otter with a red hat. They further describe Chester's personality as someone that is trying to be something he's not, or a shy little creature that is trying to fit into "bro culture" but fails. This persona is performed in front of an audience as he plays video games through a virtual avatar that is able to recognize Kris's bodily movements and voice. Due to this familiar embodied practice where Kris takes on the role of a small anthropomorphic otter, many members of Kris's audience began asking if they are a furry. Despite Kris's distance from furry, Chester became a

character that was cherished among furries due to its cute cartoonish aesthetic and personality, which was lived through Kris. As they began to gain a wider audience among self-identified furries and fans of furry characters, they stated that the furry community took them in. Regardless of their sudden popularity with furries alongside their opposition to identifying Chester as their fursona, they describe their experiences with furries as positive and that they were happy with this new engagement. As we continued to talk, I began to question if Kris was an appropriate candidate for this project. Was Kris a furry and was their experience among furries one that could be valued for this project? Should Kris's embodied lived experience through Chester, a character that is not a fursona, be considered for analysis? At first it was not clear, and I felt some resistance from Kris about this non-furry embodied practice, but I decided to continue talking with them as our conversations continued throughout the project's development.

During our first interview, Kris described their embodiment of Chester as "confusing" in relation to how those in their audience wanted to understand the individual behind Chester. This awkward engagement between Chester and the audience was often triggered when they would be asked "Do I call you Kris? Do I call you Chester? Also, what are your pronouns?" Initially Kris was unsure how to address these questions because at the time of this interview Kris used they/them pronouns while Chester used he/him. For Kris, this caused "a lot of confusion" in relation to how they wanted to be identified overall. Due to continual pronoun inquiries, Kris started to use they/he pronouns for a couple of months until they realized they did not like people using he/him for themselves at all. Going back to they/them, Kris described how embodying

Chester and using *him* as a figure for their social media presence left an "awkward space" for how they were wanting to be referred to and how their audience was referring to them through Chester. For Kris, Chester was more "detached," or that there was a level of "separation" between this fratboy and Kris. I understood that Chester was not Kris's fursona and instead this character was more of a public figure that they performed exclusively for an audience. However, Chester was not the only character Kris had created or was creating at the time. During our interview, it became clear that Kris had created many different characters for different reasons beyond audience engagement.

Kris has been drawing their whole life, but they haven't been "super serious" about drawing until they went to art school. During their time in art school, Kris began getting into "cartooning" and studying animation. In art school, Kris started drawing themself as "a little cartoon," specifically a human cartoon character. They describe their character as "super cute" and that over time they would occasionally add animal ears to their human character,

> Kris: I started drawing myself more as a little cartoon character and I would make it super cute, a cute little style. Occasionally, I would add animal ears. I don't know if that is furry adjacent or anything, but I think it's fun. I always liked animal characters, so it feels like there is a spectrum in which I enter, like furry fandom. But I definitely enjoyed drawing myself, and embodying, clearly, a very stylized version of myself. I think the experience of doing that separate from Chester has been really transformative in a lot of ways. It helped with my self-esteem and it's like drawing myself in a certain way, in a way I find appealing, or

> cute, or fun to look at, it like influences the way I view myself, and that also influences the ways I draw myself. So, its this feedback loop of like, this is how I want to be represented, and this is how I want to be seen, and this is how I see myself online.

They describe this transformative process as a "feedback loop" in that drawing these characters with animal ears to be perceived by others is how Kris was able to feel seen and see themselves. In other words, for Kris, the cute characters that they created represented how they truly felt. To illustrate further, Kris does not consider themselves to be "super social or an outgoing person." However, ever since they started to create idealized characters of themselves, they have felt more comfortable opening up online. Growing up, Kris describes that their self-esteem "wasn't the greatest." They describe themselves as being "insecure" where, for example, they would wear clothes that covered their whole body, or clothes "that was a little too big," so that they wouldn't have to think about their body. However, the embodied practice of drawing themselves, and therefore thinking about themselves and looking at themselves in an idealized way helped them "come to terms" with their physical and immediate reality. While their characters don't look like Kris "in real life," the cartoons they create feel like them. They explained that,

> [T]his isn't what I literally look like. It's a cartoon. But it's cute, and it feels like me, and it's a cartoon. It's not supposed to look like me, exactly. But it's got my hair, and my sleepy eyes, and it's this smallish, cute character. It's helped me come to terms. It's like looking in a mirror that just makes you more flattering. I get to decide how I want to look. I don't need to draw my blemishes, or whatever

> I'm insecure about. This is what I want to look like. And if you draw it enough times, you believe it.

These cartoons Kris describes, and how they are used, are different from how Chester is used in public. When discussing Chester, Kris enjoys the “distance” of not fully representing themselves in a public figure. Instead, they have a “degree of separation” when embodying Chester which allows Kris to select how much of themselves they want to put out into the world. Chester as a public figure is also open to public consumption, where, for example, many of his fans have drawn fan art of him over the years. While they find these types of public engagements enjoyable, they make Kris less inclined to fully embody themselves through Chester and instead rely on their “original characters” to feel more like themselves. Kris’s other characters, or the characters that attempt to represent how Kris sees themselves fully, would, in contrast to Chester, be kept more private. For Kris, there is no degree of separation between their other characters, they are instead reserved for private engagements and intimate interactions.

**Figure 3**

*Reference Sheet of Kris's Fursona Rhyme*

*Note:* [Digital Art], by Kris, Untitled, 2023

Throughout the two years that Kris and I stayed in touch during this project, we would talk off and on about furry events and share updates on each other's lives. In early 2023, Kris shared with me a character that they "doodled" who was at first nameless and was described as simply a "sona," or a persona. Their persona looked like a white dog with button-like ears and angel wings who, in this particular drawing, was holding a guitar and wearing blue jeans with a black shirt and a dog collar. After some days they also shared with me some pictures of their persona as a digital avatar for virtual reality, which they were able to fully embody in VRChat. As we gushed over how cute their character was, and how our fursonas would totally get along, they expressed that "honestly, it's nice to feel cute in virtual reality." A couple months later, Kris shared with me a reference sheet for their fursona Ryme, as seen in the image above.

At first, Ryme wasn't supposed to be Kris's "truesona," or a fursona that closely resembles its creator. Instead, Ryme was originally designed as a standalone character that was supposed to be "cooler and cuter" than Kris, which felt impossible to embody at first. However, overtime Kris kept thinking to themselves, "if only this could be my sona," but recalled being embarrassed by these initial feelings, or self-conscious that they not only created something so "cute and cool" but also that they couldn't possibly embody "cute" and that "cool" as represented through Ryme. They use the word "cringe" to describe this feeling, especially when discussing how they gave Ryme "angel wings" which felt like a "DeviantArt cliché element." Nevertheless, Kris could not keep away from their creation and despite such "embarrassing" aesthetical choices, Kris understood this process of creating and feeling more like Ryme as "unlearning self-cringe over time," or unlearning what kept them from feeling and seeing their true self despite how "cringy" they may think they are. In understanding that art, for Kris, is a vulnerable act, they expressed how "feeling embarrassed" in this process throughout their life has "stunted" their creativity. However, creating a fursona was their first "conscious step to fight against that," or to resist the forces that kept Kris from feeling cute and cool, from becoming Ryme. This act of creating a character and saying, "this is me," or creating a "truesona" that represents how Kris feels and wants to be seen, felt "liberating in a simple but important way," or liberating in pushing back against what kept them from feeling like they could engage with how they want to represent themselves, which has "shifted" their approach to artmaking.

For many, engaging with the fursona, and thus what it means to be a furry, becomes a process where one is confronted with questions into how one wants to create the self and thus embody and eventually express themselves to others regarding their relationship with gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, etc. This section therefore looks to sensing and feeling through the fursona as an individual process. As certain art and performance practices through the fursona are a part of an individual's lived becoming, creating a representation of the self often results in the creative expression of the true, or idealized, self. I came to a similar confrontation with the self when I was asked "can you describe your fursona for me" in late 2020. When asked by my partner of the time, as he wanted to create a sketch of my fursona, I remember being conflicted, self-conscious, and embarrassed about my true desires but also welcomed by him and my friends when I had doubts. I remember asking myself, how do I want to express myself to others, do I want to use different pronouns, and what species am I drawn to at this moment? Over time, with some help from other furries around me at the time I was able to feel that I had an opportunity to speak to muted and silenced parts of myself that I initially felt too embarrassed or uncomfortable to engage with. It was only later that in sensing and feeling myself through the process of creating my own fursona that I found another way to express withheld or harbored desires. Eventually I would answer as I saw the fursona as an opportunity to express myself otherwise, or express something that was thought to be impossible and unreachable in my current state without the fursona, such as my own queer and trans desire to present and become a woman. After witnessing my fursona on the page, being able to embody her in virtual reality, and become her, or become my true

self, around my partner and friends, I realized my fursona was a representation of my true self and thus how I saw myself and how I wanted to be seen and understood by others. Kris and others share a similar pathway of creating and thus embodying the idealized self where the fursona becomes a site for creating a figure that truly "feels like me."

*Feeling Safe to Create Me*

One of the participants' most prominent feelings in relation to how they made sense of themselves, their past, and their future through their fursona was how they first felt a sense of safety within furry spaces and places. I remember feeling similarly when I reflect on my experiences. As I spent more time at furry conventions, I remember feeling more and more empowered to be myself and become who I wanted to be through my fursona. The furry convention made me feel safe and comfortable enough to be my true self. For me this was made possible by seeing other queer and trans people embodying their fursona, fully becoming who they wanted to be, and sending me the message that this type of life otherwise was possible. Safety is a rare sensation to feel for many queer and trans people today, especially in public spaces as physical and emotional violence is ever present. However, at the furry convention, I felt safe for a moment when recognizing the ways in which other critters were acting, performing, and doing furry in their own way. Familiar sights and sounds that transferred directly from virtual furry spaces to these "real life" furry spaces made me feel safer in a way I did not expect. In attempting to capture why and how I feel safe in such spaces, I always look back to moments where I witnessed any dog, or any individual in a canine fursuit, being pet or getting belly rubs by a crowd of other critters as they bark and growl among the hundreds that walk around this

scene in an open furry convention space. Seeing these wholesome, intimate, and soft moments between critters that together understand and relate to one another through their fursonas, I relax and realize that maybe I can also become who I want to be and explore parts of myself that I had been reluctant to engage with fully.

During my interview with Ty, they described furry spaces as a “safe haven” in contrast to the spaces they inhabited at home and in the military. For Ty, being at home and being in the military felt like their life was “in the hands of someone else,”

> Ty: Coming from home and then going to the military, it was essentially like my life was in the hands of someone else, and that I'm basically putting my life in the hands of another person. But this other individual doesn't have as much sentimental care as the previous place did, you know what I mean? So, it put me into this state of just confusion and anxiety and depression because I was like, “well, I have these freedoms now, but I really don't have the freedoms that I truly want to experience.” But, me having that fursona and looking more into furry conventions and going there, that was my break from that unfortunate reality that I was living in at the time, of me being in the military. So, the fandom basically became my safe haven.

Due to being under the authority of someone else throughout a large portion of their youth they expressed a lack of autonomy. To illustrate this further, Ty expressed that moving away from home and going to the military gave them freedom in certain parts of their life but removed freedoms from others. No matter the location, being in the hands of someone else left Ty feeling like they did not have the certain freedoms that

they truly wanted to experience. However, Ty found a way to be free that gave them a sense of autonomy: through their fursona and going to furry conventions where they experienced a "break" from their "unfortunate reality" of being among those who have complete control over their life. It was at this point that Ty described furry spaces as a "safe haven," or a place where they could freely express themselves, their gender identity, their sexuality, and to be around other people who were also openly expressing themselves and being their true selves inside and outside of the fursona.

Ty's framing of furry as a safe haven is located in how he experiences furry spaces as "all over the place" and how it's "normal that no one questions anything." Not questioning anything for Ty refers to how other furries don't question how individuals come into furry spaces, specifically the ways in which furry spaces has the ability to offer one to identify however they want to without question and "worry." Similar to how Kris explains their sense of acceptance through their fursona, Ty describes a feeling in the furry convention space where they are able to experiment and open themselves up to others. In contrast to the military, explaining such individual desires to identify as someone or something other than what is legible within essentialist frameworks of sex and gender felt impossible for Ty. He states that if one tried to explain such feral complexities "they would be like, 'what the fuck?'" The ways in which Ty wants to identify and engage with the world feels bewildering to those who have control over his life. However, furry allows for these wilder ways of existing without question and worry which for many can be liberating, or a way to access life otherwise, beyond the here and now.

Kit describes similar sensorial illustrations of how she embodies her fursona Kita is directly linked to life changing events that impacted how she sees and feels herself today. During our initial interview, Kit recalled a memory from a summer while she was still in high school,

> Kit: I actually have a memory. It was between the school year, it was just in summer break. I remember a lot of things were hitting me around that time. I think being a furry and creating that fursona, it sparked a lot of that change in myself and self-realization. In the furry community, there's a whole thing about the furry community is very queer-friendly, and the whole thing is about non-judgment, hopefully. It's supposed to be like that. I remember in that one summer, I realized I was a furry, and then I realized that I was queer. I thought, "okay, I'm a furry, I am queer," and also strange, but furry introduced me to the concept of a femboy. It opened the door to just being like, "oh, I don't have to be a masculine man, I could just be a feminine boy, or a femboy." I remember that it was that moment that I just remember sitting there and thinking, it felt almost just a whole new chapter of my life just started, all around the same point, going from just thinking that at the time, I still thought I was cis. I had thought that, "oh, I'm just going to be a normal guy growing up." It's not that I wanted that, I just thought like, "oh, yeah, that's just the progression of it. I'm just going to become a man. I'm going to start being more masculine, and I'm going to like it, I guess." That's just what my process was. Creating the fursona and just joining the whole community, it just threw all of that out, it just changed courses. My whole life

> changed course in that regard, in terms of identity and just the way I conducted myself and everything.

She described that during that time a lot of things were “hitting” her as she began to think about “being a furry” and “creating a fursona” that had “sparked” a lot of change in herself. It was during that particular summer that Kit realized she was a furry while also realizing she was also “queer”. At first, Kit thought she was “just bi,” but being exposed to furry spaces made her feel “strange,” specifically how furry introduced her to the concept of a “femboy” or feminine boys in furry art. The femboy for Kit opened the door to the idea that at the time she didn’t have to “be a masculine man.” Instead, she was able to see herself otherwise through her fursona as a feminine boy. It was when creating her fursona as a feminine boy that a “whole new chapter” of her life had started. Kit describes that before that moment she always thought that she was going to grow up to be a “normal guy.” She elaborates that being a “normal guy” was not what she wanted, but it was what she thought was a normal trajectory for her life, or that there was no other way to live life other than to “become a man.” However, creating a femboy fursona and joining a community of furries who were exploring and feeling otherwise “threw all of that away” and changed the course of Kit’s life forever, including how the fursona impacted her identity and how she began to conduct herself. In short, creating a fursona and engaging with other furries made her realize that everything is “different” than how she thought it was. She describes that after this moment, it felt like she was starting a new part of her life.

Currently Kit, “to an extent,” is still unsure about her gender identity, but states that discovering the furry community and femboys during that time allowed her to finally put a “vague label” to the way she had been feeling for years. She recalled that she was familiar with the term “crossdresser,” but it never fully resonated with how she felt,

> Kit: I’m still to an extent unsure about my gender identity but discovering the furry community and femboys during that time allowed me to finally put at least a vague label to the way I had been feeling for years. Before that, all I knew about were terms like “crossdresser,” and that never resonated with how I felt. It wasn’t just about the clothing, or even looking like a woman, but expressing myself in a sort of androgynous way with a feminine aura to it. I still didn’t feel that expressing that in real life, but online was a safe haven for that kind of expression for me. I also felt gravitated towards it because of the cute factor. Cartoon animals give me comfort and I see myself as that in an abstract kind of way. Even now, I don’t like being referred to with terms like “man” or “woman,” but as for “boy” and “girl” I love being called both. Maybe because we don’t call animals men and women? It removes the humanness to it. That time felt very confusing, I juggled a lot with wanting to continue down that avenue of cute/femme/animal expression but I kept being reminded of how hard that would be to for a “male” to express themselves that way and be accepted in society, especially in high school. Now I’m much more open with all of this, and I have a lot more confidence because of it.

For Kit, it was never about only looking like a woman. Instead, she felt that she wanted to express herself in a "sorta androgynous way with a feminine aura to it." While she couldn't fully express this "in real life," the online furry community was a "safe haven" for her to do so where she was able to feel otherwise. Kit's particular memory of the femboy is similar to both how Miles and Piper describe how the fursona became a way to sense themselves otherwise. For Kit, her relationship with furry at an early age gave her a window to seeing how others were feeling otherwise. Her exposure to femboys through furry changed her life forever as the idea of a "feminine boy" gave her a way to see a life otherwise and feel what was thought to be impossible now possible. The ability to create a figure that goes beyond the boundaries of the immediate, beyond normative expectations of how one is able to use one's body to become themselves fully, is shared between these three participants. This is often possible because furry spaces, where one is able to become themselves fully through the fursona, are often considered "safe havens."

Feeling safe through the fursona also allows for a sense of comfort where embodiment acts as a buffer between the body and the world the body exists in. During my interview with Skip, she described how putting on her fursuit was a way for her to feel safe with herself and others through times of stress and anxiety. During our initial interview, she expressed how she wanted to show me her partial fursuit, or a fursuit that only consists of a head, paws, and tails. When she brought out her fursuit I naturally wanted to share mine as well. Together we discussed our experiences with our fursuits and the joy we find in wearing them in private and in public. In asking what does her

fursuit do for her, she recalled that putting on her fursuit made her “feel safe.” This feeling of being safe was not only due to how she felt in furry spaces, but specifically how the fursuit acted as a barrier between her body and her physical reality. To demonstrate this, Skip stated that she loves the feeling of having “a bit of a shield from the world” where she would put her suit on before going on dates with Mouse. When Skip started dating her current girlfriend, she recalled that before going out on dates she would put on her fursuit because at the time she was “feeling nervous.” By putting on her fursuit about twenty minutes before her date with Mouse, she would end up feeling more confident through her fursuit, and thus through her fursona. While waiting for her date, she remembered telling herself, “what do I do with this time that isn’t going to make me more anxious?” Becoming her fursona, or becoming “this creature” as she described them, made her feel not only safe but confident where she was able to “hype” herself up by taking selfies of herself in her fursuit to feel a sense of relief from her nervousness. In other words, feeling safe for Skip became possible by having a barrier through a different body in which she was able to see and feel herself as otherwise.

Safety is an individual feeling of security dependent on environmental and emotional circumstances in the moment. For some of the furries in this study, safety was dependent on the ability to freely express themselves or become who they wanted to be in an accepting environment. Large locations like the furry convention, digital locations like the chatroom, or private locations like bedroom all allowed for furries in this study to feel safe due to their ability to embody their fursona freely without question. For many, these locations were the first time they were able to not only become who they wanted to be, or

test out who they wanted to be, but also be seen for who they wanted to be in ways that extended beyond their immediate. Such playgrounds for self-exploration, due to their accessibility for fursona embodiment, are also understood as safe due to the ways in which they are populated by other furries. In witnessing furry performances, participants were able to see for the first time how they could enact feeling otherwise, or what otherwise could offer. The limitations of queer and trans domestication, or the ways in which queer and trans performances and bodies are continually restrained and removed by the state, leave many hungry for a life otherwise, a life outside of such constant restriction to expression. However, the feeling of being safe in furry spaces for the furries in this project does not endorse the notion that all furry spaces are unanimously safe. A sense of safety is individual, but for some, furry offers moments of safety which for some is all that is needed for feral desires to be awakened and acted upon.

*Feeling Otherwise*

**Figure 4**

*Kibble After Top Surgery*

*Note:* [Digital art], by Miles, Untitled, 2023.

Featured in the image above is Kibble, one of Miles's fursonas. Kibble is described in his reference sheet, a commonly used method for visually portraying and describing an individual's fursona through art, as a twenty-year-old gay male orange tabby cat. I first encountered Kibble on Twitter right as Miles was about to undergo top surgery, or gender affirming surgery that involves removing the breasts. Following up to the day of his surgery, Miles posted art of Kibble with a chest binder on with a caption that read "freedom in only 15 hours!" Weeks after his procedure, Miles posted a follow-up illustration of his fursona Kibble, shown in the image above, looking at a mirror while taking off his post-surgical compression vest exposing his new chest. When Miles draws Kibble, he is often expressing himself through Kibble where moments and feelings are reflected on through his fursona, through art. I understood that by witnessing his art and

reading his words, that Miles was expressing parts of himself through Kibble, one of his many fursonas that he publicly shares on his social media accounts. After taking time to look through Miles's social media, I realized that Miles began to visual himself through his fursonas which all had top surgery scars months before his procedure. I began to become curious about this particular performative practice where furry artwork, often artwork of an individual's fursona which may depict parts of themselves or an idealized self, becomes a place to see the self as otherwise before undertaking such gender affirming medical therapies and procedures. Put differently, I was curious about how this process felt, what the fursona felt like, or what it felt like to sense the self through a different body, or what it felt like to become Kibble. To be clear, I was not curious about why this phenomenon happens, instead I was curious about the embodied nature of the fursona, or the ways in which individuals feel their fursona and therefore sense themselves through their fursona. This curious line of thought lead to me to reach out to Miles for an interview to ask broadly, "what does your fursona do for you?" He was more than happy to discuss these feelings with me.

Miles started hormone replacement therapy in August of 2021. For the first year, he states that it was quite hard for him to see his true self. However, through his art he was able to portray himself as a character that represents an idealized self. Before continuing our conversation, Miles gave me context for this art practice and states that he is autistic and has always used art as an "intimate form of communication" where his deepest sense of self is represented through a visual method he knows best. Miles described for me how his ability to communicate through the world how he is and who he

is through art, a practice he has been doing his whole life, “feels so right, like puzzle pieces fitting together.” He stated that he created Shark, one of his most publicly used fursonas, before starting hormone replacement therapy. It was during this time that a lot of artworks of Shark was “trans related” at the start due to how much Miles desired to have an ideal body. In describing the process of how art became a way to imagine a self otherwise, he stated that,

> Miles: For a while I didn't draw top surgery scars or represent my trans identity in my art mostly after starting to be stealth in real life and at work, I didn't want others to know I was trans but I’ve recently been drawing more of my top surgery scars in my art especially since in real life my scars are visible, mostly due to my uneven skin tone from wearing a binder for my whole puberty life onward. I also used to draw my characters with the body type I wanted most in my transition, a thin body type with fluffy hair and the ability to wear t-shirts and now I can, and I draw my characters with my body type and all.

This art making process led to Shark playing with how he wanted to be perceived but also in playing with how he wanted to be. For Miles, art became a process for figuring out what he wanted most in his transition which led to him experimenting with his identity through illustrations when he was not able to express such feelings and lived performances “in real life.” For example, he states that he has used Shark in the past to express feelings he can’t put into words. Miles’s use of his fursona is a way to make sense of himself or figure out how he wants to be in this world. In other words, both of his fursona’s, Kibble and Shark, are used as a way to sense himself otherwise, to

experiment and feel an idealized body that is not reliant on the here and now but a then and there.

During our interview, Miles also described how during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically during the 2020 to 2021 lockdown in the United States, he "got into VRChat hard." When recalling this time, Miles continually stated over and over that he was "so happy" to be able to "be" his fursona by embodying a digital avatar that represented himself in virtual reality. The joy and happiness from this embodiment also became important to him while he started hormone replacement therapy alongside his time in VRChat. Miles described consistently feeling a disharmony between himself and his body, or how it was hard for him to see himself as the person he feels. However, embodying his frusona in VRChat became an "escape" where he was able to exist in a reality through a character that represents everything he wanted to "be". This feeling of being able to exist as his fursona in virtual reality, or the ability to fully become and portray himself as he wanted to be seen and felt through an imagined anthropomorphic character, was continually described throughout the interview by Miles as "freeing." These freeing feelings gave Miles a pathway towards sensing himself otherwise which assisted in his continual trans becoming. His time in VRChat, in feeling and being his fursona in virtual reality, was described as a moment that started a lot of positive changes in his life.

Roxxy uses her fursona in the same way as Miles, specifically as a way to "test the waters before moving forward irl." In 2022, Roxxy illustrated what she explained as an "early exploration into the idea of having top surgery." Through drawing her fursona

with top surgery scars, she described how she was able to see a “digital representation” first before “attempting to commit to any changes.” In describing her fursona at the time, she explained that her fursona dressed femininely before she did and had long hair in styles she liked before she grew hers out in real life. As she was testing out different representations during this time, Roxxy was also starting to develop breasts from starting HRT a year earlier. Along with her fursona dressing femininely, and having longer hair, Roxxy also added top surgery scars to her fursona as a way to return to feel “being flat chested but retaining a feminine gender expression in everything else.” She initially felt nervous about adding top surgery scars to her fursona and describes that,

> Roxxy: I was treading on transmasc expression in a way that was unearned or undeserved because I was born AMAB, or that I would be viewed as a detransitioner with all of the political baggage associated with the label. But I rationalized that in my non-binary gender expression, and the fact that I did have breasts that I felt more and more unhappy living day to day with, I was within my right to do what I wanted to do with my body in my own pursuit of happiness.

For Roxxy, seeing her ideal body with top surgery scars while wearing “cute feminine wear” and with “beautiful long hair” for the first time, made her feel “happy and euphoric.” While she noted that she had not “begun pursing potential surgeons” or seeing if her insurance “would cover top surgery,” this process of imaging the self otherwise via a “digital representation” attributed to Roxxy trying chest binders and wearing more masculine clothes after starting her medical transition.

For many, being able to be seen, or to see themselves as how they want to be seen, produces affirming feelings from a process of actualizing a sense of bodily harmony. This results in, for many, a feeling of euphoria. Produced through the fursona, specifically during the act of creating and embodying a fursona through art and performance, euphoria is noted as a central sensation as they gaze upon their idealized form. For example, Miles used "freeing" to describe how he feels when he is embodying his fursona, specifically the ways in which the fursona feels in VRChat when he is able to see and feel himself as he wants to be seen and felt. Similar to a fursuit and its ability to enable a sort of full fursona embodiment "in real life" via a large mascot-like suit, digital avatars that can be embodied in virtual reality allows for one to also fully enter an avatar as it moves with your body via tracking technologies embedded in virtual reality headset. For Miles, this technology allowed him to express and feel himself in ways he couldn't before. These new expressions and sensations in virtual reality, or the collection of "euphoric" sensations in feeling otherwise through the fursona, expand the ways in which Miles was able to express himself that was before limited in his immediate. To illustrate further, Miles describes the virtual embodiment of his fursona with his partner, as the cuddled one another in VRChat, as "euphoric." During the interview, Miles states that his partner lives far away from him, across the country. However, VRChat allows for individuals to exist in the same space despite their distance "in real life." In relation to Miles and his partner, VRChat gave them both the ability to be close to one another while also being represented by their fursona. To elaborate, when Miles describes being close with his partner in VRChat, he specifically details what it feels like when they are

“cuddling” one another. For Both Miles and his partner, they are not only being represented through their fursonas, but they are also existing in a space where they are able to touch and feel one another through their fursonas, or while they are embodying characters that they feel comfortably represent who they truly are. As stated by Miles, this form of intimacy, specifically when cuddling in VRChat while embodying their fursona feels bodily euphoric. Euphoria for Miles is not only a feeling that is reliant on sensing individual fursona embodiment and seeing the self in the mirror, it is also a part of a process of being seen, recognized, and felt in gendered ways by those in VRChat that resonate with how Miles understands himself.

**Figure 5**

*Piper’s VRChat Avatar*

*Note:* [Photograph in VRChat], by Hazel Zaman, 2023.

Like Miles, Piper uses “euphoric” in a similar way when describing their fursona embodiment in VRChat. I originally had interviewed Piper two years ago before reaching out to them for a second time due to us meeting each other in VRChat. My interest in having a follow-up conversation with Piper was seeing their newest avatar, which they had recently created. The VRChat avatar they spent most of their time in during that night was a dark grey and brown wolf named Robin who had a soft pastel purple trim. Their avatar also had long hair which covered one side of their face exposing only one eye, and at end of their muzzle was a golden septum ring. Their wolf also had on a large dark forest green pullover hoodie that covered most of their chest. However, Piper had customized their avatar a certain way to where they had the option to take off their hoodie. When they showed me their avatar without their hoodie on it revealed to me a wolf with a flat chest and top surgery scars. Similar to Miles, Piper created their fursona before undergoing gender affirming surgery. In wanting to learn more about this particular artistic choice, I reached out to Piper privately and asked if we could have an additional conversation about their new avatar, specifically addressing how their avatar feels and what does this particular avatar do for them.

During our second interview, Piper described themselves as a “trans person currently pursuing gender affirming surgery.” They stated that being able to have a gender affirming VRChat avatar has done “wonders” for their self-perception as it has helped them “come to better understand” what they wanted from their medical transition,

> Piper: As a trans person currently pursuing gender affirming surgery, being able to have a gender affirming VRChat avatar has done wonders for my self-

> perception as well as help me come to better understand what I want from my transition. I gave my personal avatar top surgery scars shortly after I was given my referral letters for top surgery, and while I was ecstatic over the fact that I could now begin in the process of scheduling my top surgery, I felt like I didn't "deserve" it or that I wasn't trans enough or trans in the right way to be deserving of the same surgery that countless other folks are also pursuing. However, that feeling began to subside once I started using my avatar more and going onto VRChat. Being able to see my avatar in reflections, and see the top scars on them has sort of eased that feeling. I love my avatar, it reflects me in a very personal way, and so to have that representation of myself affirm my gender has been practically euphoric.

As described by Piper, when they was given their referral letters from both their primary care provider and their mental health professional that approved them for top surgery, a necessary stage in accessing gender affirming surgery, they gave their avatar top surgery scars. However, at the same time they did not feel like they deserved top surgery. To elaborate, they describe how they had conflicting feelings around their choice to have top surgery where they didn't feel like they were "trans enough" or "trans in the right way" to deserve top surgery in the same way as other trans people who were accessing and pursuing gender affirming surgery. However, those conflicting feelings began to subside once they started using their avatar more and more in VRChat. For Piper, being able to see their avatar in the reflection of the mirrors in VRChat and see the top surgery scars on them had eased those initial critical feelings which has allowed them

to continue their movement toward gender affirming surgery. In short, Piper "loves" their avatar. They state that their avatar reflects them in a very personal way and that seeing themselves with top surgery scars already, and thus being represented in a way that affirms their gender, feels "practically euphoric." The euphoric elements that arise when embodying their fursona are rooted in seeing themselves otherwise and thus being able to sense and feel a body that affirms their gender. This is accomplished by imagining a body otherwise, which helped Piper imagine a possible transition then and there.

For Valentine, her fursona acts in a similar way where the fursona is a way to test otherwise expressions, specifically in considering a new sense of self "gender-wise." Her fursona Poly was originally created for a Dungeons and Dragons campaign as Valentine's main character. However, during our interview, Valentine describes how Poly was not only a character for her roleplaying game, but she was also her fursona which acted a figure for "playing around with gender." At the time of her creation, Poly was a male Tabaxi, a fantasy race of anthropomorphic cat people, who wore a "big wizard hat" and a "long cloak that covered his whole body." While Poly's wizard design had stayed consistent over time, Valentine has gone through various iterations where Poly's gender and pronouns have changed to better represent Valentine's sense of self. For example, she stated that through Poly she was able to try out "they/them pronouns" for the first time during a game of Dungeons and Dragons. By embodying Poly fully in-game, she was able to use, and have others use for her, they/them pronouns openly which eventually helped her feel comfortable using them in her day-to-day. After the campaign ended and Poly was no longer being used in future games, Valentine would continually commission

art of Poly. In addition to art, Valentine would also “continually think about [Poly]” and create a “very elaborate backstory” for her. Slowly through art and storytelling, Poly would change and eventually “transition” before Valentine, leading her to realize that Poly was her persona, a full representation of her and how she feels in her body in relation to her gender. Her time with Poly would eventually assist in her own trans becoming and her eventual move to medically transition.

Poly has also been essential in Valentine exploring what it means to picture the self when how she feels does not reflect how she sees herself. Valentine states that “as an autistic trans woman” she often feels that expressing herself, or finding the words for how she feels, is often “difficult.” To elaborate, Valentine stated continuously throughout our conversation that she often had trouble picturing herself and imagining an idealized self. However, drawing herself as a “cute cat girl” was one way she was “sidestepping” her bodily dysphoria where being able to express herself through Poly, has made feeling her “idealized form” easier to sense and engage with,

> Valentine: Drawing myself as a cat side steps one problem, which is how do I present, how do I represent my idealized form. How do I represent myself in the ideal? I don't know how to depict myself in an idealized form. I often have trouble picturing myself at all, hashtag dysphoria. It's difficult, and so drawing myself as a cute cat girl is the one way of side stepping that. But also, I don't see what's cracked up about being human I suppose, and that's where the autism comes in. My gender being sometimes flower, sometimes cat is very purposeful in that I think that describes me better than trans woman.

During our conversation, Valentine described how drawing herself as a cat girl "sidesteps" the problem of how does one present or represents the self in an idealized form that feels impossible in the here and now. For Valentine, her fursona personifies otherwise feelings and feral desires, a figure that speaks to her fluid and ever-changing sense of self that words cannot simply capture. During our interview she expressed that in addition to being a cat girl, Poly is also as part flower, or specifically "a flower cat hybrid," which is used as a way for her to articulate how her fluid and ever-changing gender feels. She stated that her gender is defined as "sometimes flower and sometimes cat" which is purposeful in that for Valetine it described her ever-evolving gendered lived experience in contrast to simply defining herself as a "trans woman." For Valentine, her gendered experience feels "magical." It grows and changes all the time which is expressed through a flower cat hybrid which when embodied she is able to feel her idealized form.

Feeling otherwise names what the fursona offers, an alternative way to make sense and feel their sense of self and their relationship with others. Furry offers an ever-growing creative resource, as a byproduct of queer and trans of color worldmaking within furry, for sensing and feeling the self. For the furries I interviewed for this project, the resources offered by other furries were a way to personify indescribable desires for self-expression. As each individual furry created a fursona, they improvised with new movements and gestures and borrowed from media properties to produce a figure that expresses personal wants and desires. The darkness of furry spaces offers many of the individual furries I interviewed a way to make sense of the self through a new digital

repertoire. In navigating the self, each individual plunges into the darkness through their fursona where sensing feeling becomes strange, awkward, but productive. In giving a productive way to understand and express the self, and the body alongside, others, fursona creation and embodiment often becomes a test site for many, a way to experiment with new ways of understanding gender and the body. For the participants of this section, the fursona became a tool for accessing certain parts of the self which could not be accessed before discovering furry and the ways in which furries engaged with themselves and other furries.

*"Humans are boring"*

Kit, 06/20/2023:

> i was peaking and had my eyes closed and i was guided through this thick fog with dark shadows of trees and spiraling lights heading towards this singular point
>
> on the other side i felt myself transform like magical girl style INTO Kita
>
> and when I opened my eyes, my field was almost slanted a bit like I was looking out of fox eyes, and I saw a shadow around my nose like it was a muzzle and VERY STRONG phantom tail and ear feelings.
>
> my voice changed too…it was almost whimpers
>
> and i literally started crying bc it was so amazing
>
> when I tried to stand up I could not keep my balance at all??? I literally kept falling over and could only feel stable on all fours

> I don’t know how long it lasted bc psychedelics mess with time perception but omggg it was so cool

The chat messages above describe a memory from a session of self-induced disorientation via psilocybin mushrooms (or magic mushrooms). Through this experience, Kit was able to feel new bodily sensations, become her fursona fully, and for the moment live in an otherwise reality. In this short trip log, the body and mind are described as being altered where Kit began to, without her control, transform into her fursona. As Kit recalled the beautiful feelings that accompanied being fully taken away into a forest and then transformed into a fox, she notes how this euphoric moment of idealized becoming had brought tears to her eyes. This experience was meaningful as it made possible an emotional and full-bodied experience which gave her a muzzle, tail, and a pair of fox ears along with the posture and voice of a fox that made it almost impossible for her to function “normally”. Within this disorderly fox state, Kit falls and tumbles over herself, unable to stand upright and return to a more human-like stature. This embodied experience for Kit was “amazing”, which had a major impact on her overall understanding of her separate identities, or her plural system and the headmates that exist within. For example, after noting this experience, she explains later that the trip “did make me question whether Kita is me, or is another part of me… it did feel very similar to a switch.” The language Kit uses to describe this personality switching is common of those who identify as plural. This conversation occurred sometime after our initial interview. While keeping in touch, Kit would reach out with experiences she thought were important to share, experiences that were continually changing her

understanding of herself that has also been filled with euphoria and joy. In this section, I want to explore the desires and performances of feeling and being more animal than human at times and what this particular performative doing otherwise does for queer and trans youth of color.

The idea of becoming an animal or feeling like an animal is not present among all furries, but for some of the furries interviewed in this project, especially those who are also therian, becoming more in touch with ones identified species through their fursona impacted their lived relationship to themselves, their body, and with others. During this project, in the last three years, I have met furries who embody their fursona through an attempt to feel more like the creature, the critter, or the animal, that is represented through their fursona in order to feel bodily and emotional harmony within themselves. For example, in feeling and seeing oneself as more "dog," one may feel more in tune with how they see and feel themselves along with how they want to be seen and felt by others. In looking to my own fursona, she is often illustrated as a small anthropomorphic cat with human-like features. While I sometimes act presentable through her, there are times when the embodiment of my fursona extends to a desire to act more cat than human. At furry conventions my main form of communication while I am in my fursuit, or when I am fully embodying my fursona, is limited to cat-like sounds such as *meows* and *purrs*. As I sense my fully imagined and embodied cat tail, paws, and ears, I become more cat-like in my behavior with others. This behavior is also not limited to outwardly expressing myself as a cat. Others in certain furry settings reciprocate and encourage this feral back and forth with me and communicate in the way they have embodied their fursona. While this

type of embodiment was at first strange and awkward, it has impacted how I communicated myself to others beyond what had been available to me before furry, before my ability to embody my fursona. This animal-like embodiment that accompanied my fantastical fursona allowed for me to feel for the first time a different way of presenting in the world that felt more in harmony with how I saw myself, feminine and ethereal.

For some furries, the feeling that accompanies fursona disembodiment comes with the realization that, as stated by Roxxy, they are tired of being a "boring human." Throughout the interviews, furries described how embodying their fursona would lead to feelings of euphoria but also how such feelings would also lead to a state of dissatisfaction post-embodiment or not being able to fully embody the self in a satisfying way. The inability to embody the fursona led to the realization that being without or unable to express the self through their fursona is often understood as frustrating and exhausting. In this section I explore "boring" as the state of discontent and frustration with the domesticated *here and now* that leads many of the participants of this study to the creative pursuit to feel otherwise, or the attempt to create an alternative way of being and knowing toward a *then and there*, via the fursona.

K9 is a plural system of seven, and its co-host Seb is a therian alter which has resulted in K9 carrying "therian identities," or nonhuman identities. K9 describes Seb as existing in a "human form" when she fronts, but in K9's "head space," Seb exists as her fursona. In allowing Seb to explore her furry side, K9 sought to encourage her by buying her a muzzle she can wear when fronting, along with other objects that are often

associated with owning a dog. In giving space for Seb to express herself when she fronts, it states that when she is fully embodied, it's "fun" and that these experiences have been wonderful to experience with Seb. Fun is an integral part of what being a dog feels like for Seb, which includes having "no thoughts," and as explained further,

> K9: Like you know how dogs and puppies are just very high energy and want love and want to play? That's exactly the headspace. I generally go nonverbal in these moments and can communicate through small noises. My partners are always able to translate what each noise means after being together for a certain amount of time, so I don't even need to actually speak in order to still communicate with others. The best way I can describe what it's like being a dog is just, fun!

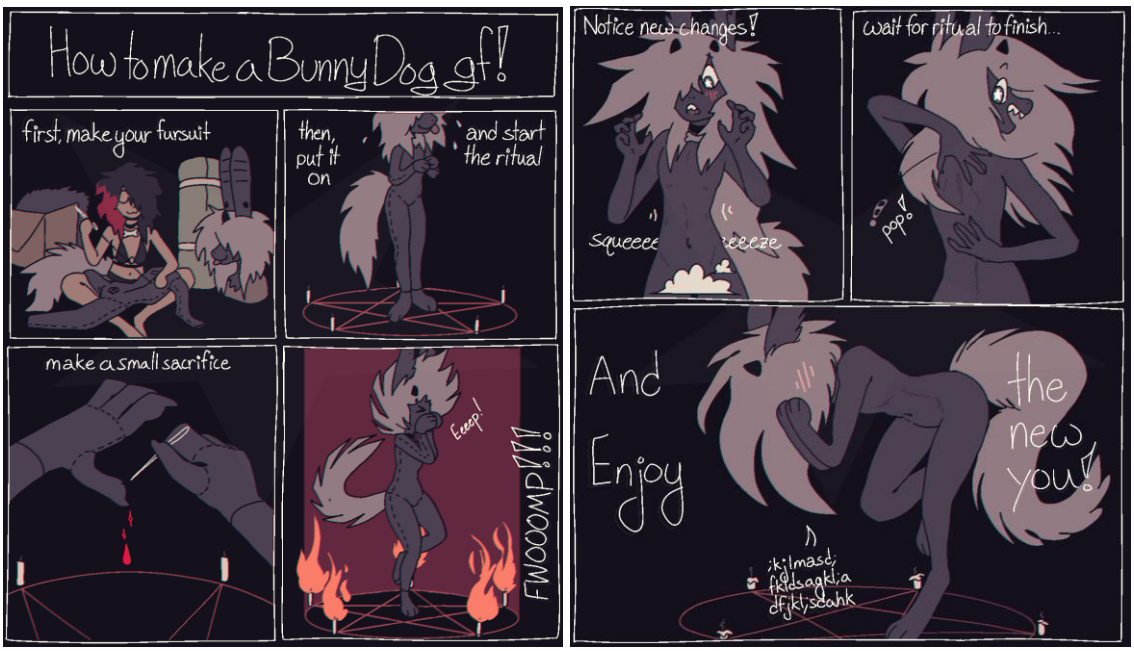
When elaborating on "fun," she clarifies its distance from kink or sex and recalls a certain "situationship," or an undefined romantic or sexual relationship, with someone "who is not a furry themselves" and who is also unfamiliar with therian identities. As expressed by K9, becoming dog with others who are unfamiliar with such feral practices can be misunderstood as "a kink thing," which is understandable as muzzles, collars, and leashes for personal use are often used in the context of kink play. However, for K9, these objects assist in expressing, or assisting, its headmates' therian and fursona identities that are often not associated with kink or sexual play. They are instead items that extend into a "lifestyle" and an "identity" that for K9 must be respected. In other words, "Seb is therian, and she is her fursona" and when she puts on her muzzle, and puts on her collar, she feels "affirmed" to look and feel more like a dog. While the person they

were with during their situationship was into “pet play” and was “probably getting something out of it,” K9 didn’t mind, as long as “they respected” that these acts and expressions were “not that.”

In addition to collars, leashes, and muzzles, a tool in supporting Seb’s expression of their therian and furry embodiment is consuming lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD. During our interview, K9 described further her experience with her situationship where they had met up and took “acid,” which led to Seb fronting and wanting to go to the park. After getting on her leash, collar, and muzzle, they both went to the park and Seb was able to do “whatever dogs do when they go to the park.” K9 described LSD as a drug that at the time not only “enhanced” their park experience by making it more “fun,” it also “heightened” Seb’s “animalistic traits” where she felt “more like a dog” as it “altered her brain” which let her “feel looser.” That is, Seb being able to feel more like a dog resulted in her becoming “freer” in herself and being able to express herself through her “animalistic traits” fully. For many of the participants of this study, their performance, art, objects, and substances, were central in feeling closer to a true sense of self.

**Figure 6**

*Roxxy's Comic "How to make a Bunny Dog GF!"*




*Note:* [Digital Art], by Roxxy, How to make a Bunny Dog GF, (2021).

Roxxy is similar to K9 in how certain objects supported her ability to express herself through her fursona as a way to feel closer to actualizing herself as a "giant dog woman." Roxxy explains how when she was ten years old, she discovered furry culture on the internet "by means of furry rave music videos" which led to a jealously of anthropomorphic animal characters that had "tails, pointed ears, and digitigrade legs" when she "had none." In reflecting on her attraction to "sparkle furs," or furry characters that at the time were often "scantily clad in tripps and bikinis and glow sticks," she described how her draw to furry characters in elementary and early middle school inspired her to create wearable "paper ears" that would attach to her head while tying a sweater in a certain way around her waist to make her shadow appear more animal like. In high school Roxxy would have more of an interest in dogs and demons which led to

fantasies about being born a dog and eventually requesting her partner to be her "owner." In that pet/owner environment she felt "confident enough" to express her "kintype," or the species she identifies with, freely. Later, during college, she began wearing collars and making "paw gloves," "started barking as a new stim and means of euphoria," and requested that her friends refer to her as a dog. Earily in her life, furry was therefore a starting point in being able to sense and feel, thus explore, her identity via her kintype and the spaces in which these types of expressions were accepted which were occupied by those who were also expressing themselves as "the species of their fursona in casual dress." For many furries in this study, fursona embodiment is a way to express and explore the self beyond the confines of what the "boring" human allows. To put another way, "boring" describes the lived reality of being domesticated, or a reality that intentionally lacks queer and disorderly expressions, where feral acts and desires are often surveilled and made inaccessible and policed.

During our interview, Roxxy shared with me a "short transformation comic" she illustrated titled "How to make a Bunny Dog gf." This comic was first described to me as being quite important to Roxxy, or very dear to her heart, as it allowed for her to "peer into a reality" where she could be a "giant dog woman instead of a boring human." For Roxxy, being a "boring human" seemed to reflect a collective sense of being held back, limited, restricted, and hindered from expressing a true self that could potentially be expressed through an anthropomorphic animal character that has the ability to act like the species of their fursona. In other words, for some of the furries in this study, being able to have a tail, have paws, have fur, etc, was a way for them to express themselves fully

through being more animal-like and thus beyond what was thought of before creating and embodying their fursona. “How to make a Bunny Dog gf” was rooted in Roxxy’s experience building a fursuit for herself during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown of 2020. At the time, Roxxy was able to buy some fursuit materials and build a fursuit over a three-month period while isolated indoors. While she loved wearing her fursuit, she explained that she always “yearned for a more permanent solution.” Her comic was a way for her to “escape” further into a fantasy where she was able to feel through her art and a story that helps her feel what it was like to transform and thus become a giant dog woman.

Roxxy describes the affective textures of this embodied practice as experiencing the self through “fabricated memories and [the] suspension of disbelief.” In creating this comic, she states that she was able to feel “incredibly actualized” in a story that “vividly” imagines, as detailed by Roxxy,

> Roxxy: [O]pening my eyes and looking down at my new grey skin, and feeling the faux fur tighten down and meld onto me permanently. I could see myself exploring my back and only finding spine where a zipper used to be, and hear the handle pop off and the metallic clank of it hitting hardwood floor.

In reflecting on this transformation she states how she still cries to this day in “sheer euphoria imagining it all.” For Roxxy, becoming a giant dog woman put onto the page has become a way for her to feel closer to a “permanent solution” to being self-actualized, or the “idealized representation” of her “physical body as a furry.” In explaining why artworks are her preferred way to explore these feelings, she stated that in

order to feel like she is swinging around a giant tail, it felt “easier” to visually peer into a reality through an illustration rather than just holding this figure in their imagination. The page, For Roxxy, became a rich site of expression and representation where she could point to an image and say “this is my fursona,” and imagine with her idealized self a process of escaping into a fantasy of becoming otherwise perpetually.

For Valentine, embodying Poly became a way for her to express herself in a way that “deviates” from what is expected of her “as a human.” In relation to how Poly helped her “figure out” her gender in a “safe way”, Valentine additionally stated how this process was one that helped her “recognize” she had been “masking,” or suppressing neurodivergent behaviors in order to be perceived as neurotypical. As described by Valentine, her developing gendered becoming through Poly helped her understand her past “masking” behaviors which limited her for accessing certain expressions. This discovery through Poly led to Valentine “unmasking” more often and thinking of herself as “autistic,” or thinking of herself “moving through the world in an autistic fashion.” One of the reasons why Poly is part cat is because she feels that “cats are all a little autistic,” which lead to her to explain further,

> Valentine: That became the reason I wound up finding that a cat fit so well as my fursona. Poly was allowed to be weird about personal space and not very expressive and showing affection in weird little ways and go about little magic routines because she's a cat and cats do stuff like that, they're really expressive, but not in the way we might consider people to be expressive and thinking of poly

> like that naturally kind of led me to think about myself/ourself like that, the ways in which my experiences deviated from what was expected of me as a "human."

Valentine's description illustrated how the fursona is able to express "deviated" performances that negated what she considers human, or the ways in which for her being human necessitated masking practices. For Valentine, embodying a cat through her fursona presented a way for her to feel and express the self otherwise. She also stated that she often doesn't feel "all that human" but embodying and expressing herself through her fursona is "really empowering in an unmasking kind of way." This process was essential in "figuring out" her gender where instead of Poly only being a figure for gender relationality, she became a figure for how to relate to herself and her reality which includes her gendered being and becoming. In her own words, "Poly's an expression of my gender in as much as she's an expression of my autism, she's an expression of the way I want to move through the world."

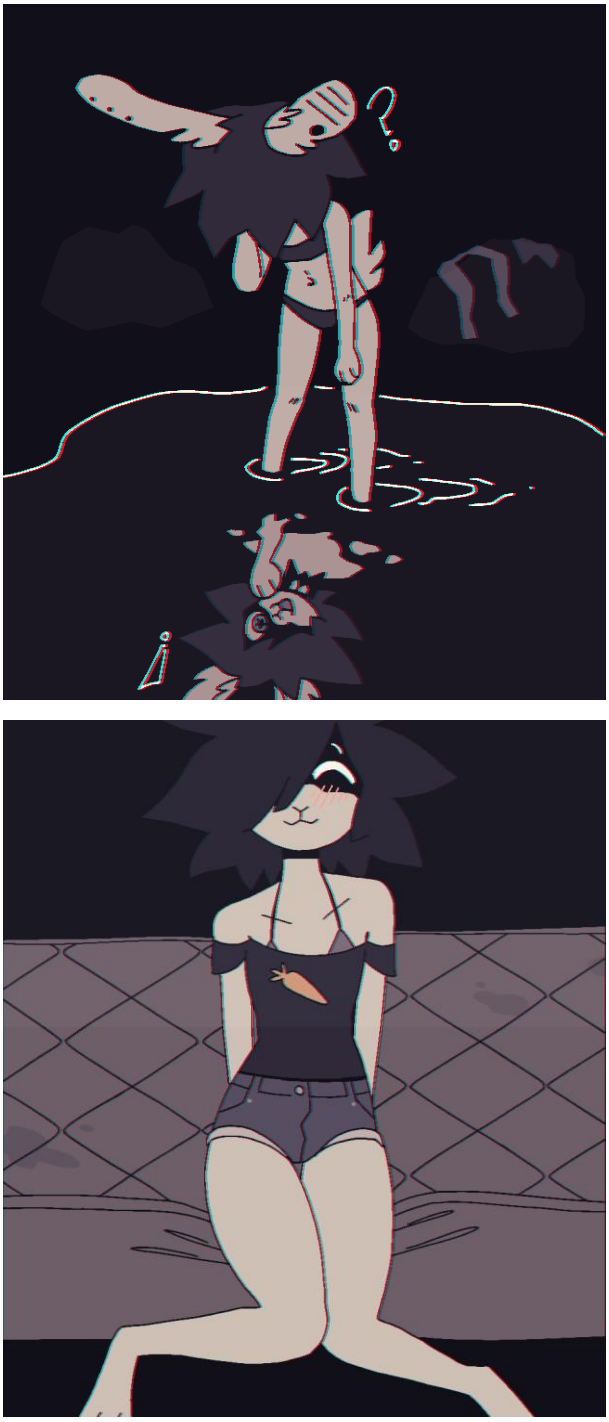
In this section, I am not seeking to define what it means to be "human," nor did I ask my participants to define what being a human means to them. Instead, in asking what does the fursona do for queer and trans youth of color, I look to reflections on fursona embodiment that resulted in detailed descriptions of how individuals felt in their body and with others as they embodied anthropomorphic characters in various ways. For many, humanness was used as a stand in for expressing lived experiences that were limited in one's ability to become themselves fully. However, becoming more animal-like through one's fursona, or being able to self-actualize a more idealized self through creating and embodying an anthropomorphic animal persona, became a way for one to explore

otherwise feelings new ways to express the self that departed from what is felt to be "human." In relation to sensing and feeling as a framework for guiding the subthemes of this section, sensing and feeling through being a dog allows for an alternative way to experience, know and relate to the self and others. To illustrate this method for sensing and feeling, fully embodying a "fox," a "dog", or a "giant dog woman" through creative venues, such as art and performance, was a way for some to discover and cultivate alternative ways expressing, being, and becoming the idealized self. Stated alternately, the fursona is a device to expand on the limits of the "boring human" experience that many find themselves excluded from to begin with. Living a "boring human" life is confining oneself to an ableist, capitalistic, white supremacist, and heteronormative culture that both overtly, and covertly, seeks to minimize and destroy queer and trans of color life. The fursona offers an alternative way of expressing, being, and understanding the world which many have left humanness for, or as simply stated by Valentine, "I don't see what's cracked up about being human anyway."

## Chapter Eight: “Falling Back”

**Figure 7**

Art of Roxxy’s Fursona Ramiel



*Note:* [Digital Art], by Roxxy, Two pieces: River and Clothes, (2021).

Ramiel was created by Roxxy to represent her experiences, and wished experiences, in her youth, specifically in high school. Ramiel also lives in an alternative reality described as "Ramiel's High School AU" where he exists. Ramiel is self-created, a particular type of head mate called a "thought form," which is an intentionally created member of a system. Ramiel was created "long after" Roxxy graduated high school; she often embodies her as a way to engage with her youth and a desired youth experience. In explaining this form of fursona embodiment further, Roxxy first shared with me selected memories from her past as a way to show how she arrived at this practice of creating alternative realities and this particular thoughtform through furry art that for her gave way to moments of euphoria, a prerequisite for traumatic release and catharsis.

When Roxxy began high school, she was court ordered to live with her grandparents after her mother could no longer take care of her or legally come into contact with her. While moving away from her mother was a relief from being physically and emotionally abused by her, living with her grandparents had its own negative impact on Roxxy due to what he expected of her while under his legal guardianship. During the interview she states that her grandfather "was a direct product of machismo culture in Latin America" and that "where he failed to have a son of his own…he saw me as his opportunity to raise a son into a proper man." However, as Roxxy explains, "Unbeknown to him, I was not only gay, but transgender and even autistic." Over the next few years, Roxxy would be verbally and emotionally abused by her grandfather for "having a poor grasp on Spanish" for "being confused at vague instructions", for "being effeminate in

demeanor and dress", and, as stated by his grandfather, for being "more useless than a woman." During this time her grandfather would question her why she didn't have or want a girlfriend while she was dating her boyfriend in secrecy. This resulted in Roxxy running away at the age of seventeen after being accepted into a prestigious research university where she felt safe to block all of her family's phone numbers and change her first and last name as a way to sever all ties to her family. These events and memories were important to Roxxy as they would become sites for her furry art that featured her fursona Ramiel as she became a figure that embodied her youth and her youth experiences.

Roxxy's way of discussing what her fursona does was to talk about her memories through her art which are represented in the various pieces that were shared throughout our interview. For her, illustrating Ramiel within her alternate universe is how Roxxy feels parts of herself fully. Therefore, the following descriptions will heavily rely on the parts of our conversation where she discusses her art, her memories, and her alternative realities as a way to explore and illustrate her lived experience. In the first image that introduces this section, Roxxy draws a piece titled "River" which shows her fursona Ramiel, a younger version of Roxxy, looking at *himself* in the reflection of the water. The purpose of this piece, as explained by Roxxy, is that she wanted to create an experience that showed Ramiel "having fun in some water in a fem presenting bathing suit." This experience is one that Roxxy wishes she had growing up in her youth; \instead she was forced to wear "masc swim trunks" which did not align with how she wanted to present or see herself. Her alternate reality, however, situates Ramiel happy, carefree, and

disconnected from all of the “troubles” of Roxxy’s teenage experiences. As Roxxy watches Ramiel, a part of her younger self, wear a two-piece feminine bathing suit, she explains that this experience is cathartic, as she feels a part of herself through her fursona, through her head mate. She elaborates on this momentary euphoric feeling by explaining the embodied experience of being able to live vicariously through this image of Ramiel and his happiness where she is able to feel happy and thus brings happiness to her whole system.

In the second piece shown at the beginning of this section “Clothes”, Roxxy’s fursona Ramiel is shown wearing “feminine garments” as she sits on a dirty mattress. Roxxy explains that when she came out as trans to her boyfriend and his mother, they were both very supportive and saw this moment as an opportunity to take her out to get her first set of “fem presenting clothing.” While the clothes in the image are not accurate to what her first affirming dress looked like, they were clothes that her fursona Ramiel “would love himself.” While the reality where Ramiel resides is different from our shared reality, it shares aspects of Roxxy’s past in objects and environments that represent her lived experience. For example, the mattress shown behind her is representative of the “poorer household” she grew up in. It becomes clear that Roxxy’s alternative realities are often mixed, a collection of past objects and environments from her youth and childhood interspersed with her fursona and the aesthetics that reflect each of their personalities. In describing the practice further, she explains that these artworks that creatively collect an assemblage of memoires, environments, and objects for her system members to exist in which helps her feel seen in her lived experience. In other words, they are a reminder of

the moments of "euphoria" that came from these selected memories which are (re)created and presented through art of her fursonas within an alternative reality that represents an idealized youth.

**Figure 8**

*Panel of Roxxy's Comic*

*Note:* [Digital Art], by Roxxy, Story 3 Page 6.

Along with another piece shared with me, she discusses a short comic that features Ramiel within her alternative high school reality which at the same time recounts her graduation from high school and her move to college with her boyfriend. As a sort of "end cap" of this particular alternative reality, she illustrated a sequence of events that

include some of her “favorite bits and pieces” of her past that also signified an end to her high school experience but in a different way than what had originally happened that instead reflected a more “brighter outlook.” For Roxxy, her high school alternate universe felt like a way for her to take past memories and recreate them using her own “creative liberties” which for her gave way to feeling “wonderfully blissful.” An example of her “staying away from reality” was how her boyfriend had graduated high school years ahead of her, but she wanted to have his own representation follow Ramiel more closely alongside her high school experience and placed him in her cohort. Other examples include how dialogue changes were made alongside some clothing and attire changes that were not accurate to the memories, but the general structure of fond memories stayed the same that reflected some idealized changes that for Roxxy creates feelings of euphoric healing through her fursona. Overall, Roxxy explains these pieces as “wished experiences” and “struggles” that she was compelled to adapt into the “happy ending” that she managed to achieve “notwithstanding adversity” and with help from her partner. She explains that her furry artwork is a way to relive the “few happy memories” she holds “very close to her heart.” This could not be possible without the physical manifestation of Roxxy’s head mate as an anthropomorphic bunny.

The fursona is a complex device often used for feeling the self, understanding the self, and experiencing the self in strange and queer ways. As discussed in the previous section, the fursona for many is a technology for sensing and feeling otherwise, or for feeling free, euphoric, different, wild, safe, etc, due to what the fursona can offer as a flexible device for individual self-exploration. In addition to the fursona as a sense

making device, I found, through various interviews, that the fursona was also a device for feeling, processing, and mitigating bad feelings, or the many feelings that queer and trans people of color experience in their everyday life.

*Framing Subthemes: Affective Commons*

This section focuses on bad feelings, or specifically bad feelings felt and described by a selection of queer and trans people of color who are also furries. The bad feelings discussed in this section and across the subthemes are also situated as specific felt realities of minoritarian subjects within a majoritarian sphere. In other words, "bad feelings" describes the feelings of queer and trans people of color within their material reality, the felt conditions of queer and trans of color life in contemporary society. My interest in bad feelings is rooted in Eric Stanley's curiosity with "negative affects" and the ways in which "bad feelings produce psychic bonds and collective energies in the practice of queer worlding… — an affective commons" (2018, p. 491).

In expanding on "affective commons", Stanley describes *commons* as "a place, a structure of feeling, and an idea" that "provides refuge in the ruins of capital's totality" (2018, p. 489) and the *affective commons* as "a cosmology of feelings, a resource in common" (2018, p. 492). While affective commons is useful in describing a felt sense of refuge, these conceptualizations of affective commons are not descriptive of a liberation from capitalist and settler-colonialist culture. Instead, while the commons can articulate affective sanctuaries and spaces of liberatory retreat for minoritarian subjects, Stanley notes that such understandings of the common "us" runs the risk of abstracting difference and reproducing the very violent culture and structures that bring us in common. In other

words, the commons is not an innocent concept illustrating queer utopic feelings and spaces. However, the attempts and failures to engage in a collective "us" can illustrate and chart powerful movements towards feral futures. Therefore, the analysis of the risks and failures by queer and trans people of color in this project through an analysis of furry affective commons allows for a focus on queer radical potentiality in the collectivity of bad feelings of "those disposed of and made disposable by latest capitalism" (E. Stanley, 2018, p. 503).

In this chapter I focus on feelings that comprise a furry affective commons, or particular feelings and sensorial atmospheres that, as Hil Malantino describes, runs "counter to the structural violence engendered by the public/private divide so central to capitalist development" (2022, p. 10). In being moved by Stanley's and Berlant's usage of "the commons", Malantino names a "trans affective commons" to specifically address the collective feelings of trans people within and against systems of sociopolitical violence against trans people. These particular feelings address, what Malantino illustrates as the,

> collective sense of fatigue, exhaustion, and outrage brought about by inhabiting lifeworlds very much shaped by broken socialities that produce more or less unlivable lives, while bearing in mind that such negative affect is also collective acknowledgment of and testament to the inadequacies of the present conjuncture, that it is and can be mobilized in the service of imagining, and molding, a more livable provisional life. (Malatino, 2023, p. 189)

His framework of a “trans affective commons” is useful in this chapter in that it reflects the feelings of the trans youth of color in this study who together seek to image a move livable life through their fursona. Similar to how Malantino articulates a trans affective commons, I understand the feelings, ideas and psychic bonds by queer and trans people of color who are also furries as a gathering of subjects “in solidarity by virtue of being dissatisfied with this world and working against its casually brutal reproduction” (2022, p. 10). It is within a collective of bad feelings understood as a furry affective commons, that resources in common are utilized, shared, and mutually engaged with which, for many, make difficult feelings, desires, and a difficult life more bearable. In short, this chapter looks to negative affects, specifically queer and trans bad feelings that have formed bonds which resulted in a collection of shared resources within a furry affective commons for fleeing momentarily the conditions that reproduce queer and trans violence.

Illustrated in the following sections are the ways in which individuals have expressed their bad feelings through furry art and fursona embodiment which for many has been integral to their survival as queer and trans people of color. Looking to how other critical scholars frame negativity, or bad feelings, as a site for affective inquiry (Malatino, 2022; Smilges, 2023; E. Stanley, 2018), this chapter focuses on queer and trans of color negativity, and how participants navigate, manage, and disrupt normative social spheres that produce violent and sometimes deadly conditions, specifically for queer and trans people of color. In exploring what the fursona does for queer and trans youth of color, I situate the fursona as a tool and a resource for individual survival that

relies on collective queer and trans of color worldmaking practices for resistance and livability.

## Personal Narrative

*When I first started to re-engage with furry in my thirties, I remember feeling bad about my body, my inability to be myself or engage with others in ways that I desired but did not yet understand how to or have the words for but continued to blindly engage with through furry. During the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had a lot of time to think about myself, my body, my relationship with my friends, my family, my partners, which were all hidden within me for years. Not only was my body at the center of this internal conflict, but memories, events, and traumas relating to my family, my career, and my romantic relationships both past and present became a site for considering at great length my own happiness and my own state of being. At that point during the most isolating parts of the COVID-19 lockdown in the United States, I didn't know how long I was going to live, if I was going to see my friends again, or if I was going to see my family again. Life was unpredictable and uncertain. My grandmother had already passed away from the virus as the first wave of vaccines where being distributed. It was during this time that I began to curiously look back to furry, specifically queer furry spaces that existed online where I could still be social and explore my confusing feelings with others. It was then that I began to see myself in furry art, or see my queer and trans feelings reflected in the lives of other furries as they depicted their reality through art and performance. Furry art therefore comforted me, it was reassuring to feel that others were also experiencing what I was feeling as a queer and trans person of color, there was a*

*sense of solidary and connection in our shared disappointment with the world and our inability to become and express ourselves fully. From gender affirming art that spoke to the tumultuous first few months of starting hormone replacement therapy to art depicting how it feels to come out to your family as gay, queer or transgender, furry art spoke to my life and the lives of those around me. It was strange as I could not find this type of representation among other types of media around me. However, within furry spaces, furry art and performance reflected my own lived experiences which inspired me to participate in this exploration of queer and trans life as I began to create my own art and play with my own fursona. The bad feelings then began to shift, not disappear, but become more tolerable as I felt connected with others who made me feel seen. Months later, as restrictions began to lift, I would attend a furry convention that would help in mitigating the negative feelings associated with the presentation of my body.*

> *Journal entry 11/20/2020: Attending AnthroNorthwest was an intense but amazing experience. It was a private event that spanned across three floors of a large hotel in downtown Seattle. When I arrived, the space was already filled with furries, I was overwhelmed. I have been a furry online for so long, but I haven't been to a gathering this large. I was shocked and frozen both physically and emotionally. I was not sure at first how to interact with others in this space, but over time I settled. What was so interesting to me was the amount of openness and expressive communication with strangers that made me feel happy and safe. It was as if the social conventions of normal life were changed to be more friendly and positive. For example, I had an experience in the elevator where furries*

*would comment on each other's furry gear and respond in such full and furry ways. People were just communicating more to each other freely. Personalities seemed to have come alive, and they would converse with me, and I felt open to converse with them being in this familiar furry atmosphere. There was a benefit in knowing so many things about furry due to being a furry for so long where the basic elements of furry and things I would hear, see, and feel online were so familiar at this in-person convention and made me feel comfortable. What I mean by comfortable is that I was able to openly wear a tail and feel myself through my fursona. I don't have a fursuit, and at times I felt almost underdressed, but wearing just a tail felt comfortable and most people had something on them/or were wearing something to express their fursona to others. Seeing everyone being who they are through furry made me want to change how I presented myself more and more. As I wore my tail, I felt that I was able to embody parts of my fursona in some way and in a way act more like her, more like me.*

*This journal entry was written two months before I started hormone replacement therapy (HRT). I recently came across this entry on one of those nights after undergoing HRT for quite some time where you grow curious about your past self and what life was like before everything had changed. At the same time, I feared observing any part of my past self in photographs and in my journals as I was certain if observed fully, they would ignite uncomfortable emotional and bodily sensations. For example, looking back I saw someone unfamiliar, someone straining to understand his conflicting desires and ability to exist in this world as he looked out onto the furry convention floor at that specific*

*moment. However, as I read this entry over and over, a part of me was curious about these unsettling feelings that I knew directly connected to my own fursona and thus my desire to start HRT. While looking backward sometimes hurt, I was interested in deciphering proto-trans feelings within the creation process of my fursona as a way to consider my pathway into my own trans acceptance. More specifically, I was interested in how I described wanting to be more like my fursona, an imagined feminine figure that I was able to see myself as the more I embodied her with my partner, with my friends, in virtual reality, in furry chatrooms, wherever and whenever possible. While I was already considering HRT within the weeks leading up to the furry convention, it was being among other furries, and seeing how so many were able to express themselves fully through their fursona, that pushed me into becoming who I wanted to be. What was first required for this step in my transition was the space I found myself in, a space filled with other furries who all came to be seen for who they wanted to be seen as, and I wanted to experience that freedom too. For the first time it in looking at others around me, it felt possible to feel something other than what I was feeling at the time.*

*As I re-read this journal entry and reflected on past memories, I realized how necessary this particular experience had been for me in exploring other ways of being that I knew at that moment I did not fully understand but I needed to attempt to engage with through what I was most familiar with in relation to bodily harmony, my fursona. I knew that despite the fear and anxiety of potentially leaving everything behind, to reject the very body and life which had granted me protection and safety in my every day, I still wanted to be more like "her", I wanted to be my fursona which when embodied made me*

*feel that life was finally worth living. For most of my time in this world I wanted to live a life where when I look at myself I can feel happy for how I look, how my body looks, and confident in how I present myself. It was at this furry convention that I began to really wonder how it would feel to be happy with how one looks when they look back at themselves in photographs, in the mirror. It was during this furry convention that I felt for the first time that it could be possible to live otherwise. When I got home from the furry convention I remember looking back and taking some time to process those conflicting feelings. It was only days later that I would arrange an appointment to start hormone replacement therapy and begin my medical transition.*

I present this detailed narrative as a way to connect to the continued feelings of depression, doubt, and anxiety and the stories that discuss how such feelings were felt and mitigated through the fursona which had come up consistently throughout the interviews for this study. This section is not so much focused on bad feelings alone, or a centering of bad feelings as a way to define the static state queer and trans youth of color who are also furries. It is instead descriptive as a driving force for fursona creation and/or fursona embodiment for some furries where bad feelings, or the often-felt conditions of queer and trans people collectively within states of oppression and violence, became a way to resist and gain autonomy collectively through art and performance. For many, the fursona is used to feel, reflect on, and address bad feelings in order to potentially counter the precarious circumstances that many queer and trans youth of color are forced to endure. In the following sections, participants describe stories that illustrate the ways in which the fursona has attended to bad feelings through the fursona, as passed on by other

furries, or those who are also collectively dissatisfied with the state of being queer, trans, and/or a person of color in states where structured violence against their lives are continually taking place.

*"Feeling Shitty"*

During my interactions with furries, many shared descriptions of bad feelings alongside their initial interest in creating and embodying their fursona. However, the detailed feelings were not due to fursona creation or embodiment. Instead, these particular bad feelings often stemmed from what was happening before they created their fursona, or before embodied fursona experiences, and how creative forms of embodiment were ways for individuals to feel less bad, or "shitty." Throughout the interviews, furries shared stories of pain, anxiety, stress, and guilt, which were often accompanied by stories about how everyone sought out fursona creation and embodiment as a way to escape, resist, and calm particular moments of suffering. These stories had become important moments of self-discovery, or unforgettable milestones that had shifted their life in positive ways due to the impact furry had.

My focus on "shitty" feelings first came from my interview with Skip and how she described the use of her two fursonas since being involved in furry. Skip has two different fursonas that function quite differently. The two have discrete roles. Skip, in explaining her relationship with her first fursona Cola, stated that "If I'm feeling really shitty, I will often draw her." Cola was created by Skip when she was sixteen years old as not necessarily a fursona Skip embodies, but a fursona that is there for her, alongside her, that helps her when she feels bad. Where Cola is noted as being with Skip and thus never

embodied, her other fursona Fleabag is most often lived through and fully embodied. Each, while different, have specific uses for Skip in helping her ease painful conditions and the negative feelings that arise from her lived reality.

During the first half of my interview with Skip I noticed that she was drawing on her tablet. I understood this as someone who also needs to be kept busy during a new or a stressful interaction. Therefore, I did not think anything of this. However, when asking more about Cola, she naturally drew attention to what she had been drawing during our conversation and noted that she draws all the time, but when she is feeling any kind of "intense emotion" Cola is someone she can "fall back on." During our interview, I asked Skip if she could recall a time when Cola was "with her" and "helped" her through a difficult situation. In continuing to draw, she stated that,

> Skip: I feel like whenever... I just draw all the time. I'm drawing right now, and she is someone I can really fall back on if I'm feeling any kind of intense emotion, I can draw her in that. And I don't know, it's like I'm able to express it through drawing it that way. There's definitely been times when, and I'm not sure if it's even always helpful, the way that I do it, but it is like she's always there. When I was younger, I would draw lots of gore with her to deal with having those intense emotions, and as a way to not self-harm. I would just do that. And I say that she's this really kind of happy, joyful character. But at the same time, I do have lots of really sad art of her from when, if I'm feeling really shitty, I will often draw her. Sometimes she can also just be a reminder to myself of that I can feel happy. That

> can be really difficult when I'm feeling really depressed, to remember that happiness exists, and she kind of can be that reminder for me.

Falling back onto and/or into the fursona became a defining feature for Skip to quell, escape, relieve painful, stressful, and violent conditions and circumstances that had hindered her bodily and relational existence. Cola's presence was important for Skip due to how Cola allowed for a way to feel bad in a creative way that redirected violent impulses towards art rather than to herself. For example, in artwork shown to me, Skip depicted a figure with a knife used to cut off one of their own wings with. Blood pours from this severing and the figure is shown to be almost unresponsive to such a brutal act. Skip describes this kind of illustration as "gore" art, or for Skip, art that depicts violence, blood, and bodily harm in various ways. To elaborate, when recalling her younger self, who was often sad, she would "draw gore and stuff" with Cola to deal with "intense emotions" that would help resist her urge to "self-harm." Even though Cola is a "happy, joyful character," as described by Skip, Cola was often depicted as a main figure in "really sad art" when Skip was "feeling shitty." According to Skip, this practice reminded her that she can feel happiness when it may be difficult, at times of crisis or when she is "really depressed".

Through Cola, Skip has successfully been able to express her own sadness and depression in art, which has helped foster a continual connection with Cola. As an outlet for reducing "self-harm," Cola has been a figure in which bad feelings can be felt and expressed through that sidesteps acts on the physical self. Cola is described as a companion in which Skip can "fall back on" when life feels "shitty." Falling back on

Cola, who is “always there”, is a continual reminder that “happiness exists” despite “feeling shitty” and “depressed”. Her descriptions highlight how bad feelings are resisted through art and a way to live with and beyond bad feelings. Instead of acting on bad feelings, they are facilitated through art, specifically through a direct and creative connection with her self-created fursona Cola. This results in a link to Cola’s happiness, to the joyful and hyper nature of Cola as she is a reminder of life outside of the “depressive episodes” that Skip described with me. For Skip, the creation of and continued relationship with Cola is an important survival technology that has impacted her ability to get “through things” and alleviate depressive episodes that have been present throughout her life.

While Cola is with her at all times as an outlet for depression and a reminder of happiness, Fleabag is a fursona she fully embodies and utilizes in a different way for comfort, care, and support. As described before, Cola lives alongside Skip while her other fursona Fleabag is primarily embodied. Fleabag is her “current” fursona who, in contrast to Cola, presentsas sad and depressed. Creating Fleabag became another way for her to fall back onto a fursona to feel relief in a different but strategic way where becoming Fleabag offered an array of tools for building confidence and a sense of safety. Both of Skip’s fursonas, Cola and Fleabag, were created during different times of her life, addressing different modes of support, care, and comfort. While Cola was created when Skip was sixteen or seventeen, Fleabag is a more recent creation that addressed her environmental and social circumstances that were impacting her everyday life. In looking back at both of her fursonas she recalls the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2021, which

coincided with an array of other events that led to the creation of another figure that she can fall back onto,

> Skip: I live in Victoria, which is in Melbourne. That's where we had really, really harsh lockdowns. I think there might have been one of the harshest in the world. At the same time, I'd just broken up with my ex, who I had been with for three and a half years. It was also my first ever relationship. I was also just really trying to deal with taking care of myself, with the pandemic happening, with having this really difficult kind of life things happening. The only thing that I could really do during the day was work, and once a day I would be able to go on a walk, and I would go down to the creek. And then outside of that, the only other thing I could do was smoke weed, and watch anime. At the time I remember feeling like I need a new fursona and I didn't have a fursona that I really connected with at that time, which was a new feeling for me. It was unusual for me to not have someone that I really connected with in that way. I remember drawing her, I remember just being like, "I'm going to draw really fucked up cat, and that's going to be my new thing." I'd been thinking a bit, "I want to make a cat." And then I think I drew her in one of my outfits that I have, and it just felt right. It just felt like me at that time. She is a bit different now than when I first made her. She's maybe three years old? She is lots different now, because when I made her, it was just really this embodiment of all this pain I was going through. So, she was really fucked up. She had all these scratches in her ears and stuff, and her tail was all fucked up,

and had bald patches and stuff. I've changed her now, so she's a bit healed over, I suppose. At that time it was just a pretty dark time.

For Skip, Fleabag's creation comes from a reaction to her life, her surroundings, and her relationship with others. In exploring this embodiment, Skip describes the experience as feeling "comfortable, warm and safe". She describes that her connection to Fleabag is often during the rainy seasons, or during the winter or autumn. In elaborating, she states that she really feels her during seasons where it is usually gray and rainy outside. During our interview she discussed that when she walks by the creek, or when she is in nature, is when she is fully able to be herself through Fleabag. It is during these moments that Skip is able to not think of herself as how she appears physically "in the real world," but instead how she wants to appear in that moment, as Fleabag, which creates "comfortable, warm, and safe" feelings for her. Similar to Kit, Skip uses Fleabag to become someone she wants to be seen and understood as and uses this imagined figure as a way to separate herself from how she appears. Through fursona embodiment, most often when she is alone and in nature, she becomes who she wants to be, or becomes how she is truly feeling and how she views herself, which is simply described as being "me" which gives her relief and comfort.

Becoming Fleabag has a similar impact to Skip as existing with Cola, but her relationship with Fleabag is directly connected to her ability to embody her rather than being alongside her. To elaborate, when Skip becomes Fleabag, she feels "comfortable, warm, and safe." This direct embodiment is different than how she interacts with Cola, but they are both used as a device to navigate depression, anxiety, and stress. While Cola

is described as happy, hyper, and joyful, Fleabag is given different descriptive attributes that describes a character who is a relief to represent herself through, or embody, by being someone who is a weird and scruffy "genderfuck creature." In giving further details, she states that Fleabag is "a stoner," "dirty," "wears shit clothes," "just fucking horny," and "probably doesn't have a job." In ending her description of Fleabag, she states that, "…a lot of the reason why she's not worrying about any of this is because she probably just doesn't fucking care." Skip make it clear that while she does "fucking care" about herself in ways that are different than Fleabag, "coming into" Fleabag is a relief where when she embodies her she is able to feel and capture her fursona's carefree and confident attitude. She reiterates that in her "real life" she often feels strained, anxious, and worried about herself and how she expresses her true feelings and desires. What she gains from fursona embodiment is that while she often feels embarrassed in her day-to-day life, specifically in how she feels about her desires and expressions which are restricted and repressed, embodying Fleabag gives her the ability to connect to a sense of confidence in moments where she can finally become who she wants to be, carefree.

"Falling back" describes the many ways in which many furries understand the use of their fursona(s). The fursona, as a technology in common with other furries, creates a way for many to engage with an affective commons, a site of common refuge, that offers the fursona as a device for individual manipulation for relief from the conditions in which many queer and trans people of colors endure. The follow sub sections elaborate on this process, where Kit, Roxxy, and Nghia have illustrated for me how falling back on the

fursona has been used to “escape” and/or “process" anxiety, depression, grief, pain, violence, and fear, or in other words, “shitty feelings.”

*Escape*

Looking back to the episode of *My Strange Addiction* I referenced in the literature review, the featured furry Lauren describes her first fursona, Kiira, as a white fennec fox with pink trimming. During this description, an image drawn by Lauren of Kiira is shown to the audience as she continues explaining her furry experiences. She depicts Kiira in an image smiling, looking onto the viewer in a playful pose, happy and bright. After this brief description of her fursona, Lauren describes what her fursona does for her,

> Lauren: Normally I am kind of shy, but Kiira lets me break out my more outgoing and talkative side. If I am ever having a *bad* day, putting on the [fursuit] and going out will definitely end the day on a *good* note.

From this excerpt, certain audiences can broadly understand that the fursona is useful for Lauren. In addition to her words, it is revealed later that Lauren’s father had passed away when she was thirteen years old. She states that she became “antisocial,” “shy,” and “lost” after her father’s passing. However, the act of putting on her fursuit to embody Kiira is a way for her to become social again in a way that makes her feel happy and confident. While the episode deviates from the positive impacts of the fursona for Lauren and instead situates her as an “addicted” individual who needs professional intervention due to a growing concern from her family, the episode is witnessed by those who share similar feelings with Lauren. The episode’s message becomes queerly viewed,

and her performance becomes a site of inspirational becoming for Kit, a participant in this study.

Lauren stands alone; there are no other furries introduced or discussed in the episode. Lauren performs Kiira alone; her embodiment is shown to anyone watching when this episode aired over and over across various networks during the early 2000s. While some gawk at Lauren's queer/nonnormative practice in shock or distain, perhaps the purpose of this program, others are lured by her strange embodiment and take note of her feelings and movements. Muñoz states that "the act of performing and theatricalizing queerness in public takes on ever multiplying significance" (1999, p. 1). The queer act of embodying a fursona and becoming an anthropomorphic animal is similarly significant in our current climate where queer and trans of color life remains one within what Eric Stanley describes as an "atmosphere of violence", or a "deadly force that not only kills but makes life unlivable" (2021, p. 7). Therefore, such embodied performance, such expressions of queer being and relating to the self and the world, becomes for some access to alternative possibilities outside of such atmospheres, outside of "the thick hang of fog that allows us to know little else" (2021, p. 16). This chapter focuses on how some of the participants, who reside within this thick hang of fog, have learned to create and sustain a way of being and knowing through a shared technology in order to push away the haze, or to make life more livable.

During an interview with Kit, she describes how deeply she felt Lauren's performance; it was foundational for her own engagements with furry technologies and future fursona embodiment. After witnessing Lauren online when she was thirteen, Kit

immediately resonated with her feelings and became lured by her creative technology. As a powerful first introduction to furry, Kit stated that she discovered what being a furry was at thirteen and her first encounter with furry was through Lauren's words. She elaborated by asking me "do you know the show *My Strange Addiction*?" and reflected on how the show described furry for her which helped expand her understanding of why people create and embody a fursona. Kit also related to Lauren's particular circumstance and link to her "trauma" and "certain mental health issues" in which the fursona acts as a way to feel relief from the bad feelings rooted in these affective conditions. She described how she processed Lauren's use of her fursona by stating that she uses her fursona as a way to say, "I'm not me, I'm this fursona" and that Lauren is "basically putting on a mask, literally and figuratively". This reflection on Lauren led to Kit restating how she looked to this furry as a way to explore a particular technology that if you "don't like certain parts about yourself, or you don't like yourself at all, you just create this whole fursona to create that confidence". For Kit, how Lauren described furry and its use particular use for her resonated with Kit's own desire to create a fursona for confidence, or to create an alternative form of the self to embody that is more in line with how she wants to be seen and feel. Later in the interview Kit recalled how she created and embodied this newfound technology, a resource realized by watching and listening to Lauren.

Kit described a process for self-comfort through fursona embodiment that does not rely on a fursuit or a virtual furry avatar. Instead, Kit described how she imaged herself as her fursona as a way to relieve herself of the panic and nervousness that came from her uncomfortable relationship, her sense of disequilibrium, between her body and

herself. She explained that while she was in class she would experience a lot of social anxiety, these feelings would come up especially during gym class. As a way to become "calm" in such situations, she would imagine herself in the third person, watching herself but as her fursona. In other words, while in gym class, she would distance herself from her physical body by watching herself in her reality from afar. However, instead of watching herself as Kit, she would watch herself as Kita, her fursona. In place of Kit was Kita, a fox that did everything she was doing. She explains further that "if I'm in class, it's like I'm not sitting in class, it's my fursona sitting in class." For Kit, this practice removed anxiety, it was an act that comforted Kit by allowing her to feel like "not a person" where her physical body and her name had changed. She was someone else. In reflecting on this practice, Kit describes being "this other", being Kita, which for her was a type of "escapism."

This escape for Kit was described as "comforting," or escape as a way for her to relax in her mind for both long and short periods of time. She described that even for a moment, this practice was useful in "relaxing" her worries. Kit details this process further by stating that if she felt eyes on her, or the feeling that everyone is staring at her and judging her, being able to escape through Kita by imagining herself as her fursona would calm her anxiety in those panicked moments. During this practice, she recalls feeling "an absence of me and a presence of Kita" that through "pretending" Kit wasn't there the world would have "nothing to judge" which for her was comforting. While Kit's use of her fursona may not be directly similar to the ways in which Lauren used hers, the fursona as a technology for escape was useful in creating an individualized device for

comfort and a sense of calm during moments of anxiety and panic. In order to escape her physical body and relieve herself of the stresses and anxieties of being perceived, Kit imagines and embodies Kita, a practice made possible through a shared resource that Kit witnessed through Lauren.

What was different for Kit, in relation to Lauren's use, was how her body became the focus of her anxieties that developed a practice for escaping her body for the anthropomorphic. Kit described herself as trans throughout the interview and reflected on how Kita helped her in the past mitigate bodily discomforts and gain a confidence in embodying who she wanted to be now. While she stated that she escapes "less" because she has more confidence in herself now, her descriptive reflections of her life before her medical transition illustrated how her fursona was a way to feel a different body than her own, a body that at the time felt impossible to become but able to play with through an anthropomorphic figure. Kit stated that she hated her body growing up, especially during her teenage years. The way she combatted her symptoms of body dysmorphia was at first through "pretending" that her body did not exist. Instead of existing with humans, she would "fantasize" about a world in which all humans are "anthropomorphic furries." This imagined reality was a way for her to "tune out" her body and ignore it. Kit described that during this time she didn't acknowledge that her body existed, especially in moments when she was anxious or panicky at school. In attempting to escape her body, Kit described how the fursona acted as a way to distance herself from a body she "really hated" for a new body that helped her forget about the discomfort she felt daily,

> Kit: I really hated my body growing up. As a teenager, I pretended my body didn't exist. I would just fantasize about a world where it was okay that we were all these anthropomorphic furries. I felt so disconnected from my body and I pretended my body was gone. I just had a lot of body dysmorphia then and I pretty much just tuned out my body. I didn't think about it a lot. I just ignored it the best I could. In those moments where I would become Kita I would feel so disconnected from my body, and that is what I liked about those experiences of just pretending to be Kita. I didn't care what my body looked like in those moments because it didn't exist to me. I just pushed it all away as best as I could.

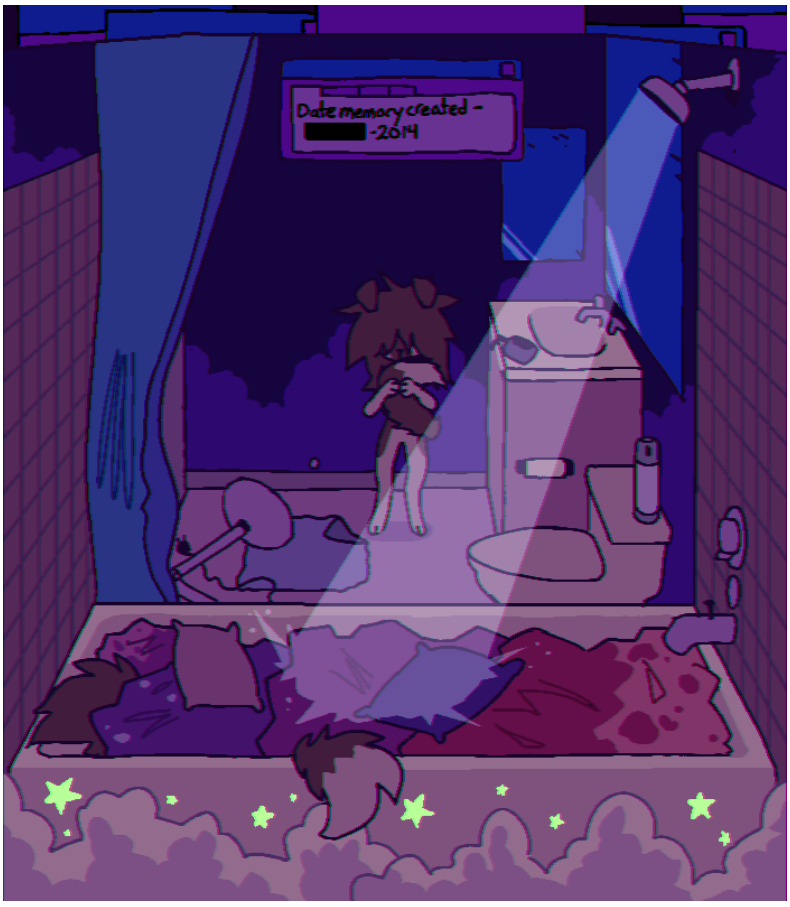
For Kit, the fursona offered a way for her to feel otherwise, or by presenting herself as an anthropomorphic she was able to express herself in a way she could not before. She described that while attending high school she could never dress the way she wanted to or look the way she wanted to for various reasons. However, she "put more effort" in crafting and modifying Kita by commissioning artwork of her which she was able to use online as an interactive avatar. She stated that she used Kita "everywhere" because she felt "ashamed" of who she was. However, in presenting herself at Kita, rather than "herself," she was able to gain confidence she lacked in a body she "hated." During those moments, Kit was disconnected and didn't care about what her body looked like. Instead, she ignored her body; it didn't exist. Her fursona Kita was central in this practice where embodiment would help her forget about her human body, who she was at the time, and how the world saw her. Kita became a way for Kit to embody an idealized self, one that she would look to in considering who she wanted to be and how she wanted

the world to see her. In imagining this idealized self, living and existing in place of her and thus completely changing her body into Kita, Kit felt a sense of comfort which helped not only with her anxiety but also, as described by Kit, in living a life otherwise which gave way to continued and long-term relief in her day to day.

*Processing Feelings*

**Figure 9**

*Art of Roxxy's Memory*




*Note:* [Digital Art], by Roxxy, Bedtub, 2021.

Along with using the fursona to fall back onto the moment, or to escape from a particular situation or circumstance, the fursona also became a way for furries to process

past feelings, specifically bad feelings rooted in traumatic events. Throughout the project, some of the furries I reached out to for an interview were resistant or hesitant to participate in video or audio interview. For many of the queer and trans people of color I interviewed, seeing themselves, hearing themselves, and not being able to fully present themselves as they want to for an extended period was not appealing. In reflecting on this experience and looking to my own feelings where I realized I would feel the same as I was not so confident in my voice or face early in my medical transition, I began to allow text-based interviews as an option for participation. This allowed participants to express in their own words their feelings and experiences while being able to present themselves through an avatar without having to use their voice or show their face. In talking with furries who chose text-based interviews, many discussed how this option allowed for a more expressive form of communication since many use text-based applications as a primary way to socialize and stay connected with others. This process resulted in rich illustrative details on how Roxxy was "processing" or attempting to internally engage with and feel past experiences cognitively and through in the body, her trauma through her fursona due to the unspecified time they were given to contemplate and respond to questions given. For example, in leaving Roxxy days to reflect on some of the broad questions I had proposed to her, she described in detail what I found to be an important and common utilization of the fursona which was illustrated in how they used their fursona to fall back onto as a way to create alternative memories and realities.

Roxxy believed that the traumatic experiences she has “endured” have contributed to her becoming plural. In reflecting on the traumatic events that took place in relation to her headmates, she stated that,

> Roxxy: I believe that experiences like that had contributed to me becoming plural, the dissociation became more frequent as I tried to cope in situations where my mother tried her best to protect me from her own visions. My best solution was to simply not be present, and without realizing my first headmate emerged. There was Ride, a border collie, the consciousness in my system that had been present since birth and Riley, a demon, my system’s protector and the headmate that began to front more and more frequently. While I didn’t have names for us two until much, much later in my life, there was a clear distinction in my personality as I became more stoic, unbothered and similarly apathetic to the reality around me as Riley fronted. At least to the amount a 12-13 year old kid could possibly manage. The only moments that Ride began to front after my mother’s health declined was only in private by myself, or with people I considered close enough friends to open up. I assume this was my brain’s best attempt at creating that harsh cut off to preserve my ego in the face of trauma. Around friends I almost felt like I was free from everything that had occurred in my life before to actually enjoy myself, but in any new and unfamiliar situation I felt nervous or unsure, I closed back up into the hard shell that Riley embodied.

In being plural Roxxy has many headmates, and they are often visually represented through anthropomorphic animal figures which are also described as her

fursonas. She explains that her learned dissociative practices, that resulted in certain headmates fronting, became more frequent as a way to cope in stressful situations with her mother. Becoming "not present" was the best solution for Roxxy where eventually, "without realizing it," her first headmate emerged. Her first headmate Ride, a border collie, has the role of "the consciousness" in her system who also has been present since her birth. Ride began to front more after her mother's mental health started to decline, but only in private or with those who she considered to be close friends. Her other headmate Riley, a demon, has the role of being the system's protector who also began to front more frequently after Roxxy was being continually subjected to her mother's behavior. Roxxy describes these headmates as her "brain's best attempt at creating that harsh cut off to preserve my ego in the face of trauma." For example, she stated that around her friends she feels like she is "free from everything" that had occurred in her life so she could "actually enjoy" herself. To Roxxy, her headmates grew from a response to trauma and a way to "cope" in situations where her mother tried to protect her "from her own visions."

As a way to fully illustrate the ways in which the fursona is used to process trauma, I reflect on one traumatic experience that Roxxy chose to focuse on during our text-based interview. Roxxy described to me how early in her life her mother's mental health had sharply declined leading her to exhibit symptoms of schizophrenia that developed into dangerous "episodes." Such "episodes" would situate Roxxy in dangerous and vulnerable situations that lead to interactions with social workers and law enforcement. Oftentimes the traumatic memories described by Roxxy were Among the memories and reflections that Roxxy had given me during our interview a particular

traumatic instance ensued between Roxxy and her mother which resulted in a great fear of bathtubs. Bathtubs make multiple appearances within her narrative artwork which illustrates her trauma through artistic interpretations of anger, grief, and confusion. In her own words Roxxy, after describing her experience, stated that,

> Roxxy: I came out of that traumatic experience fearful of baths, and in many, many pieces of artwork I have drawn in the future include depictions of bedding in tubs, or sitting/laying in a filled tub. In pieces regarding her, or that experience, or my own expression of unusual comforts or traumas I tend to include that element almost religiously.

The artwork often centers her fursona Ride, who is often at the center of the memory representing a version of Roxxy during that time. From the story described, it is quickly understood why Roxxy has a fear of baths. Despite her fear, Ride became a way for Roxxy to process this particular trauma through her fursona who often is lived through interpretive memory-based artworks that speak to her lived experience.

The piece shown at the beginning of this section is titled “Bedtub” which shows Roxxy’s headmate Ride as an anthropomorphic border collie holding her tail in the bathroom looking onto a bathtub full of bedding. Infront of her is a floor lamp, broken beside her. Ride is also simultaneously seen as being in the bathtub, her tail sticking out from under pillows as the water soaks her underneath. As described by Roxxy, the piece shows Ride “both living the experiences and remembering it as an observer.” At first, Roxxy created this piece out of “frustration” with her own trauma which she “despised” having to experience. However, over time, as stated by Roxxy,

> Roxxy: [A]s I worked on it and processed what had happened I began to feel more at ease. I wanted other people to see and understand this very hard moment in my life. I wanted to find a way to express my anger and grief and confusion in some way that wasn't just continuously reliving it in my head. I wanted a way to remember what happened as well, if it kept coming up in my mind over and over, I figured it must be important enough to preserve in case I were to ever forget.

For Roxxy, depicting such a "violent and terrifying scene" is a way for her to process trauma, and the negative feelings within such as anger, grief, and confusion, through her fursona, or the anthropomorphic visualization of her headmate Ride as she lives and remembers the experience. This process leads to a sense of relief where afterwards Roxxy realized that drawing "took some of its power over me away." She described further that "instead of remaining a withered tangled knot of thoughts, memories, and emotions only to ever haunt me," her art creates something "beautiful" instead that sidesteps the harsh impact of the trauma in a creative way. In addition to processing this particularly painful memory through artistic expression, Roxxy also states that she "wanted other people to see and understand" this moment.

**Figure 10**

*Nghia's Art of her Fursona Mewni*

*Note:* [Digital Art], by Nghia, Untitled, 2023.

Similar to Roxxy, Nghia uses her fursona to process past trauma, but also the bad feelings that reside within the everyday. In the art piece above, Nghia does not necessarily reflect on a particular traumatic event. Instead, this specific piece explores an array of negative feelings lived by Nghia about her past and present conditions, specifically the negative feelings that come with being, "poor as shit", "hungry", in "pain", and "hurt." Through her fursona Mewni, the piece narrates Nghia's feelings, how in this moment she wanted to cry and wanted some kind of relief as her heart felt "hollow in a painful way." Anxious, frantic and frustrated, Mewni questions herself here, she arrived to this particular painful moment. As a visual expression of self-doubt, shame,

and guilt, Mewni presents a way to show how Nghia felt, and she is not alone. When discussing this image, specifically describing what her fursona does for her, she states that this creative process is not only “healing” but has a greater impact for other furries who relate to her art when she shares it online,

> Nghia: I just draw what i feel, and for some reason, it works. I've been drawing my whole life and 90% of everything I draw is a reflection of my experiences or things I've been through, things Im still thinking about it, happy or sad. I have complex PTSD, so it's hard to not show that in my work. Many people seem to resonate with my artwork for that reason. I try my best to capture the real thought processes i have- based on real things. I think that's why it impacts so many people, and in turn, Im kind of healing myself with my emotional work because i know its genuinely touching people and helping them.

“Drawing,” for many of the furries I interviewed, became a beautiful venue to express themselves in which their fursona takes the center stage in processing feelings. Nghia, like Miles in the previous section, has been drawing for her “whole life.” It is through drawing that furries like Nghia reflect on their lived experiences. During our interview, she notes having “complex PTSD”, or complex post-traumatic stress disorder, which is often represented in her work. She adds that in her artwork, she tries to “capture real thought processes” she has which are “based on real things” such as her past traumatic experiences. In looking to artwork that Nghia has used to process trauma, she mentioned how she created a comic about being groomed at an early age and the “internal process of aging and understanding” which featured her fursona Mewni.

Through her fursona, through the creation and embodiment of an anthropomorphic cat, she is able to reflect on lived experiences.

Nghia's fursona Mewni is a kitten that reflects not only Nghia's personality but how she looks in real life. Mewni has dark hair, brown eyes, and cat stripes. She is a catfox, a mix between a cat and a fox, but mainly a cat who has the ability to "flop its ears kind of dog-like" which, for Nghia, represents being "emotionally stunted" and being "disabled in real life." She elaborates and states that her flopped ears signify how she feels about herself currently, still young and "figuring things out" despite becoming "hyper independent at a young age." She explains that she grew up alone and "trusted the wrong people" which led to "bad things" happening." As a way to distance herself from being seen as "mature for her age" and being treated as such, she embodies how she really feels through her art as young and stunted which helps her process traumatic experiences. Nghia stated that she has "been through a lot" and that it's hard for her to not show her lived experiences in her art where she is able to embody her Mewni and reflect on her life.

As Nghia shares her feelings through the publishing of her own furry art from her various social media accounts for those who follow, much like Roxxy, she participates in the continual reproduction of a furry affective commons, or the collection of a shared resources in common, in which she both borrows from and adds to through the process of creating and embodying her fursona online and "in real life". In other words, Nghia's art practice and form of fursona embodiment presents for many a way to attempt a

navigation and mitigation of a late-stage capitalist and white supremacist public sphere that seeks to silence and eliminate queer and trans of color life.

## Chapter Nine: "Walls Coming Down"

Hazel: …being with all those people at the furry kink party, what did that do for you and your friends?

Basil: My friend group can be quite shy, so I guess it was a very relieving thing that we can all be that close and open with each other and show a side of each other that wouldn't typically be engaged with in a group situation, and it really helps…it strengthens your bonds with your friends. I guess that is why I did end up participating is that it just ended up being a really good bonding activity with my friends and I'm feeling closer to them than before. Obviously, there's the sexual aspect of it, that's fun and all, but it could be all thought of as a big bonding thing.

This small excerpt focuses on doing fursona embodiment during a private trans furry kink party and what it does for Basil, specifically its impact on the bonds between the participants' relationship with their friends. While noting that their friends are quite shy, the furry kink party becomes a space for Basil and their friends to be open with another and discover themselves and their relationship with one another. It becomes what Basil describes as a "bonding activity," a space for everyone to become closer with one another and to strengthen already established friendships and bonds. In describing how they came into this furry kink party confidently, Basil outlines how their fursona embodiment as a dog, specifically a Shiba Inu, helped in establishing this bonding activity with others,

Basil: So, I really like being a bratty dog. It's just really fun for me because in reality I am 0% bratty, I am very mild mannered and calm. But something about being a Shiba I see bratty, I've seen so many bratty videos of Shiba's for example, and I just think it's fun to act out that way. So, the pet play was the first round of activities at the kink party to ease everyone into it because I think as furries so many people are just like, "oh, we're dog fursonas" right, or maybe a cat or something... and many can easily get themselves into that animal headspace. So, it was very much like, "let's break the ice this way" and even though it was pet play it had a lot of laughing involved. It was very comical in its own way. It was just very silly and sweet, and this space just allows you to get into, "oh, I'm in this animalistic" or "I'm in this funny dog", headspace, right? Because if everyone is just having fun with it, you can just let loose. Because everyone knows that it is just a little bit ridiculous, and I could just be a little ridiculous dog and not fear. That was kind of a great set and setting to do that versus just everyday life. And then after that we started solely getting more into involved activities.

The furry kink party, as described by Basil, becomes a particular space in which they were able to become a Shiba fully, or enter a "animal headspace", and then play with others who were doing the same. Basil also describes how the "ridiculous" atmosphere of the furry kink party made it easier to become a silly dog, to become their fursona. In other words, the fursona at this kink party, for Basil, is a device that made entering an animal headspace possible for engaging in comforting and fearless sexual play with others.

However, Basil's participation in the furry kink event was not without apprehension due to recent gender affirming surgeries and general anxiety around sexual encounters with others. They explained that while there was some initial hesitation in going to the kink party, their attendance was welcomed, and they were able to engage in sexual acts and performances that were foreclosed due to the state of their body before undergoing gender affirming surgery and a previous relationship. However, a new sense of self had become actualized through various changes in Basil's life and they described further their experience at the furry kink party since such changes,

> Basil: I knew that I was going to be in a good environment and safe and everything, but I had been struggling a little bit beforehand. My sex drive's been a little weird. I think it's partly due to the breakup I had, and this is the first time I've been single basically in ten and a half years. I'm just reprocessing everything, and I've been questioning what kind of relationships I want to have, or rather how I would want my relationships to look moving forward. For some reason I was feeling a little awkward about having casual sex. But in a group setting it was fine.
>
> I went in, I was like, "ah, I don't know how into it I'm going to feel," but then I ended up having a really good time. It was just a lot of fun, even though I went in with the expectation of not really feeling sure I was going to do anything at all. I don't know, it was very welcoming to be in that kind of space. We did some pet play stuff, and I wore my fursuit there with the paws that I have, and I was just

> acting out in ways that I find really fun because me and my ex didn't really do a lot of pet play, so it was just a nice opportunity to do some of that.
>
> I also thought at first that people aren't going to want to interact with my body because I have a new form of genitals, that's been manmade, but it's still a part of my body. It's still all my tissues and all that, but it was cool that people wanted to interact with it and I don't know. I don't think that would be the case without the aspects of furry and being around other awesome furries who were trans and so forth.

While the furry kink party allowed for a certain "headspace" to be accessed, there was also a sense of self-discovery that came with engaging in the sensual, physical, and emotional expressions with others, or the erotic. In this chapter, I center furries' erotic and sensual narratives to illustrate how embodying the fursona has impacted their life in a positive way, specifically as a device for engaging in sexual exploration and self-discovery. For Basil, fursona embodiment not only allows for access and participation in certain furry spaces, the fursona also makes intimacy accessible not only for Basil but also for everyone involved. This particular furry kink party, as described by Basil, allowed for them to embody their fursona which became a powerful way for them to "reprocess" and "question" of what kind of intimate relationships she wants to have in the future with others. It was also a space for Basil to feel desired and to feel a sense of self-confidence in their "new form of genitals" which was met with affirmation as many of the other participants were "awesome furries" who were "queer and trans." In looking back, they recalled "trying to think if there was any non-trans" people at this particular

event but remembered none. This was important as Basil felt “very welcomed” in a space of other transgender furries. For Basil, their “hangups” around their new trans body were minimal as they believed that “furries just do not care” and that furries are “super chill” which made it hard for them to doubt that they were unwelcomed at the furry kink party. As a consequence of this supportive space and the participants involved, Basil was able to “break down those walls” that they had built by “witnessing other people do the same thing” at the party which resulted in a “really good bonding activity” where they were all able to be “open” with one another and “show a side of each other that wouldn’t typically be engaged with in a group situation.” For Basil, this event resulted in impactful moments that were important for their individual growth in relating to others and for (re)discovering their relationship to sex and intimacy throughout their continued trans becoming.

Basil’s detailed narrative introduces this chapter’s focus on fursona embodiment and the reoccurring stories that occur alongside such descriptions throughout the interviews that illustrate erotic experiences, feelings, and desires. These lived experiences and desires describe powerful and impactful moments for each participant in relation to understanding themselves, their sexuality, their relationship with sex, and their relationship with others. In other words, this chapter address the research question what does the fursona do for queer and trans people of color, specifically the fursona as a gateway for discovering and exploring the power of the erotic for individual and community change and transformation.

*Framing Subthemes: The Erotic*

My use of the erotic throughout the subthemes is rooted in Audre Lorde's conceptualization of the erotic as a source of power. For Lorde, the erotic is understood as power in "unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" within a social system that seeks to "corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change" (1984, p. 53). In other words, Lorde situates the erotic as a source of threatening power which has been intentionally suppressed and devalued in order to maintain patriarchal oppressive structures. The erotic is defined by Lorde as,

> the sensual — those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.

The erotic for Lorde is empowering; when accessed, we can recognize our deepest feelings and "we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense" (1984, p. 58). The erotic is therefore threatening to oppressive systems that maintain their power through arresting corporeal autonomy. While "[w]e have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings" (1984, p. 57), the yes, or the erotic, becomes a site for engaging in transformation against oppressive systems that seek to restrict and hinder our ability to feel deep satisfaction, fulfillment, and joy. For this chapter I understand the erotic similarly but seek to expand my conceptualization in order to address the erotic narratives that are explored in this chapter. Instead of accepting the erotic as simply "the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation" (1984, p. 54), I understand the erotic as a force that develops one's capacity for radical joy.

Lorde's erotic also address "[t]he need for sharing deep feeling" and its power for change, specifically the sharing and participating of shared erotic feelings as a "forerunner for joint concerted actions not possible before" (1984, p. 59). In order to address the material impact of erotic feelings, and the sharing of deep feelings, that have made change for the participants of this study, I construct a framework for analyzing furry erotic feelings that utilizes both Lorde's power of the erotic and Joshua Chambers-Letson writing on the power of the party. Chambers-Letson defines the party as a refuge, "a place to catch one's breath when you can't breathe" and "a way of staying alive and of keeping each other alive" (2018, p. xi). Drawing on Fred Moten's writing on the house party as a site of refuge, "which indicates that those who take it are refugees and people tend not to want to have to live like that" (2018, p. 258), Chambers-Letson frames the party as "a site of refuge" and "a site of revolutionary planning" (2018, p. xi) in which being together in difference acts as a space for change and power in living, and creating a life, otherwise. For this chapter I understand furry erotic parties, erotic gatherings together, similarly as sites of refuge and revolutionary planning in which life is imagined, enacted, and sustained.

Furry parties are gatherings held by furries such as furry conventions, room parties at furry conventions, local furry meet ups, and other events where furries plans to congregate. Furry parties are also understood in this chapter as furry gatherings online, in virtual reality, in social media communities, in chatrooms, and in chat applications. The many places in which furries choose to gather and reside become sites of refuge due to their ability in allowing for the various ways furries choose to be seen and understood

through fursona embodiment. In looking to furry parties, this chapter explores the erotic, the sensual, the deep feelings felt and shared, when queer and trans furries of color gather and party. Chambers-Letson understands the party as collective performances, or collective acts that have formed in an attempt to "survive conditions of negation and annihilation" (2018, p. 5). I understand furry parties in the same way, as powerful revolutionary sites in which the erotic, or the sensual, the passionate, and the physical, are central in making change for queer and trans of color livability and joy.

The narratives in this chapter also detail sex acts and desires that the participants narrate, which require a sense-based framework for illustrating the descriptions that follow. In order to interpret and present the particular sex acts described in this chapter, I return to Gamboa, who understands existing in the dark as "an orientation that develops a style of sexual pedagogy" where queerness at the night becomes "a pedagogical method for imagining, practicing, and sustaining queerness itself" (2021, p. 92). In detailing dark spaces as those "designed to facilitate immediate, 'impersonal' erotic contact" where "darkness functions as a rehearsal space [in] learning how to be together in the dark", the dark spaces that are discussed in this chapter are understood as an orientation that develops a sexual pedagogy where participants "learn to make sense queerly" (2021, p. 92). The dark space illustrated in Basil's introductory narrative is an example of queer sense making and self-making through fursona embodiment in the dark. Therefore, I understand erotic furry parties, including the furry kink party that Basil attended, as a dark space, or a disorientating space where queer and trans furries of color, through fursona embodiment, choose to learn to make sense queerly.

Throughout many of my conversations with furries during this project, mutually explorative sensual sessions through fursona embodiment would become a way for participants to describe how the fursona was important to engaging positively with queer and trans intimacies and desires. During the interviews I found myself receiving descriptions of intimate memories and powerful desires fulfilled through fursona embodiment that were often accompanied by tears, sighs, chuckles, and various expressions of overwhelming joy. From these private descriptions, it appeared that for those who shared descriptions of sensual play, intimacy through the fursona was important for queer and trans self-discovery and/or a way to further explorations of queer and trans desires in various collaborative supportive settings. In looking to fursona embodiment as a device for sensual and intimate exploration, I understand the fursona as an improvised sense making device for accessing the erotic. As "the dark frequently provides the backdrop for the rehearsal of queer eroticism", the fursona acts as a pedagogical device that provides its user with feral gestures, a way to learn and make sense queerly of where, when, and who they are. Engaging in erotic furry parties, furry gatherings, via the fursona, or engaging in furry devices, materials, and practices for sensual pleasure and play, is a particular doing that this chapter seeks to explore in order to address the research question what does the fursona do for queer and trans people of color. In sum, this chapter centers on the material impact of fursona embodiment for erotic furry gatherings where the erotic is framed as a powerful source for acquiring transformative power and knowledge through experiencing deep pleasure, sensations, and intimacy.

## Personal Narrative

The following sections describe the power of the erotic for the furry participants in this study, specifically the ways in which furry erotic acts and desires are rooted in a feral practice of (un)becoming. In a conversation with Jordan Alexander Stein, Lauren Berlant discusses her need, during her youth, for "unbecoming" as a method for "inducing better relations and potentials from within the cracks of the present" (2015, p. 19). While her notes on unbecoming are in relation to her own sense of self through her connection to food and veganism, her process of unbecoming as a utopian impulse are similar to a process of an individual's unbecoming through furry. During the interview Berlant notes that,

> I got attached to making a modality I could bear to be in. Along the way, like many young adolescents—but I was more or less feral, on my own and grasping for things—I began becoming original through food.

Much like Berlant, I was feral, on my own grasping for things during my youth, but instead of creating a modality of survival through food, I began becoming original through the internet, through furry. In other words, fursona embodiment became a modality of survival, one that I could bear to be in.

*At a young age I had unrestricted access to the internet. The basement became a sanctuary where my parents were oblivious to my deep digital explorations. Over time, I became sexually curious as I would continually stumble upon suggestive art of my favorite animated characters, fantastical expressions of sexual feelings and desires through anthropomorphic figures. It was within these erotically charged restructured*

*stories and images that the power in the erotic for me became accessible and possible. Over time throughout my early teens, I would intentionally search for erotic furry art, erotic furry fiction, and engage in erotic furry roleplaying with strangers as a way to explore my own queer and trans feelings and desires.*

*I lost my virtual virginity during a chat based virtual furry sex roleplaying session with a stranger. At age fourteen I had learned virtual cruising techniques and found myself in an adult chatroom advertising that I was looking to have virtual sex with a stranger interested in my fursona. I added minor details about myself in the initial post and kept it short. Most of the information I posted was focused on a physical description of my fursona, a brief backstory to illustrate his personality, and some reference images that I found online from various furry websites. At the time I had imagined myself as a smaller anthropomorphic wolf who was not as strong as the other wolves in his pack. I had related to characters that were shy, misunderstood, disheveled, and lacked confidence in themselves. A loner, but cute and impressionable, nonetheless. In other words, I both felt like them, and I wanted to be them. This resulted in creating and embodying a young slender wolf who was shy and reserved but looking for guidance from a stronger alpha wolf. I was on the prowl, and it was not long before I got a private message in response to my post.*

*The conversation began with the usual, "what are you looking for?" and "are you a top or a bottom? Dom or a sub?" The stranger then began describing his fursona as a large "daddy" wolf type who was tall, muscular, and confident, who above all was looking for a smaller "son" type to take care of. The scenario he proposed included a*

*sort of mentoring relationship that had reached its sexual tipping point where our mutual desires for one another would lead to a break in our platonic friendship between a much older wolf and his mentee. After a small conversation discussing our intentions and agreeing on our dynamic, we quickly began to cooperatively construct the backdrop for queer desires to be acted onto. This impossible setting, and our fantastical bodies together, served as the sandbox for the lines and descriptive paragraphs that would illustrate and outline not only the sexual acts we imaged but also the emotions that we felt as we virtually took each other into our arms.*

*Taking my paw, guiding it through text onto his body, I felt tenderness for the first time through a stranger. The anxiety of writing my responses to his descriptive movements onto me, sexual dialog that both felt so natural but inappropriate, was overwhelming. My heart raced reading his responses to my shyly written reactions, but understanding my hesitation he picked me up and carried me gently over to the bed relieving my nervousness. This felt right, the soft digital caressing together with his confident gestures awoken dormant desires that began to pour from me and into this text-based sensual roleplay. While I was ready to minimize the window at a moment's notice, or quickly close the messenger service temporarily as I listened for parental footsteps above, I realized I was feeling guilty and fearful of a reality in which those around me could found out what was happening to me. My relationship with sex at the time was only ever associated with shame and guilt. I was not only at an age where I knew the sexual acts I was partaking in and describing with this stranger were reserved for adults, but they were queer sexual acts, descriptions of intimate desires that were constantly policed*

*and restricted through countless narratives that flooded all aspects of life. I was conflicted and confused, but despite these messy feelings and desires, I felt a sense of clarity as we virtually emptied our feelings onto the digital page. As we finished, sensations I have never felt before filled my body. He thanked me and we never talked again, but I will never forget his name and how he made me feel. From that moment I fell in love with furry and its ability to create sexual realities in which I could bear to be myself in and loved for who I am.*

This feral act of grasping for things, reaching into undomesticated, unknown, unsafe worlds at a young age and blindly searching for something, resulted in discovering parts of myself that I was not able to access before. The fursona for me was a sense-making device, a way for me to make sense of not only the dark chatroom, but also myself and the other curious virtual bodies that resided within this dark space which helped in my journey. I led with this personal story to outline how many furries find themselves unbecoming and discovering parts of themselves through the power of the erotic through feral, or undomesticated, ways in the dark desperately due to the circumstances we find ourselves in as queer and trans youth of color.

Sky discussed with me during our interview a similar story to my own, one that I immediately connected with as he mentioned the same text-based chat applications I used during my youth, MSN (Microsoft Network) Messenger and IRC (Internet Relay Chat). As we both aged ourselves in relating to such outmoded technologies, Sky began to give the context to his personal engagements with erotic furry chatrooms. He described a process of interaction in these spaces as being in a “hot seat” where live text messaging

with other furries began to pressure him to ask himself who he is and his relation to these erotic spaces. After a while he described a process of becoming as "emulating" what he thought the kind of person he wanted to be would sound like, which for him came easy by practicing this performance in furry chatrooms. However, while Sky described that at the time he did not fully understand his own relationship to sex and queerness, the online experiences during his youth roleplaying with other furries helped him process what he liked and didn't like which led to a time of "extreme self-discovery." Doing the fursona as a way to engage with furry erotic roleplaying, as a site of refuge, gave Sky a way to unbecome something else that he was in control of, a process for self-discovery.

Starting with Basil, Sky and myself, I wanted to first illustrate these descriptions as examples of unbecoming through fursona embodiment, and within this process a sense of self-discovery that is felt through the erotic. In looking to furry acts as feral acts, doing furry for many of the participants in this study led to the sensorial experience of self-discovery through a disorderly mode of (un)becoming where the power of the erotic, the sharing and exploration of deep feelings, is met with the feral desire to embody the unrestrained. While this shared sense of self-discovery is common among many of the participants of this study, each comes to differing embodied descriptions that lead to particular events of erotic self-discovery.

*Anxiety and Fear*

Anxiety became a common embodied experience before participants engaged in sexual acts through the fursona. An example of this feeling is expressed in the descriptions given both Basil and Ty which illustrates the ways in which feeling anxious

was an often-early precursor for engaging with their erotic desires through the fursona. Looking back, I remember feeling scared knowing I was interacting with a stranger in a dark place online, wondering if I would be caught by my parents at any moment for all the words I was using to describe my desires. What was more anxiety inducing for me than just those who could expose my strange desires was my own coming to terms with my own queer feelings that for so long were shrouded in shame and guilt. However, we all persisted in our erotic curiosities despite our initial anxieties and uncertainties. What helped both Basil and Ty participate in their queer and trans erotic desires was their construction of their fursona and its ability to understand the dark spaces where queer and trans erotic expressions are possible. Much like going into a dark room, down a dark hallway, through a dimly lit space, we become anxious, scared, unsure of what the darkness harbors. As we feel the walls, and use our senses to touch what is ahead, the impulse to figure out where to place our next step demands us to engage with wildness, the unpredictable. This step into the unknown is purposeful for many furries due to their curiosity for an erotic otherwise, or the deep and sensual power of queer and trans erotics often only accessible in private, in the dark. While at first feelings of anxiety are produced before acting on queer and trans desires, and the unpredictable spaces in which they reside, many participants note that excitement is felt once within and submerged.

For Basil and Ty, the fursona acts as a sense making device that is used in the dark, or the often hidden furry spaces that have become for many sites for queer and trans refuge. However, anxiety is not only felt before the sexual acts within those spaces, but it was also felt through each movement Ty made in furry spaces as they noted how early in

their life, specifically in their youth, they felt troubled and confused with their own exploration of queer and trans erotics due to the messages they were receiving by the adults in their life during their youth. For Ty, their anxiety was first rooted in how institutions heavily policed and hindered them from expressing and feeling safe to explore queer and trans desires.

Ty's erotic self-discovery began within confined institutions where their queer and trans desires seemed impossible to access and express safely. Ty first describes familial resistance of queer and trans desires rooted in their traditional Christian household in which their father was "very anti-gay" and feminine expressions and same sex desires were policed violently. The result of this intense disciplinary environment was that over time Ty policed themselves, which prevented future engagements with their own queer and trans desires. In junior high, Ty met with another student of the same gender from a different school during an overseas trip. While they both shared feelings for one another, Ty was conflicted and recalled being motivated by internalized and embedded messages from their father that echoed, "being gay is not right". This led to Ty harboring their true feelings and desires deep within which confused them and resulted in feeling that something was "wrong". Because of their life at home, Ty kept "quiet" and silent all of their queer and trans desires until their time in the military.

Despite feeling wrong and deciding to keep quiet any queer sexual feelings and desires, Ty found themself deep within furry spaces about four years into the military. They describe that during their service in the military they began to see everyone expressing themselves, and their sexuality, openly and freely through furry online. By

first witnessing these open expressions online within furry spaces, Ty began to wonder if they could do the same, if this furry expression was possible and safe as a way to express and explore their "different sides" of their sexuality. As Ty described going "deeper" into furry towards the end of their military career, they slightly laugh as they describe that at the time they were "so ready" to "bust down" and really be who they are.

While they were ready to explore themselves in new sexual ways, engagement with furry erotics was not immediate for Ty. They describe a slow process towards sexual expression through the fursona in which exposure to not only public furry expressions, but erotic furry art had opened them up to ways they could express themselves in a safe and sexual way. When Ty created their first fursona they did not invest any thought into expressing any sort of sexuality through it. They describe that they were still confused and had internalized thoughts from their childhood that were persistent in telling them that certain desires and expressions were "wrong". These internalized messages transferred over to their first fursona where anything sexual was "off limits." However, Ty was still curious and decided to create a second fursona Kamau that would act as a safe and playful site for queer and trans erotic desires.

Through Kamau, Ty was able to "revert that mental conditioning" from their past and become more sexually expressive. As they began to "revert" and explore their sexuality, Ty's first experience of ordering and receiving erotic furry art of Kamau was an important first step in moving past their fear of their own sexuality. Ty's curiosity in embodying their fursona in a sexual way began with their continual viewing of not safe for work (NSFW) furry art, or erotic furry art, online. Eventually in wanting to see

NSFW artwork of their fursona, or seeing artwork that featured a figured that represented an extension of themselves involved in queer sexual acts, they began to ask themself, “why can't I get NSFW art?” After Ty explored furry artists and finding one that would take on Ty’s request, they were both excited and concerned in this new sexual act which creatively engaged with their desires. They remembered feeling “anxiousness” during this process of both ordering and witnessing published sexual artwork of their fursona online which for Ty felt “taboo”. This sexual experience at first made them question “what if a coworker or someone stumbles upon my Twitter” where the artwork is published, which would result in “people thinking I’m strange.” These early experiences with expressing sexual desire through “taboo” furry art were at first full of feelings of panic which led to various sexual insecurities, but each experience from this point acted as a gateway into “deeper and deeper sexual explorations” where they were able to engage in kinks and internalized desires never accessed so freely through their fursona. Slowly the fear and anxiety were lifted. After sharing their past experiences, they expressed a sense of relief and acceptance from where they are now in a new ability to express their sexuality through their fursona and beyond. Ty shares that,

> Ty: Until my current Fursona, I never really invested any thought into expressing sexuality or anything through my previous fursona. It was like, no NSFW stuff at all, because I did not want any sexual anything to be associated with my character at all and the reason behind that was just because, in my subconscious mind, I was still a bit confused and still had those thoughts from childhood embedded in my mind, of this is not okay. It just kind of transferred over to my previous fursona at

> the time a little bit. So, anything sexual, anything like that was off limits for the character. And then I got my current fursona, and now I'm able to revert that mental conditioning that I had back then. Now I'm more expressive, sexually expressive, with my fursona and getting NSFW art and whatnot to express my and my fursona's sexuality.

From feeling anxious and wrong, Ty began their journey in a place of internalized shame and guilt rooted in heteronormative and patriarchal institutional and familial narratives that surrounded them from an early age at the home and into their time in the military. Once distanced and relieved from the confines of adults who guided and persuaded them to resist queer and trans feelings, Ty was able to access themselves through the fursona in furry spaces online and in-person where they were able to be released from sexually oppressive environments.

Sky expressed similar youth experiences which prevented him from at first fully understanding himself and his sexual desires which led to eventual feelings of fear, anxiety, and confusion. In thinking about his own sexual becoming, Sky first described how during his youth his household was “pretty negative” in relation to sex, intimacy, and conflict. To elaborate, he stated that starting early in his life he was taught that sexuality was “disgusting” which was rooted in the narratives within his “relatively traditional family” where sex was to be something hidden and suppressed. Sky stated that both of his parents came to the United States in their 30’s and carried with them conservative and traditionalist misogynistic and homophobic values from both Japan and Afghanistan. He expressed that these particular values would come in the way of being

himself where, for example, if he were to come out to his family, families like his would "give up on you" or "your family will probably disown you." There was fear in these statements as Sky attempted to express the severe impact his familial environment had on his ability to understand his sexuality in a highly de-sexualized and sexually oppressive space. Due to the messages Sky received during his youth, and the active ways in which his parents forcefully removed sex from his life, he felt confused and expressed that he "had no idea how to even think about any of that shit." However, after he discovered furry and began creating a fursona, Sky's relationship with his fursona Geist gave him access to parts of himself that would free him from such narratives that overwhelmed his youth which impacted how he thought about his own queer desires.

During his teenage years, Sky remembers wanting to be "cute" and "hot," but never understood what that meant or how to embody those desires completely. For example, in relation to understanding himself and his desire to feel cute, he described that when he was really young he didn't know what he was doing, or how to go about feeling cute alongside his queerness while at the same time not knowing any queer people to reference. His only proximity to queer people during his teen years were two openly gay students in his high school. However, those two students were often bullied and ridiculed which left Sky fearful in expressing his own desires publicly and within himself which led to him never allowing himself to act on them. Because of these factors, his queer desires were first explored in private and anonymously in furry spaces online.

Sky stated that during his youth his way to express and explore repressed desires primarily existed online, specifically in exploring various furry webcomics and

communicating with other furries on text-based forums where he was able to feel cute and hot through a furry avatar. Sky's avatar was not his fursona,, though. Instead, as a way to represent himself online to others, Sky chose to use a NSFW image of Fox McCloud, an anthropomorphic fox who is also the chief the protagonist of Nintendo's Star Fox series, which helped ease some of his initial anxieties and fears around sex and his own sexuality. In chatting and roleplaying with other furries online through Fox McCloud, he described how this practice emerged from an urge to see him as an erotically charged cute character. This persona allowed Sky to explore what being cute and hot could feel like. However, this was not enough to feel those aspects of his desires completely. He often felt like an "imposter" and an "impersonator" and described that he had to "fake it till I make it" due to not being able to fully understand at first how to engage in sexual spaces online with confidence. Queerness for Sky was not yet something he knew how to engage in or express confidently at a young age. However, this important step was essential in the creation of his fursona, partially inspired by Fox McCloud, a character that early in his life he looked to feel through.

Alongside his attempt to feel cute through Fox McCloud, he also recalled looking to "cute relationships" that were expressed in gay furry web comics that ignited a desire to experience the idealized gay relationships and lifestyles portrayed. In describing the importance of these types of media during his youth, he stated that it is,

> Sky: If you ever read a furry comic, there is definitely a persona that is attached to the idea of what makes a very attractive furry top or bottom or gay couple and it's the way they talk, how over the top affectionate they are, how everything is just

> perfect somehow, how they can make a mistake and be like, "You know what, babe? I just love you so much." Shit like that, it's like, "Wow, I didn't realize people can just do that." I grew up in a pretty negative household, so all I ever saw was conflict resolution that was terrible. And then all of a sudden I'm running into all these sources of media where conflict resolution just is like, it just happens and they just seem to love each other. I think I was so attracted to that idea that I really tried to apply the persona of those characters to how I would talk to strangers on the internet hoping that somehow it would rub off on me. And I think over time it did, because I learned a lot of lessons through that. But yeah, no I mean, I guess you'd have to really have seen the media to know what I'm talking about. But it's very like a utopian world where everybody's feelings are very easy to discuss, and everybody is just so communicative. And it's just like they value just talking things out more than being upset about some mistake they made. And all of a sudden, they're just making out and they're so happy and shit like that. And it's like, obviously that would be awesome. I've never felt that kind of thing before.

These stories, and the ways they portrayed queer love, resonated with Sky not only because it was a way for him to witness intimate and sensual moments between queer characters, but also because they showed scenes of positive “conflict resolution” within the stories. According to Sky, the stories showed a “utopian world where everybody’s feelings are very easy to discuss” and the characters all value “just talking things out more than being upset about some mistake they made.” Paired with the erotic,

positive representations of conflict being process and resolved by others would lead to scenes where “all of a sudden they are just making out and they’re so happy.” In contrast to his youth, where Sky was surrounded by “conflict resolution that was terrible,” the comics showed an alternative way of solving and working through conflict where despite the negative circumstance shown “they just seem to love each other.” It was in digesting such comics that Sky was able to “apply the persona of those characters” from the stories to his online persona as a way to talk to strangers online in hoping that it would somehow “rub off” on him.

**Figure 11**

*Photograph of Sky in Their Fursuit*

*Note:* [Photograph], by Sky, Untitled, 2020.

During our interview Sky also talked about how, after he created and began embodying his fursona Geist through his fursuit, he was able to experiment with his body and with how he wanted to express himself through clothes. When Sky got his first full body fursuit, he began exploring with different “outfits” that would eventually “trickle over” into how he felt about himself. When describing further, he recalls the moment he put on a “shiny pair of underwear” for the first time, which for Sky felt “kind of suggestive.” After posting pictures of himself in his fursuit in suggestive clothing online, others started to give Sky compliments about being “attractive” which was new for him. He described for me that,

> Sky: When I got my own fursuit, I really never realized how much that would trickle over into how I feel about myself. Moments where for the first time I would put on a shiny pair of underwear on the fursuit that's kind of suggestive and people just being like, "Oh my God, you are so attractive, or you are this" and then once people decide to give you that compliment, obviously you're going to walk the walk and then just living that out physically and then not just in a drawing that somebody else drew like, "Hey, can you draw me being really hot on the sofa," is way different then like, "I'm on the sofa now. I am posing, I'm figuring out how to." And it's like my body. I'm figuring this out. I'm acting it out. I think doing that just successfully crossed the wires in my brain to trick me enough to know or to think that this is me, I'm the model and I think that just completely just exploded my brain. It's like all these people are having so much more fun now. It really got me to realize that there is so much inherent power in

> just wearing a fursuit that I never even thought about before. I just thought it was a costume people wear just for fun or whatever, but it really fills you with so much confidence or comfort that I really didn't expect.

For Sky, fursona embodiment is centered on becoming Geist through a fursuit where he can feel his body fully and figure out how to express himself and who he wants to be physically. In relation to his sexually repressed past, Sky described that in experiencing "rhetoric revolving around sex negativity" he felt that embodying his fursona in suggestive ways was helpful in being "unafraid" of being self-expressive in erotic and sexual ways and had helped in fighting against his sexually repressive past. While at first "it was a little scary" to expose so much of himself through his fursuit, his audience online was quite receptive which led him to engage in public fursuiting in suggestive ways at furry conventions. Some furry conventions, such as Further Confusion and Furry Weekend Atlanta, have a "night market," or an adult themed evening event that celebrates the erotic side of furry. For Sky, adult events where "you can wear anything you want" at furry conventions became a space where everyone could feel "empowered" to "get in touch" with the more erotic and sexual part of "their identity that they were hiding for a long time." In elaborating he stated that "if you're a queer person, a part of being queer is basically pretending like you are not," however night markets offer furries like Sky a way to freely express themselves through their fursona in a fun and safe way where he is no longer "afraid" or "worried" about expressing erotic parts of himself.

Both Sky and Ty experienced familial dynamics that hindered them at first from exploring parts of themselves at an early age. However, each found ways through furry to

get in touch with the power of the erotic and thus the power for change in themselves and those around them. In the darker spaces of furry, such as the night markets and in online NSFW spaces, furries that I interviewed felt empowered to express themselves in erotic ways that gave way to bodily autonomy and autonomy over their lived reality in ways where they felt hindered to before. Through the fursona, furries create a figure for self-expression that for some allows for a way to feel a sexual and erotic otherwise that once explored can help one escape the anxiety and fear of past oppressive conceptualizations around queer sex, sexuality, and intimacy. As anxiety and fear came up continually throughout the interviews, they were often linked to early feelings associated with engaging in the erotic side of furry for the first time. However, such feelings dissipated once engaged in furry erotic activities alone or with others through the fursona. In reflecting on the interviews, such erotic gatherings in dark spaces enacted what Chamber-Letston's party claims to offer, a site of refuge for many furries where one can breathe and stay alive together with others. In living with and against the repressive conditions that work against queer and trans people of color, some of the participants look to the erotic in relation to their fursona embodiment as a way to develop one's capacity for joy and pleasure. While many have come from families that worked to stall and limit access to queer acts and performances, some of the furries I interviewed reported reversing such violent conditions and the narratives that were deeply entrenched in their consciousness through the fursona. In feeling free to express the self in such creative and bewildering ways, the erotic became a source of power that released many of their anxieties and fears around sex and sexuality. As simply stated by Sky, in relation to a shared sense of relief

for many who engage in furry erotic acts, “I think people are just tired of having to worry.”

*Making Sex Possible*

**Figure 12**

*Art of Korma’s Fursona as a Plushie*

*Note:* [Digital Art], by Shadowpelt, Plushy and desperate, 2021.

Much like furry roleplaying imagines impossible scenarios, furry art is similar in that depictions of sexual acts are often situated in impossible realities. However, in this section I don’t want to propose what furries create and desire as simply unattainable and unreal in which sexual acts cannot be physically lived through and are thus unfulfilling. Instead, I want to illustrate its legitimacy in emotional fulfillment by situating furry

impossibilities as creatively crafted possibilities by the dissatisfied that are made within their famished imaginary, or in other words possibilities made in contrast to environments where queer and trans feelings and desires are intentionally made impossible to access for queer and trans youth. Therefore, what the fursona offers for many of the participants in this study is making impossible deep and powerfully life changing erotic desires possible. In the seemingly impossible, or the fantastical, magical, and unbelievable, the power of the erotic emerges through creating and embodying what is not offered in the here and now. This feral act of grasping and crawling, perhaps on all fours, towards the queer horizon for a then and there allows for many an access, and glimpses, into undomesticated deep feelings that fuel acts of queer futurity.

For Korma, the impossible aspects of erotic furry art that centered on depicting arousal that was primarily focused on the "null" helped him create ways to imagine and enact asexual sex. However, similar to Ty, Korma at first did not want to engage sexually in any way with his fursona. During the interview, Korma noted that it was not until quite recently that he started to express his sexuality through his fursona. He states that before mixing his hobby with his sexuality he would have to "figure out more" about himself. Korma also describes that he has had a hard time connecting to erotic furry art that depicts what he called "traditional sex," or sex that has some variety of penetration. Instead, he discusses his draw to the "null spot" or a "null creature" where there is nothing "down there", but they are still able to be stimulated in the genital area. Korma described the idea of the null as,

> Korma: A character that doesn't actually have sexual organs. So, the character is round down there. There's just nothing. So, imagine the classic Loony Tunes shape or the Disney shape. Think of Nick Wilde from Zootopia. He's upright standing character. When you go and look down to his bits down there, he's just round, he's just furred. There's nothing down there. He's a Disney character and so the idea is that those characters can express sexuality without the organs and the concept is that you can play around with their sensitive parts and they can still experience sex is what it comes down to.

Similarly to null animated anthropomorphic creatures, we can think about plushie toys or how soft animal toys often depict animals without their sexual organs. The genital area for the null figure is flat and/or furred. In looking to figures where there is nothing "down there," Korma is able to explore different types or erotic excitement and arousal that at first felt impossible but was made possible through the fursona.

Korma recalled his first sexual experience in a fursuit. He describes an important memory while embodying his fursona through his fursuit where his "brain and body" first fully accepted the idea that he was at that time a null and plush creature. During this fully embodied experience as a plush null creature, a friend used a Magic Wand massager, a vibrating sex toy used to stimulate the body, on the null spot of his fursuit. This gave Korma an experience he enjoyed. Korma reiterated with me that he does not enjoy intercourse often, but this experience gave him a connection to sex beyond intercourse that he does not usually have. Specifically, this experience led to a connection to sex without sexual organs being involved where parts of the body that make Korma

uncomfortable were absent. While describing this moment, Korma explained that he does not like “raw sexual energy,” but furry art where the null is present and thus actual intercourse is removed as a possibility is used by him to explore sexual desires that don’t portray “standard sex situations.” In other words, for Korma, removing the intercourse from sex is what enables him to participate in sex.

Korma tells me that he is unsure if he experiences some form of dysphoria in relation to his “struggle” with sexual intercourse. He further clarifies this confusion by stating that he is very comfortable with being a man, but just does not enjoy his “sex bits.” This experience gives Korma access to a side of himself where he can engage in and explore sex without intercourse and his own sexual organs due to the ability to embody a creature without sexual organs. In other words, through fursona embodiment a body absent of sexual organs where instead a null spot can be engaged with and aroused. From this experience, Korma was able to feel sex in a comfortable way for the first time. This experience was also ideal for how he wanted to have sex as someone who identifies as being on the “asexual spectrum.”

As we continued to talk about his sexual experience, Korma elaborated on their own asexuality as an important part of his sexual becoming. He first states that furry art that focuses on the null is attractive to those who are on the asexual spectrum. For Korma, this type of art was important for thinking about their asexual feelings and desires as sexual intercourse was removed. However, the idea of asexual sex did not seem possible for Korma at first. In reference to those who are asexual, Korma stated his early assumption about asexuals as, “just people that don't have sex, they're people that don't

fuck, it's that simple." Over time he realized that its more that "they express their sex in a different way," and like Korma, "they struggle with intercourse of any variety". Korma could relate to this struggle and perspective, and null became a way to express his sex in a different way. He states that null is his way to remove intercourse from sex which makes sex for Korma possible. In other words, in embodying a null creature fully, Korma is able to have sex without sexual intercourse.

**Figure 13**

*Panel of Filt's Comic Featuring His Fursona Twigs*

*Note:* [Digital Art], by Filt, Untitled, 2023.

Similar to Korma, Filt looks to art to explore desires which helped him think about his body, his desires, and his relationship with others. For many of the furries in this project, furry art was a way for many to conceptualize sex differently, or different

sexual desires, that would result in the creative manifesting of the impossible through an expression of the erotic. Filt's fursona Twigs was shaped and developed through the lengthy process of illustrating a full comic which features a fictional sexual encounter between his fursona and a stranger. The story follows Twigs, a young nonbinary dog, in a "meet and fuck" scenario with an older unnamed male dog at a park. After meeting, the two move to a public bathroom where the comic quickly focuses primarily on displaying, for the reader, detailed sexual acts where Twigs is being taken by the stranger. Twigs is illustrated as being blissfully taken away by the stranger as he verbally degrades Twigs continually throughout the panels. As the short story develops, the stranger forcefully takes Twigs from behind where the erotic dialog continues alongside explicit visuals that detail their sexual encounter. While this erotic comic is short and focused on the two characters engaging in anonymous sex, or casual sex between strangers, each panel that Filt illustrated was an intentional and concerted process to shape and understand himself through his fursona by feeling "hot." As a way to explore certain queer desires, the hot characters and scenarios that they are placed in made what was thought to be impossible or withheld sexual feeling and desires possible, which overtime had helped Twigs feel more "confident" about himself and less "dysphoric."

Filt has a second fursona named Filts which is a character he created that looks more like who he is "now" and how he acts "irl", or "in real life" in contrast to Twigs who does not look or act like Filt. Both of his fursonas, however, are not representations of Filt, they are instead characters that he is able to act through in art. As clarified by Filt,

> Filt: In regard to how furry art represents me as a person, it's kinda complicated. Both Twigs and my fursona Filt are both loosely based on some aspects of myself. But I am also quite emotionally disconnected from them, I guess. As characters, they are more vessels for kinks and stuff that I'm into. I can usually only work if the vibes are right, if I'm into it, I draw it, and the two of them are also kinda born from that. My [fursona] itself bears a resemblance to how I look, and a little of how I behave irl. As I said, my attachment to my characters is mostly related to how they allow me to express myself sexually, and having made Filt helped me with my poor self-esteem, and while "I'm not him," I'm close enough to the point where making him hot and desirable comforts me a little. Twigs is kind of the opposite of that. I suffer from a bit of body dysmorphia, and it sometimes hurts that I can't be like them. As I said, Filt helps me with feeling comfort in who I am- But besides that, Twigs also carries a lot of traits and vibes that I like, and that I'd love to someday find in someone who likes me. So they're both. I usually write Twigs' personality to be closer to my own, while their appearance and vibe is something that I find hot.

Filt's two fursonas are figures that he is able to image himself through rather than figures that represent him. Filt's other fursona Filt, the same name he used for himself during our interview, is more of a "top", where Twigs is more of a "bottom," which for Filt allows him access to different sexual roles that he enjoys engaging in. To clarify, he states that if he prefers to be a bottom he wants to be just like Twigs, but since that is not always how he feels, he has Filt. Filt is a character that takes some cues from his "in real

life appearance" and his preference for "topping", but besides those two aspects he is his own character. While there are elements of Filt in both of his fursonas, he makes clear that his fursonas are simply characters and therefore they do not directly represent who he is fully. Instead through art, his fursonas are vessels for expressing himself sexually which manifests in actualizing kinky desires through digital illustrations. In his own words, the ability to sexually express part of themselves in art acts as a venue for "expressing a side of yourself that you likely can't in other situations, that remains suppressed". To elaborate, during our conversation, Filt described the process of creating his most recent comic as one that begins with him imagining in the moment "if this were me, what would I like to do and/or be done to me." This particular embodied act, the process of inserting parts of the self onto the page, has made exploring "repressed" erotic roles and desires possible. This creative process of personifying parts of the self through the fursona has helped Filt's "poor self-esteem" where creating "hot and desirable" characters in sexual scenarios comfort him and allow him to express suppressed feelings and desires.

During our interview, Filt also stated that he "suffers from a bit of body dysmorphia" where a side effect of this negative bodily sensation is feeling "in his own skin." What has helped in reliving some of the impact of these feelings is fursona embodiment, specifically having elements of his own feelings and desires being performed by Twigs and Filt within illustrated scenarios. Particularly, "hot" scenes where his characters are engaging in various sex acts. In his own words, Filt describes that "having aspects of me in there and having them be parts of what is overall very sexy

helps me feel better about how I am." For example, he notes that, during this embodied act of creating stories through art with his characters, those "dysmorphic" feelings are absent. Instead, this process is meditative and therapeutic where he is able to sense and feel his characters fully. While he experiences "body dysmorphia" daily, the experience of creating this short comic has allowed him to lessen his dysmorphia and feel multiple forms of bodily sensations through embodiment. In other words, Filt describes this process as "comforting" where through his characters Twigs and Filt, and how they sexually engage in one another, he is able to feel "better about himself" by embracing different roles and different bodies in imaginative, and often erotic, ways. However, this interaction is not without conflict in relation to the impossible acts and desires that are described in his work. His artwork sometimes "hurts" due to the Filt's bodily relationship with Twigs where he cannot become this fursona completely. Nonetheless, Twigs helps Filt feel comfort in who he is by exploring certain "vibes" when thinking about his own desires but also what he seeks in others. When discussing "vibes," Filt stated that Twigs is both a figure that he desires to be and a figure that he desires to be with as they carry certain traits that he would "love to find in someone."

Filt's comfort comes from making feelings of "being sexy" possible through his illustrations where parts of himself are expressed through his fursonas. In other words, like the stage, the blank page becomes a site for performing selfhood no matter how impossible, and for Filt feeling hot and being sexy with two furry figures makes sexual feelings, sexual roles, and sexual desires possible. For many, erotic furry art, and its ability for many to embody themselves through their fursona in art, allows for testing,

exploring, and creating erotic desires which becomes a rehearsal space for queer eroticism.

Queer and trans sex is messy, but it is only understood as messy within the confines of orderly social systems and structures that perpetuate strict heterosexual goals and desires for its subjects. In playing with and against such systems, the queer and trans people of color I had the pleasure of interviewing often discovered sexual practices by redefining what is sexually possible through art and performance. In other words, within the limiting frameworks that violently restricts queer and trans access to the power of the erotic, the furries I interviewed act upon undomesticated desires by looking to the impossible in order to engage in liberatory sex, intimacy, and love. As queer and trans people continually unbecome and (re)discover how to feel themselves and feel one another while being subjected to a variety of policing tactics that seek to limit and punish our intimate spaces and lives, the impossible becomes a site for queer and trans possibility. This messy process of making sex and erotic desires possible through fursona embodiment is beautifully illustrated and performed in various ways that become sites for discovering and exploring parts of the self. The erotic becomes a source of power and knowledge for many of the participants of the study as they experience deep pleasures, sensations, and intimacies by making sex possible, or by making impossible desires possible through art which influences the queer acts they navigate in the dark with others.

*“Melting” and “Magic”*

**Figure 14**

*Poly and Mouse Laying in Grass*

*Note:* [Digital Art], by Valentine, Untitled, 2023.

Through Valentine’s fursona Polychrome, or Poly for short, she began experimenting with her gender and sexuality for the first time. As stated in a previous section, Poly was first created by Valentine for a Dungeons and Dragons campaign with her friends. Over time though her character became more than an in-game device. As Valentine continually embodied Poly during her campaign sessions, acting as, responding to participating friends and the fantastical world through Poly, she began to slowly play with new ways of being perceived and acknowledged in ways that made her feel more comfortable with herself and those around her. This carried on in real time beyond in-game sessions as Poly would become a part of Valentine where through her she would be

able to test and play with new ways to be and become in the world. However, during the time before this interview she reflects on a past relationship where she first began to experiment with furry. While she was curious and excited about what furry could do for her, Valentine's partner did not understand her strange practices and was disgusted with her sexual furry engagements, or her curious sexual desires through fursona embodiment that became more prevalent in her life. This created a dynamic where Valentine felt like she had to hide her feral desires. Feeling trapped and not having anyone else to talk about furry with, Valentine started to feel isolated and unable to express herself fully with her partner or with any of her friends. This led to Valentine secretly connecting with furries online through Discord and Twitter as a way to engage with not only her furry desires but her sexual desires. It was during this time that she would meet Sasha, her first furry friend.

Valentine describes Poly as sexy. Poly enjoys having sex and can have sex easily. Valentine describes these elements of Poly as completely different than who she is when not embodying Poly. For Valentine, being sexy and sex acts are difficult to attain without the help of Poly. While she was describing for the first-time what Poly does for her, Valentine began to cry. Through her tears she described that while she has a lot of issues with feeling attractive and sexual, Poly was someone that by embodying her she could feel sexy. As Valentine engaged in furry spaces and felt sexy and sexual through fursona embodiment, she began to consider, "if Poly can be sexy and have fun having sex, why can't I, why shouldn't I." This conflicted with her relationship with her partner as she felt that she was not allowed to access Poly freely and thus had no way to be seen as, or feel,

sexy. However, Valentine's connection with Sasha during this time had opened up a new reality where she was able to embody Poly freely through text and art which helped her become more intimate with her future partner Mouse and herself.

Valentine and Mouse quickly fell for one another. After realizing the seriousness of their connection, Valentine broke up with her partner. A couple of weeks after her break up, Valentine and Mouse agreed to meet up in-person at a hotel. Valentine describes the sexual experience that took place that evening as "magical" and "incredible." For Valentine, the word magical is used to describe the sensorial, and in this specific instance the magical feelings of fully being in yourself and feeling yourself with others and the world around you. In other words, the magical feelings described in her detailed intimate moments illustrated how, for the first time, she was being fully seen, touched, and heard by someone else through Poly. She describes briefly the magical elements of fursona embodiment in which the body is transformed and the sensation of a tail is felt which led to an important experience,

> Valentine: Right before we kissed for the first time, I turned around in bed to face her, and our lips were an inch apart, and I felt this spark travel from the base of my tail up to the back of my neck, it melted me before we'd even kissed. That's magic, I don't know what to say, I'd never felt that before. I felt so in myself, in my body and soul in that moment. It felt magical being with her because everything that had happened the rest of the world melted away.

Melting had come up alongside magical frequently where both words were used to describe Valentine's embodied experience, or how she felt in her body during this

experience. For example, in magically feeling completely in her “body and soul”, this transformed her reality in which for a moment it felt like “the rest of the world melted away.” Melting for Valentine is described as the embodied experience of “walls coming down” where the confining reality of the world is removed leaving her to lose herself “in the feelings” where she can “let herself just feel.” In contrast to moments where Valentine may be too “in her head,” or where the walls can be felt and seen, which can keep her from coming into similar experiences inauthentically, melting is used to describes the absence of worry, where she can be in the space fully with others.

Overall, what made this experience so important for Valentine was how Poly and Mouse’s fursona Winter were magically embodied in the bedroom together to create a powerful lifechanging experience that would impact her relationship with sex and how she engages in sex with others. In embodying Poly, and therefore feeling sexy though her, Valentine engaged in sex for the first time fully and confidently through the “magic” of being and becoming her fursona. By magically embodying Poly, Valentine was able to interact with another fantastic fursona and melt into extraordinary scenarios with Mouse where they were able to create (im)possible sexual experiences that changed how she understood her relationship with sex and her sexual desires. It was in describing these sexual feelings that she expresses how shocking it was to experience sex in a safe and desirable way for the first time. She shared that after her experience with Mouse she remembered telling herself, “is this how it feels to have sex? Is this how it feels to want to have sex?” A month later Valentine and Sasha “started going out formally” which for Valentine resulted in continual roleplaying as Poly and Winter “in bed.” However, the

roleplaying would extended beyond the bedroom and into the everyday where Poly and Winter are embodied “all the time” as they both talk about their fursonas constantly because, as stated by Valentine, “they are us.”

Valentine describes Poly as being sexy and sexual, different than how Valentine describes her own relationship with sex but through Poly she is able to access sexual feelings and desires confidently. Skip describes a similar feeling when discussing her fursona Fleabag. During the interview she states that embodying Fleabag gives her a sense of relief because Fleabag is not only confident in herself but is able to expresses a confidence in being sexual, or as described by Skip someone who is just “fucking horny.” Skip describes Fleabag as being “really confident in what she is” and having a character that is confident is a relief for Skip to connect with when her life “can be very straining a lot of the time.” For some of the furries in this study, being able to embody their fursona, another persona that was perhaps more sexual or more confident than their creator, allowed them to engage in sex and intimacy in an alternative way. The melting of walls that comes from embodying the fursona for erotic play is illustrated in how some of the furries interviewed felt when they were able to become themselves or their idealized self. Melting then speaks to the power of the erotic, or the ways in which the fursona becomes a device to melt and therefore expose deep, unrecognized, and repressed feelings that have been sustained by social systems that repress queer intimacies and desires. Therefore, the fursona becomes for many a way to share deep feelings and create a source of power for change and transformation not only individually but shared with others. The magic illustrates the result of embodying the fursona in erotic ways and the self-

discovery that comes with feeling fully like yourself with others and thus being seen completely by others. Magic therefore becomes a life-giving source, a way for some of the participants to create life through the erotic where there was none before. Both result in a new way of understanding the self, a confidence in the self, and a reconceptualization of their relationship to sex and their sexuality than before fursona embodiment.

# Chapter Ten: Concluding Discussion

## Play and Fun as Powerful

After writing and reviewing the themes and subthemes of this study, I took a step back and observed everything I had presented so far. As I began to wrap everything up, I took time to sit with all that I had gathered and all that had consumed my life for the last three years. Like an artist may view their painting in-progress, I tilted my head and looked for loose ends and unattended sutures at different angles. In feeling unfinished, I stepped back more and more to recall how this study started and the conditions which drew me to this phenomenon. As I reflected, I realized that three years ago, I was a very different person. I consider myself now so completely changed from who I was before my medical transition that when looking back I find myself feeling sad for someone who was not yet here. There have been many moments that I wish I could go back in time, lend him a hand, and carry him through what I now know to be some of the most difficult and life changing events of my life to date. I am comforted though with the reassurance that I would eventually find a source of relief in my fursona, a median between who I was and who I am now, a guardian angel that I explored and played with that through our adventures together I always felt protected by a spirit that I would eventually accept as a manifestation of my own desire to be free. Then what became so clear, so obvious which was scattered so beautifully throughout the memories and moments that were shared with me, was feelings of excitement, pleasure, enjoyment, ecstasy, euphoria, and fun. As I continually looked back to the transcripts of the interviews, similar feelings and relationships with play and fun echoed my own experiences with creating and embodying

a fursona. When looked at directly, these feelings felt all-encompassing but different in how they were felt individually by each participant. This was often the allure of furry, its ability to feel joy, fun, and pleasure alone and with others.

For the participants of this study, play was threaded in various ways throughout their collective descriptions and therefore across all of the presented themes in this study. In the presented themes, "this is me," "falling back," and "walls coming down," elements of play and fun were continually brought to the surface which I argue are potential sources of queer attraction where creating and embodying the fursona became a powerful tool in feeling otherwise. In centering play and fun in this final discussion, I want to focus on not only its felt aspects but it's a material impact on the participant's lives who all reside within a time of queer and trans of color violence. Play and fun is not to be mistaken as a tool for solving queer and trans violence, it is instead a survival practice for navigating and mitigating state sanctioned silencing of queer and trans life, or otherwise possibilities. Within sites of refuge created and occupied by queer and trans people of color, feeling otherwise through the fursona was a way for the participants of this study to play, or experiment and discover, with art and performance in ways that challenged the normative drive for domesticated ways of being and knowing, or the pressure to forcefully reside indefinitely within the here and now.

To recall Munoz's words, "the here and now is a prison house," (2009, p. 1) or a straight time that confines by communicating to us that there is no future but the here and now in which the present, or the current version of reality, "naturalizes cultural logics such as capitalism and heteronormativity" (2009, p. 12). Queerness however, as a

performance, is about "the rejection of the here and now" (2009, p. 1) where in doing queerness it is often for and toward the possibility of another world and to feel otherwise. In other words, within such a confining temporal state, the here and now is not enough, and queerness desires another way of being that refuses the idea that this is all there is. What I want to present here in this final discussion is how queer and trans youth of color pursued desires that resist the urge to accept which is not enough. As a way to deal with the restrictedness that comes with accepting the here and now and its presumptuous demand for a natural or normal order of things, the experiences that are described within this section describe play and fun through the fursona as a key element to feeling another world in a then and there. This final discussion focuses on the overarching aspect of creating and embodying the fursona as a playful and fun world-making project that has material implications for queer and trans youth of color.

*Fabulous Fursonas*

> [F]abulousness is always an embrace of yourself when you're constantly reminded that you don't deserve to be embraced. (Moore, 2018, p. 8)

Central to discussing further implications is the acknowledgement that queer and trans of color acts and performances by youth are often monitored, surveilled, criticized, and punished by individual adults and adults within whole governing bodies. To elaborate, not only are queer and trans youth of color at the mercy of those who hold legal authority over them, such as parents, legal guardians, teachers, social workers, etc., queer and trans youth of color are also the target of political and social attacks who through policy or direct violence challenge their ability to exist. This span of brutal

violence against queer and trans youth is therefore felt as seemingly impossible to escape. This is intentional. Eric Stanley describes this inescapable violence as a deadly atmospheric force that "not only kills but makes life unlivable" (2021, p. 7). I want to discuss the impact of this study by framing the process of creating and embodying the fursona as a potential and partial respite, whether momentary or fleeting, from the pervading atmosphere of violence that seeks to eliminate creative projects for a life otherwise. In exploring and attempting to understand the sensemaking process of queer and trans youth of color who create and embody a fursona, participants revelated to me how the ways in which they engage with their fursona has impacted their ability to find a possible existence within a time of anti-queer and trans violence and death. In discussing the implications of this study, I frame the fursona as disorderly and errant to normative ways of existing in contemporary society. Such disorderly lives illustrate the limitations of existing within the confines of a normal life, or the ways in which living otherwise through the fursona exposes the fragility of that which keeps many silent and isolated by escaping it.

While queer and trans people face countless forces of violence in the everyday, we consider our current period in the United States to be one of queer and trans inclusion, or a time that allows access for gay marriage, gay and lesbian military recruitment, and the expansive display of queer and trans characters in popular media. Surely such radical inclusive movements that permit queer and trans people into such public spheres would signal a society's turn towards a collective sense of acceptance. However, queer and trans youth are still the targets of exclusionary movements that seek to limit their ability to

express themselves fully. During this study, in early 2024, Representative Jim Olsen and Representative Justin Humphrey filed Oklahoma House Bill 3084 to attend to what they consider to be a problem in schools, furries. As stated within the House Bill,

> Students who purport to be an imaginary animal or animal species, or who engage in anthropomorphic behavior commonly referred to as furries at school shall not be allowed to participate in school curriculum or activities. The parent or guardian of a student in violation of this section shall pick the student up from the school, or animal control services shall be contacted to remove the student.
>
> H.B 3084, 59th Leg., Second Sess. (OKC, 2024).
>
> https://legiscan.com/OK/text/HB3084/id/2884290

While the filed bill did not directly address queer and trans youth by name, furry was used to indirectly attack queer and trans youth and their ability to express themselves through "anthropomorphic behavior." Furry as a problem within schools is also not a newly established narrative or a recent phenomenon in the public sphere. Discontent conservatives have often turned to furry as a way to covertly address their frustrations with schools accommodating transgender youth and gender transgressive behaviors among youth. For example, prior to this filed bill, the now debunked rumor that educators were putting litter boxes in schools for students who were "identifying as cats" spread within conservative circles as a way to address their concern with gender nonconformity and transgender life (Kingkade et al., 2022). In an article published by The Guardian, Erica Menchen-Trevino stated that the litterbox "story put together a few things that some people already believe are true: that people's assertions of identity, especially [for]

children, are out of control, and that our schools are out of control for allowing it" (Demopoulos, 2022). It becomes clear that the litterbox rumor is not about students identifying as animals, but the believed to be ridiculous and "out of control" acts of youth who are attempting to act and perform their own sense of self. Therefore, the "out of control" actions by youth are what becomes a threat for many who seek to restrict a young person's ability to express their gender and sexuality fully, particularly if their expression involves transgressing normative youth development. Furry as a threat has therefore become a homophobic and transphobic anecdote that seeks to disparage, and as a result, surveil youth that seek to reclaim their bodily autonomy through art and performance.

In considering the social and political context in which furries exist, I want to conclude this study with a discussion on the material and emotional implications of play and fun that is individually felt and continually engaged with as a source of empowerment through the performative act of creating and embodying a fursona. Within atmospheres of violence, the allure of furry for the participants was its ability to mitigate and navigate such oppressive conditions. However, this allure is what I understand to be the most threatening part of furry, its ability to access and create fabulous, alternative, and wilder forms of existence where impossibility becomes a playground for possibility. I therefore understand queer and trans youth of color who create and embody fabulous fursonas as "creative renegades" whose imaginative creations "almost always bends the rules of socially accepted appearance" (Moore, 2018, p. 7). Madison Moore (2018) frames fabulousness as not only the quality of being extraordinary, dazzling, and pretty

through creative and imaginative ways, it's also about being dangerous and risky as it is usually practiced by queer and trans people of color who struggle every day to inhabit the world comfortably on their own terms. Therefore, being fabulous, or looking good and having a great style, is not simply a fleeting desire without purpose. It is instead, as emphasized by Moore, a "form of protest, revolt against the norms and systems that oppress and torture us all every day" (2018, p. 8) where existing as extraordinarily otherwise through eccentric and stunning style through the anthropomorphic is targeted and attacked. While someone's fursona may look colorful, bright, spectacular, elaborate, astonishing, breathtaking, fantastic, outrageous, and remarkable, or simply fabulous, Moore implores us to acknowledge that,

> [t]he style and presence you're commenting on is the direct result of all sorts of trauma, depression, and anxiety, not to mention verbal and physical street violence. When you tell someone they are "sickening" or that they are "slaying" a look (as in looking really, really good), know that there are folks out there who do think that people forced to the margins are sick, a problem, and, as much as someone may be "slaying" a look, realize that there are people who want to (and do) physically slay them on the streets. This constellation of beauty and pain, of virtuosic creativity and risk, is central to how fabulousness operates: society wants nothing more than for us to play by its rules, and we're punished for it when we don't. The fact that beautiful eccentrics put themselves on the line every day despite the odds shows how important they are not only as aesthetic geniuses but as political activists too. (Moore, 2018, p. 8–9)

Throughout the interviews, creating and embodying fabulous fursonas was not simply a thoughtless performance without meaning, such acts were instead a direct result of having out of control feelings and playful desires that reside beyond the confines of normative frameworks that challenge its very essence.

While Moore's interest in fabulousness helps guide how I frame the fursona as a performance in reaction to oppressive systems, I want to compliment his theory of fabulousness with participant descriptions of joy, happiness, ecstasy, and euphoria that were often the result of play with and within the fursona. In other words, I want to explore how being fabulous, or how performing in messy and out of control ways, leads to fun which becomes a powerful component for queer and trans youth of color autonomy. Throughout the interviews, *fun* was a feeling often associated with the pursuit of, and one's purpose to continually engage with, furry and the fursona. I define fun as a stimulating feeling through an activity where enjoyment and pleasure are often felt through experimental formations that encourage discovery. I also situate fun as powerful where playful experimentation leads to joy in discovering possibilities that stretch beyond what was thought to be possible in the here and now. Fun feelings are centered within this final discussion as an essential aspect of the experiences that were discussed during my time with the participants of this study. When considering the structure of experience of creating and embodying the fursona, fun and enjoyment became central in producing meaningful experiences and powerful discoveries within the lives of the participants which impacted their everyday. While participants detail moments of sadness, depression, anxiety, and pain throughout their life, they would contrast such experiences

by highlighting the ways in which the fursona let them access moments of rest, safety, healing, support, and escape by having fun with and within the fursona. The participants of this study fight and struggle for life every day, but in creating and embodying such fabulous creations, the fursona is their bridge to experience more life. Central to this creating and embodying the frusona is that it feels fun to be a cat, to be big, to be colorful, to be stylish, to be otherwise. In other words, it was expressed over and over that it was fun to create and embody a fursona, or to freely act and perform withheld and suppressed dreams and desires in exciting and experimental ways.

The process of pleasurable play and fun through fursona creation and embodiment is a process of undoing learned social restraints through experimentation and discovery. This type of playful undoing can be seen as threatening to heteropatriarchal and white-supremacist narratives that violently works to create a sense of rationality and cohesion in order to preserve its control over its subjects. The threatening fun I am looking to center here, that which I argue holds such potential power, comes from the experiences of participants who illustrated for me that by feeling otherwise through play they are messing with and attempting to break free from the boundaries and limitations produced and maintained by the social and political movements to restrict and potentially eliminate queer and trans of color life. Such pursuits have sought to restrict and surveil one's ability to play, experiment, and discover alternative realities and worlds beyond dominant culture's constructed reality. However, the queer and trans people of color in this study choose to not play by the rules demanded of them in the here and now, they are instead creatively pursing queer and trans desires through play with art and performance to feel

alive, released, and free; to feel otherwise. In this concluding discussion I want to direct attention to the messy nature of play and fun that the fabulous fursona offers as a queer and trans of color worlding device for creating an alternative route for experiencing reality and bodily sensations while being together as misfits in difference.

*"Playing pretend"*

In thinking about fun, joy, and happiness as feelings that accompany the fursona as an attempt to undo the restraints of normative culture, I situate the fursona as what Sara Ahmed (2006) calls a "queer object", or objects that facilitate queer orientations. To explain, queer objects are not objects that are themselves queer, instead the object offers possibilities between the queer subject and the relationship to the object. This relationship between the object and the queer subject allows for a queer orientation, or an orientation that is "out of line" or at a "slant" where the body can feel unsettled and world can be seen differently, or queerly. It is when feeling out of line that we can reach for objects at a different angle, producing strange grasps for things. Through contact with the object by a queer subject, an "out of line" orientation is accessed and explored through the body that unsettles the apparent naturalness of the normal and thus creates "other kinds of connections where unexpected things can happen" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 169). Through this framework I situate the fursona as a queer object where in creating and embodying a fursona by creating a queer relationship with paper, ink, digital media, faux fur fabric, yarn, and more, one is able to feel "out of line" experiences with an assemblage of objects. Queer relationships with such materials produces a stage for playing with queer and trans desires due to its ability to disorient/reorient the subject towards the unexpected (2006, p. 169). When participants playfully explored through the fursona, I found that the

“unexpected things” that arose from this practice were often feelings of joy, pleasure, and ecstasy. In other words, when the participants reported out of line experiences, or experiences of welcomed strangeness, they described fun moments and memories that always left them wanting more opportunities to feel otherwise.

During my conversation with Skip, she discussed how fursuiting was fun because she was able to “play pretend” through her fursona which created fun and freeing out of line experiences for engaging with the world. In her own words, Skip describes fursona embodiment through her fursona as a way for her to “play pretend,”

> Skip: It's just fun, because you are kind of like, you're playing, right? It's like you're playing pretend. It's just fun being a different thing for a bit, and there's no possibility of me having to have a serious conversation, or of having to answer an email, or something. It's like, "I'm a cat."

For Skip, being able to “play pretend” by becoming a cat allowed her to step away from certain aspects of her life that had continually created stress. To explain, she stated that in becoming a cat there was “no possibility” of her having to answer an email or have a serious conversation. Instead, by becoming a cat she felt a sense of “freedom” where she could wander “aimlessly” in a fursuit that created a social barrier between her and the world around her. This physical wall of fur created a welcomed distance from expected forms of communication and being engaged with where it would “impossible” to have a “normal conversation” with her through her giant fursuit if approached. While in fursuit, no one could see where she is looking, and no one could see her expression which made her feel like she was in a “bubble” or “almost invisible” which was

welcomed. For in a time where queer and trans people of color are made visible by the state and are constantly surveilled, monitored, and targeted, playing pretend as a cat and being “impossible” to reach socially and “almost invisible” physically acts as a creative response to being perceived in a time when existing as who we are is seen as a threat. Skip therefore uses her fursona as a way to withdraw from normal conventions and to become an ephemeral mess of fur that wanders aimlessly in this world unable to communicate deeply with others. This sort of social and physical reorientation to her reality is revealed to be both desired and fun, a queer way to express the self that demands from the world different modes of engagement, specifically ones that are brief and fleeting.

Valentine described having fun in relation to embodying her cat girl wizard fursona in her Dungeon and Dragons campaign with her friends, specifically in how it was fun to have an opportunity to express herself in a way that she had not before. She stated that by presenting and performing as a cat girl wizard she was able to express herself in a limitless way. To elaborate, Valentine described that her idea of a wizard is deeply in contrast to the one offered by JK Rowling in her Harry Potter book series. Instead of presenting and performing as a “magic cop,” she describes wizards as “doing awful shit on the daily basis because they want to, because it’s fun and radical.” Fun for Valentine is not about policing or maintaining the status quo, it’s about being messy, being resistant, and being disorderly towards systems that limit one’s ability to access joy and pleasure. Through her art and performance of Poly, Valentine is able to experience a more chaotic sense of self, one that has created for her unexpected things with those

around her. Through her fursona, she was able to try out different pronouns for the first time and experience a different way of being perceived which for her created new experiences. She was also able to try out new behaviors and attitudes, ones that could be accessed by reorientating herself through her fursona. While she stated that she is and continually wants to be someone who is enjoyable to be around, embodying her fursona allows her to "be a shit head" which offers a way to resist confining structures that have been forced onto her. To elaborate, Valentine described during our interview a desire to be "a shit head" through Poly which is often seen as undesirable, but this type of behavior is not used to be "evil" to others. It is instead an attitude that is a product of anger, rage, and trauma, a desired attitude rooted in being marginalized and is used by Valentine to push back against her Catholic upbringing through performance and art,

> Valentine: What I would give to just be a shit head like her. Just to do fucked up shit. Not because I am evil, but because I don't give a shit about morality or whatever. Moral constructs that have been placed on me like gender, I just don't give a shit. I grew up Catholic, you know how that shit be. But wizards are shitty, Poly is a wizard and she does fucked up shit.

In being a Wizard, Valentine is not only able to embody a type of attitude that is reliving by allowing her to express anger towards a system of suppression, but she is also able to mess with her own presentation and performance that acts against the "moral constructs" that have guided her life for so long. Throughout out interview, this playful process was revealed to me as being not only liberating, but also fun. For both Sky and Valentine, imaginary figures for play created fun ways to interact with the world and for

the world to interact with them. Playing pretend for Sky and Valentine was a way to creatively express fears, frustrations, pleasures, and desires in various settings that materially impacted their sense of self and ability to interact with others. Playing pretend for the queer and trans youth of color I had the opportunity to speak with revealed how in imagining with fursona one had the ability to experience otherwise desires that cleared a path for momentarily fleeing the repressive atmosphere that overwhelms the here and now.

*"Yes, yes, yes, yes, animal!"*

Unexpected experiences through states of unsettling and resettling through the fursona has shown to produce a stage for change in one's sense of reality. Fursona creation and embodiment as a process for undoing, unsettling, and reorienting the self opens new possibilities for alternative ways of existing that dances with the out of line. In this brief section I look to how Korma discuss out of line time, and how disorderly experiences of time can be both fun and impactful for queer and trans youth of color.

The time and space in which fursona embodiment takes place is conceptualized here as a sort of queer time, or an out of line time, in which one steps out of a confined straight present. The language I use here to describe this out of line time lends itself to the work of both Halberstam, who describes "queer time" as "strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices" (2005, p. 1), and Munoz who describes "ecstasy" as "queerness's time" (2009, p. 187). As a queer device, the fursona therefore offers a temporal reorientation that engenders a joyful momentary push away from straight time, or capitalist temporal frameworks that sustains heteronormative

values and reproductive practices. Due to this temporary distancing, many experiences out of line sensorial experiences as fun and powerful moments for each participant in different ways outside of the here and now towards a queer(er) future. Munoz states that "[t]aking ecstasy with one another is an invitation, a call, to…a not-yet-here", but reframes this seemingly literal call to take ecstasy (MDMA) as instead a request to engage with a feeling of ecstasy, or the "collective temporal distortion" that forces us to step out of a straight present. It is within the action of stepping out that Munoz describes a desire for something that cannot be offered in the here and now, something that cannot materialize within straight time. Furry time is therefore queerness's time, or the moments and feelings of fun from play that occur at a furry convention, at a furry meet up, in a furry virtual reality chat room, between two furries role playing over a social platform, are some of the ways in which individuals engage in their desire for something else, in a greater collective temporal distortion that continually imagines out of line ways of being and knowing that resides outside of straight time and towards feral futures.

An example of furry time was illustrated through Korma experience of fursuiting at a Pokemon themed rave. While fursuting at the rave, Korma described that when he arrived people started to "lose their minds" as he began to attract "gangs" of Pokemon fans and furries who wanted to photos while the music was blasting around him. At the rave there was also a table full of colorful stickers and pins for attendees to stick to themselves that many used to attack Korma by covering his fursuit with an assortment of bright hairclips and stickers. In only being able to move and communicate through a giant animal costume, this event for Korma felt like "pure chaos and pure hyper energy" that

fueled his outward personality and ability to become a “hyper idealized” version of himself through his fursona. During this event, and events where Korma is able to use his fursuit, he described time as untraceable, especially when he was having an “obscene amount of fun.” This amount of fun was first felt when Korma received his fursuit where once fully worn his concept of time was “gone” and that when completely embodied it was only “pure good vibes.” Korma’s absent sense of time mixed with his ability to stand out at the rave through his fursona lead to a “wild cycle of nonstop attention and energy” that since getting his fursuit was new, fun, and satisfying. While this kind of intense attraction would be stressful for many, for Korma it was cherished as it made him feel like a “celebrity” which he thrived in. In being able to become a big, bright, and a “beloved” Pokemon that stands out aggressively like a “highlighter,” he expressed how he was able to through his fursona feel a sense of “pure ecstasy” within a fun, timeless, and chaotic energy produced by the rave.

This particular felt bodily otherwise as experienced by Korma was produced by the fursona within a space that allowed for such devices to be a vehicle for accessing a fun way to engage with the world and for the world to engaged with him. These experiences of being in a full fursuit lead to moments of “ecstasy” that he was able to access through fursonsa embodiment. In his own words, Kora demonstrated this felt sense of “pure joy” by elaborating on his use of the word “ecstasy” which he described by stating that,

> Korma: If I had to break it down, it specifically tickles this primal part of my brain that just says “pure joy.” It absolutely just triggers that pure joy in my brain.

> It's quite literally just dopamine that my little brain is secreting because it's like yes, yes, yes, yes, animal! In my adult life there's very few things that I've experienced that actually give me that experience and, in my brain, I am in character, a hyper idealized form of myself that people are ready to accept when I am in full suit.

It is clear that through the fursuit, Korma experiences ecstasy within certain spaces where his "hyper idealized form" through the fursona is accepted and celebrated. With the help of the rave, I want to relate what the fursona offers to what McKenzi Wark calls, "xeno-euphoria", or "[f]orms of bodily wellness achievable only through external agents, which at the same time produce euphoric states of welcome strangeness" (2023, p. 94). Wark, in her own experiences of this particular felt welcomed strangeness write that she is "not" and that instead "in the place where there's usually me, with all her anxieties and racing-racing thoughts and second-second guesses, there's just happy flesh, pumping and swaying, tethered only by gravity" (2023, p. 19). While Wark talks about this produced bodily strangeness and disassociation in relation to the rave and ravespace, fursona embodiment is similar to being "happy flesh" in that furry space is supportive in producing the conditions for furry time, or states of strangeness where happy embodiments are possible. I frame the fursona here as an external agent, a technology that assists in a queer (re)orientation and welcomed strangeness, or a device for stepping out and experiencing the out of line. For Korma, furry time offers a sense of bodily wellness that is usually limited in his "adult life." Embodying the fursona and becoming "hyper idealized" for Korma extends beyond what is offered in his "adult life." When

embracing the out of line by entering furry time through the fursuit, this colorful, hyper, and beloved version of Korma is accepted fully which like “pure joy.” It is through the fursuit, or what Wark would call “xeno-flesh,” that many are able to visit this “pretty strangeness” (Wark, 2023, p. 19) and leave a certain part of the self for otherwise sensations through bodies that lose themselves to furry time.

*Closing Thoughts*

Ahmed describes disorientation as “the feelings that gather when we lose our sense of who it is that we are” (2006, p. 20). The ways in which the participants of this study experienced losing a sense of self throughout their engagements with furry allowed them to gain other senses of self from experiencing the otherwise through the anthropomorphic. Fursona embodiment engenders a sort of deviation from straight time and where for a moment the here and now is felt as distorted, distant and/or forgotten. In fleeing and forgetting, playing and exploring with the fursona causes one to “become oblique of the world,” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 162) or a type of becoming that is slated which offers a way to view the world from a new angle. How things are arranged becomes disoriented through the fursona where for many the bodily sensation of losing one’s place is common. These are often welcomed sensations that lead to a (re)grounding or a reorientation of the world that allowed for new ways of being and becoming. To phrase this differently, the fursona caused the participants of this study to feel slanted, oblique, or otherwise which resulted in momentary feelings of being happy, comfortable, and safe in the world. What I want to emphasize in concluding this study is how important their disorderly experiences were for queer and trans youth of color in accessing joy and

pleasure. In refence to queer bodies that experience being out of place, Ahmed stated that,

> The point is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 158)

The queer and trans youth of color in this study experience disorientation in many ways, often by the state in repressive and violent ways. What I hope to share from this study is movements for intentional disorientation that have resulted in new and fun directions that have given many hopes for a life otherwise.

What I want to express in this final discussion is that play and fun were powerful elements in navigating an often violent here and now by disturbing the image that a straight life is the only possible life to live. If unfamiliar with being a furry, creating and embodying the fursona as illustrated in this study may feel strange when considering, but this very strangeness is what many cherish because of its ability to reorient the world and accept a new and wilder ground to stand on that allows the anthropomorphic to become a way for them walk queerly and thus exist more freely. As a sense-making device, the fursona allowed the queer and trans youth of color in this study to sense differently, or to make sense at a slant, which enabled feral opportunities for self-expression, connection and communities to form. Due to its ability to allow out of line experiences, creating and embodying the fursona is a utopian impulse that due to its disorderly possibilities was used by the participants of this study to catch a glimpse of something other than what is offered in the present and act upon its strangeness. The fursona was therefore a crucial

device for navigating and negotiating with a restrictive reality offered by the here and now and its forceful normalizing procedures and atmospheres of violence.

What then do we social workers, child and youth care workers, and educators do with such knowledge of this furry phenomenon? In the next section I want to highlight what I consider to be important aspects of youth resistance for autonomy that may inform how those who work with queer and trans youth may approach their queer behaviors. As current or potential employers of the state, we hold the power to potentially restrict those who we claim to assist in freely expressing themselves and their ability to live freely as queer and trans individuals. In the next chapter, I discuss this study's limitations and its implications for professional practice and future research, specifically its relationship in supporting those who work with queer and trans youth of color.

## Chapter Eleven: Implications, Limitations and Further Research

My work provides a critical view into the positive impacts of creating and embodying a fursona for queer and trans youth of color in a time of anti-queer and trans of color violence. This study therefore has the potential to inform future professionals who engage with queer and trans youth of color when considering the potential impact of their creative performances and practices. In this final chapter I seek to highlight the results of this study and its implication for professional practice, specifically for educators, social workers, and child and youth care workers. However, there are also important limitations to this project and many opportunities for future research that demand to be explored in better understanding queer and trans youth movements for autonomy that I seek to highlight in this chapter. In this chapter, I also attempt to highlight areas of interest that could not fully develop due to the aim and scope of this project. As I explore implications for professional practice and suggest areas that I consider to be important in continuing research and scholarship on both furry and queer and trans youth of color, I make suggestion throughout in hopes that those of us who work with queer and trans youth of color consider deeply the value of art and performance for resisting and surviving a time of heightened anti-queer and trans violence.

### Implications for Professional Practice

Queer and trans youth are continually the target of increased violence in being more visible in society while at the same time remaining marginalized and thus experiencing social isolation (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2013). As subjects who "violate

conventional gender expectations" (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2013, p. 112), queer and trans youth are often highly surveilled and disciplined by adults and their peers for their sexual and gendered transgressions in the form of bullying, discrimination, and abuse. Queer and trans youth are as a result the target of various forms of social exclusion, rejection, marginalization, and discrimination leading them to seek refuge in spaces where they feel included and accepted that give access to agency in how they are able to express themselves. For the queer and trans youth of color of this study, many fled to furry spaces, both online and in-person, to gain a sense of bodily autonomy and belonging from socializing with others who experience similar conditions and desires. I believe that my work supports social work's commitment to social justice and can be applied when considering

The implications for professional practice, that I seek to I highlight here, are centered in informing professional educators, social workers, and child and youth care workers on the ways in which queer and trans youth creatively improvise with their environment to gain agency through art and performance in order to express themselves fully and freely. For those who seek to support queer and trans youth of color in their fight to exist and express themselves freely in a time of anti-queer and trans violence, I propose that professionals must acknowledge the value of the expansive and disorderly identities formed through the fursona that are used within marginalized communities to resist anti-queer and trans logics within mainstream culture. Therefore, I suggest that scholars, practitioners, and activists working with systems-involving queer and trans youth of color must place value on, and never minimize or trivialize, furry, specifically

the furry act of creating and embodying the fursona which many rely on for creating and embodying an affirming sense of self. In a time when gender transgression is highly surveilled and acted upon in disciplinary ways, those working with queer and trans youth must be attentive to the creative ways in which youth are seeking sanctuary from state sanctioned and social forms of violence in contemporary society. In acknowledging that queer and trans youth spend more time online than youth in general (GLSEN et al., 2013), I suggest that professionals also must understand the ways in which the internet is a "crucial lifeline" (Jenzen, 2017, p. 1638) for queer and trans youth of color in providing a space to play and discover alternative ways of being and knowing in order the thrive.

During the interviews, it was clear that in creating and embodying a fursona, individuals were able to play and experiment with different identities which lead to material changes in how they represented themselves in the every day. To describe further, creating and embodying a fursona for queer and trans youth of color was a used as a tool to play with its ever-expansive possibilities within its anthropomorphic limitations for self-expression. Not only did participants explore and experiment with their identities and their body through the fursona, they also used it to engage with one another to gain a sense of affirmation in their performance which allowed for queer and trans desires to be shared and experienced with by others. In having a history of being ostracized and isolated at home and/or at school, the queer and trans youth of color of this study found community in furry where they thrived within its perceived to be "safe" spaces online and in-person to sustain a sense of belonging and acceptance. A part of the advocation for queer and trans youth of color is being able to foster a safe environment

where one is able to express themselves fully in order to live a fulfilling life. Those working to advocate and support queer and trans youth of color must resist the urge to dismiss furry art and performance as only leisurely pursuits and instead look to the ways in which furry art and performance provides one with the power to for a moment break away from the continual onslaught of anti-queer and trans violence embedded within social and political public spheres.

What was also often witnessed during this study was also how participants processed negative feelings through the fursona. As a tool, I want to highlight the ways in which the fursona acted as a therapeutic device to access creative and powerful ways to navigate and process "bad feelings" or the often-felt conditions of queer and trans youth of color within oppressive and violent contexts such as, depression, anxiety, stress, panic, fear, guilt, shame, and pain to only name a few. As a tool to play with and manipulate negative moments, memories, and experiences, I suggest that professionals consider the mental health implications of the fursona for queer and trans youth of color. Healing, as a result of navigating and processing bad feelings, for many of the participants of the study was often felt during fursona creation and embodiment through performance and art. To elaborate, in "feel shitty," the fursona would often act as a tool to mitigate individual bad feelings. The fursona is therefore a creative tool that has been used to create a distance from a world that forces many to in precarious conditions due to their marginalized status.

While popular media and misinformed research have often situated those who engage with the fursona as deviants and fetishists, I suggest that professionals who seek

to work with queer and trans youth challenge such narratives, both internally and externally, by looking to the ways in which the fursona has provided a source of pleasure and community in seeing and feeling oneself as how one want to be seen and felt. Also, in attending to the intimate and sexual aspects of furry, I suggest that professionals working with queer and trans youth of color who engage with the fursona to resist the urge to confuse furry erotics with the taboo. The youth of color that I had the opportunity to speak with discovered alternatives for experiencing intimacy in ways that were thought to be impossible before. Youth of color also described how in using the fursona to engage with the erotic, playing with furry erotics provided a way to deconstruct and undo internalized discriminatory and violent narratives about queer and trans people which allowed for messages of shame and guilt to be potentially lifted. For the participants of this study, there was power in engaging with the erotic through the fursona in which many played and experimented with one's relationship to sex and their own sexuality in having a space for such desires to be executed in creative ways. We must therefore remain curious to the powerful ways in which queer and trans youth of color learn about sex and their own sexuality in a time of restricted access to information for youth on such topics.

## Limitations

In addition to the implications of this study and its various contributions to professional practice, I want to explore the limitations of this study which should be considered in pursuing future research. I want to first address broad and overarching limitations that impacted the overall study. First, my philosophical frameworks situated

furry and the fursona as fluid terms that attempt to resist the impulse to create generalizations about the phenomenon. In understanding furry and the fursona as placeholder terms for the broad range of messy identities and feral practices, I wanted to allow for intersecting communities and social groupings, that informed the experiences of the queer and trans youth of color of this study, to flow throughout the pages. In other words, the terms used in this study are continually transforming and changing within the various communities in which self-identified furries mingle and occupy as a way to leave room for everything that informs queer and trans youth of color to engage with the fursona. However, as various intersecting communities and experiences appeared throughout the interviews, I found myself limited in the capacity to address fully those very intersecting experiences that informed various approaches to fursona creation and embodiment. For example, I initially went into this study assuming I would touch on gender, sexuality, and race as major aspects. Yet, what I had discovered was that many of the participants of this study discussed what I assumed to be topics along with new topics such as plural, age regression, and therian experiences which I saw to be powerful aspects of fursona creation and embodiment. Some of these aspects are expanded upon in this section.

Another limitation was the continual shifts in how queer and trans of color experiences were being discussed and explored due to a transformation of language within the three years of this study. In addition to shifting terms for describing feral practices and desires, social and political events throughout the three years that directly impacted queer and trans youth of color and thus how our conversations were discussed.

The continued flow of events that influenced how queer and trans youth of color were perceived in the three years made me consider the long-term impact of continued violence and oppression for the participants of this study and how the fursona assisted in alleviating their felt sense of fear, anxiety, and depression. While I attempted to engage in how Kris, over time, was engaging with the fursona, it was minimal and future studies would benefit from an intentional longitudinal examination that tracks individuals over time. A major limitation was the geographic range in which this study focused on. While only reaching out to queer and trans youth of color who speak English and who are located in the United States and Canada, a major limitation is exploring the experiences of queer and trans youth in other countries and regions globally. In addition to what I have listed here, I want to expand on a few limitations in order to address what I thought to be important considerations for future scholarship.

*Race and Racism*

When I initially started the pilot project, which eventually lead to the formation of this current project, race and racism were at the forefront of my mind in attempting to address potential aspects of furry that were often ignored and across scholarship on furry and within various furry communities. For example, in the pilot study, participants were asked directly about how their experiences as a self-identified furry related to their ethnic background and if they had experienced forms of racism within the furry community. What I discovered in asking queer and trans youth of color about their racialized experiences is that race was not always the central element of focus when creating and embodying their fursona. While all the participants existed as marginalized subjects, or

subjects who were often the target of racialized and gendered violence, race was considered in individual ways from never consciously considered to being the foundation of their initial interest in furry. Conversations during the pilot project also often deviated from race and racism to discuss what the fursona had done for the participants as many expressed an interest in discussing the conditions in which furry was discovered and impactful moments that created a space for positive change. Race and racism became a topic that was weaved throughout, but I knew as I ended my pilot project it needed more attention to address not only the racialized elements of furry but also how queer and trans youth of color experience furry.

Race and racism I knew was an important topic for many queer and trans youth of color. For me, my philosophical approach to foundational aspects of life that influence how I see and understand the world I live in is influenced and supported by radical movements that seek to highlight and uplift those most marginalized. The frameworks for this study are derived from queer and trans of color activists and scholars who sought to theorize around queer and trans of color life and the impact of our existence globally. While I was situated properly to discuss topics around race and racism, they were not strongly present in my results, nor did it feel as though those aspects were able to be fully captured with the data gathering methods used here. Race and racism were instead discussed in ways that were both elusive but at the same time deep within the descriptions which was a limitation in how I approached the purpose of this study, a study not about the impact of racism directly but about racialized subjects where I naturally thought race and racism would appear during the interviews. Instead, I

understand this project to be a precursor to further studies on race and racism in furry, a topic of study I seek to explore further and more directly with my own data and future data gathering efforts.

Quickly during the analysis, I realized that topics on race needed direct attention and not minimized as amendments to themes in relation to the research question in order to address its depth, importance, and impact for the individual. While race came up, it was not frequent enough to capture its impact across all individuals. All aspects of race came up on their own naturally within the interview or were the result of discussing the pilot project that addressed race and racism directly. For example, Sky shared with me their familiar background which influenced their view on sex and sexuality and its eventual impact Sky's engagement with furry, but a more intentional research question felt required to retrieve additional details that would highlight deeper the racialized elements of fursona creation and embodiment. I therefore wanted to stray away from forcing myself to create racialized connections from individual interviews in order to address it in this study. Its limited depth in this study is not due to a lack of race in how one experiences the fursona, it is instead as aspect of creating and embodying the fursona that I argue needs its own focus and depth which would resist the urge to minimize its presence and tokenize its worth in a broad study. Instead, this project uplifts the voices of those who are often not centered in research on furries, queer and trans youth of color, in hopes to create a pathway for future conversations on race and racism in studies on furry.

To reiterate, this study was about racialized subjects and what does the fursona do for them within oppressive systems and structures. Therefore, race and racism are not

absent, they are lived through the descriptions as they come from participants who experience a life marginalized which resulted in precarious and often oppressive conditions. However, this project narrowly focused on the response to such conditions and the ways in which queer and trans furries of color navigated atmospheres of violence through performance and art. In other words, there was a focus on the practices and acts of creating and embodying the fursona that would be a response to existing as a queer and trans person of color. Therefore, further research on furries must now attend directly to the racialized aspects of furry that are continually present and impact queer and trans youth of color. The lack of discussion on race in this study is indeed a limitation as race and racism has impacted various aspects of the individual's life. However, those elements require deeper conversations that I hope to explore after this initial study.

*Personal Membership*

I consider my experience as a queer and trans furry of color doing furry research a limitation because I am often curious about how the study would have produced different results if my memberships were absent or had not bled into all aspects of this study. I therefore want to acknowledge the potential bias I have as a queer and trans furry of color where my presence is not absent, and neither are my views. I consider this personal influence a potential limitation for further research on furry I wonder about what is hidden in plain view from me that others who are distant from such lived experiences can see. I also consider my own bias as a limitation in subconsciously centering or privileging certain experiences over others as a queer and trans furry of color. While my membership has granted me access to participants and spaces in which I could gather data in effective

ways, my membership has the potential to impact the study in ways I am unaware of, and I look forward to studies on furry that remain distanced from the self for differing insights.

Revealing parts of my myself was not only obvious in my performance during interviews but obvious due to my social media presence in which I am public about my queer life as a furry. My queer and trans existence was therefore apparent as furry is also often a signaling to other furries a sort of queer relationship with the world that one expresses through their fursona. Therefore, many of the participants of this study talked freely about their queer and trans life to me alongside my own that I revealed during our interviews which allowed for in-depth discussion about gender and sexuality due to our shared background and interests. After talking with each participant, many at the end of our conversation wanted to talk more by commenting on how no one had asked them about these topics before. For many, the interview process was expressed to be a refreshing and therapeutic experience. A limitation I was left with was not having a way to maintain a network of individuals who are interested in discussing further their lived experience as a way to participate in the collective destigmatization of queer and trans acts through furry.

Throughout the study, I continually considered my own positionality as not only a queer and trans furry of color, but also my role as a researcher and the conflicts that arose from interacting with the participants of this study due to our shared interests. During the three years that this study took place, my membership as a furry helped in gaining participants to interview over the entire course of this study. However, what I did not

consider in this process of being a queer and trans furry of color and a researcher was how both my furry life and my professional life, that felt so oppositional to one another, would intersect resulting in distinct relationalities collide. To elaborate, in my own experience as a furry, there seems to be a shift in how I perform around furries due to how comfortable I am to embody and engage with my various fursonas. Embodying a fursona feels for me like I am entering a certain headspace with others who understand this similar experience. I feel the same in how I embody my role as a researcher and an educator where the certain headspace that I am occupying to perform accordingly is dependent on the environment and social situation. During this study however, both of these embodied experiences would clash as I often felt various headspaces existing awkwardly together. However, the mess making aspects of these particular headspaces engaging with one another provided interesting insights as I reflect on the potential implications of embedding oneself into their topic of inquiry. A potential personal limitation I discovered was the ways in which a topic of study that I was invested in transformed due to my role as a researcher being present within these private spaces I often mingled in.

*Theoretical Frameworks, Methods and Methodology*

I found that my chosen methodology and methods complimented the subject matter quite well as I was able to critically engage the subject matter and the participants from queer and trans of color frameworks that position the participants as the ultimate experts of their experience with furry. However, in reflecting broadly, the scope of this paper was narrow in that it only focused on the felt aspects of creating and embodying the

fursona for queer and trans youth of color. This was intentional but some limitations that became obvious throughout analysis were how I often found myself engaging in a small number of interviews, fourteen, with a narrow focus on moments, stories, and experiences that relied on the felt. In other words, while each interview was rich and full of depth, enough to expand beyond the scope of this initial study, my implementation of hermeneutic phenomenology was extremely focused on asking participants to explore what the fursona felt like and left me naturally excluding certain contextual and environmental aspects that I was curious about in retrospect.

In addition to methodology and methods, the queer and trans theoretical frameworks also provided a critical framework for approach the fluid nature of queer and trans of color life. However, at times the theories and perspectives of queer and trans scholars of color were left lacking a closeness to the subject and/or the subject matter. For example, many of the theories would address queer and trans people of color from an array of perspectives that attended to discursive readings of art and performance. Theories were limited in returning to the "I," or looking to lived experience as a source of data for critical analysis. A major limitation was therefore relying only on queer and trans of color scholars whose work was primarily situated within humanities. In future scholarship I look to a larger blend of both scholarship from applied and humanities-based fields to ensure I am critically attending to a wide range of perspectives for a more in-depth and robust study.

## Final Thoughts

As I write my concluding thoughts, I know this topic expands far beyond what I could possibly write within the time given during my doctoral studies. However, included in this study is what I believe to be vital experiences in understanding the ways in which art and performance are powerful tools that queer and trans youth of color use to navigate and survive violent circumstances and oppressive conditions in a time of anti-queer and trans violence. Creating and embodying fursonas has been a lifesaving practice for many, or a practice that has given life where queer and trans life is minimized and continually silenced. At the risk of placing too much utopian possibilities onto the fursona, I want to address again how the fursona is only a tool for survival as it provides a way for queer and trans youth of color to feel what is outside of the straight, normal, tidy, and orderly. The fursona is therefore a step toward a queerer future, a feral pursuit for a then and there that offers unknown potentialities that are often euphoric and liberatory for many. Sometimes, however, the fursona can be used to reproduce the very oppressive and discriminatory structures many seek to retreat from. Therefore, furry is not a purely queer utopic act. Instead, to create and embody a fursona is to partake in the repeated act of sightlessly strolling into the dark to find something else, or to find otherwise feelings, within the unpredictable. As human rights for queer and trans youth of color are continually under attack, I highly suggest that professionals consider the value of the creative endeavors and feral practices illustrated here as powerful movements that have the potential to change lives in positive ways. Furries are continually dismissed, devalued, and misunderstood as scholarship on furries has yet to provide critical depth

into the ways in which furry impacts the lives of those who utilize its repertoire in their everyday. However, by listening to queer and trans youth of color and acknowledging the ways in which they have learned to survive and resist systems and structures that have time and time again restricted their ability to freely express themselves safety, we can hopefully assist queer and trans youth in providing them with support and opportunities to express and affirm themselves through the fursona.

Berlant describes “slow death” as “the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence” (2007, pg. 754). What are we doing as social workers, educators, and child and youth care workers to reverse the “slow death” of queer and trans youth of color? In acknowledging our reality as consumed by neoliberal, late capitalist, and white supremacist ideals, thus the all-encompassing structural conditions in which queer and trans youth exist in, I argue that looking to the experiences of queer and trans youth of color can provide professionals with information to potentially stall and reverse this deliberate slow death. In other words, professionals must not become participants in the perpetuating slow death of queer and trans youth of color. Therefore, professionals must begin to listen to queer and trans youth of color in order to start addressing the ways in which their practices may produce the very conditions for slow death to occur. And finally, social workers must attempt to understand the value of furry art and performance for queer and trans youth of color in a time where their ability to live and express themselves freely is continually contested.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A - Interview Guide

What does the fursona do for queer and trans youth of color?

## Interview Guide

**Procedures:**

1. Overview of the project & interview process
2. Review consent form and allow for informed consent
3. Pay participant
4. Go through open-ended demographic questionnaire with participant
5. Turn on recording
6. Conduct interview
7. Turn off recording
8. End Interview

## Open-ended Demographic Questions

1. Please choose a pseudonym (fake name) we can use for you throughout this study: _____

2. Please choose a pseudonym (fake name) we can use for your fursona(s) throughout this study: _____

3. What is your age?

4. What words do you usually use to describe your sexuality?

5. What is your current gender identity?

6. What pronouns do you use?

7. How do you identify in terms of race or ethnicity?

**Beginning the interview:**

- Recap phenomenological interviewing
    - "We're really interested in hearing specific stories, because hearing real situations – instead of generalizations – helps us make sense of how people make decisions and what's really going on for people 'in the moment.'"
- Restate that you're interested in *really* understanding *their* story and experience
    - "Sometimes, people find the interview format a little irritating, because I'm going to ask lots of questions like, 'What did ___ feel like?' or 'Can you tell me more about ____?' and that can start to feel pretty repetitive. Keep in mind that I'm only doing it to make sure I *really* understand your

story. I'm not trying to get 'the dish' on your personal experiences, but just trying to understand what was involved in your choices at the time."

- Ask if there are any questions
- Start interview
    - "In these interviews, we're trying to understand what happens in people's decision-making when creating a fursona and then using/embodying their fursona. What's most helpful is if you can think about a fairly typical time in your life when you have created a fursona, and then also when you have used your fursona (online, in-person) and tell me that story (try to include as many details as possible about what you were thinking, feeling, what the space was like, and things like that). I might interrupt to ask some questions, but we'll just see where we go from there. Can you think of a situation like that? Okay, great…"
- End of interview
    - "Now that you talked a lot about how all of this felt and how you feel, what do you think these performances/acts/feelings *do for you*?"

**Content areas: Continue the interview until you have the following areas covered:**

1. Fursona creation: Inspirations/motivations (What motivated you?)
2. Experiences when you have embodied the Fursona
3. How did you experience space/time/place through your fursona?
4. How do you relate to others through your fursona?

## Interviewer Notes

**Focus on listening for descriptions of:**

- Lived body
- Lived space
- Lived relation
- Lived time
- Lived performances

**General flow should look like this:**

1. Tell a story
2. Explore key phrases and descriptions (stick to the past and the specific story)
3. Probe:
    - "What was going through your head when…" NOT "Why did you…"
4. Once you've heard the story, let them reflect ("What does it mean to you now?"), but then use that to start another story:
    - "Can you think of a specific time when you've felt the same way? Tell me about that time."

## Potential Prompts

**To get more descriptive:**

- "I want to make sure I understand. Can you say more about what '*scared*' felt like?"
- "Tell me more about…"
- "I think I know what *I* would mean if I said ___, but can you tell me more about what that was like for *you*?"
- "Tell me more about the room/car/bar…"

**If they starts getting too reflective/abstract/general:**

- "I don't want this to get too general, so can you think of a specific time when you felt the same way?"
- "Let's go back into your story. Can you put yourself back in that moment and describe what was going on for you then?"
- "Put yourself back in your body. What were you thinking about then? What was happening in your gut? (or any other body part)"

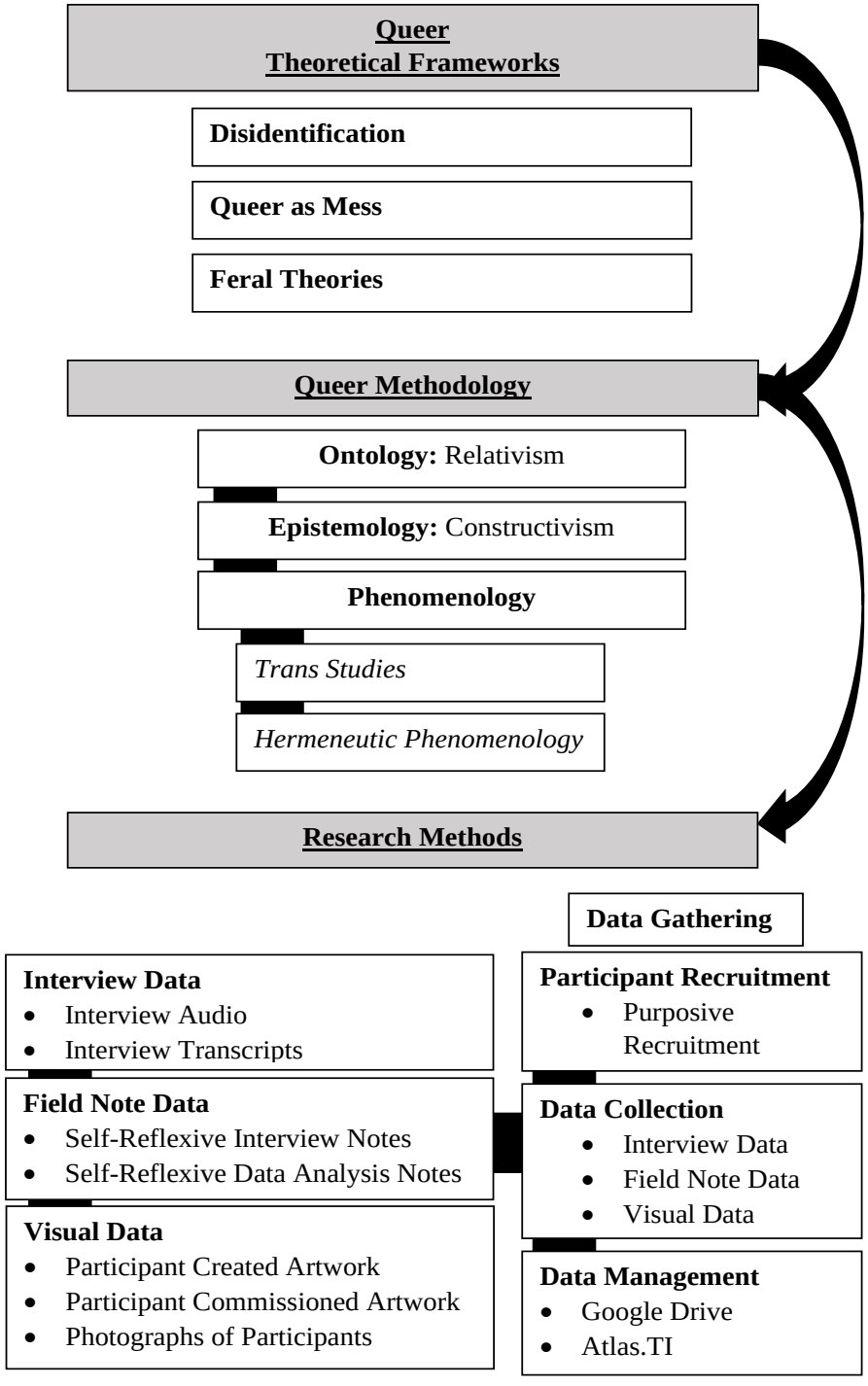
**If you get stuck:**

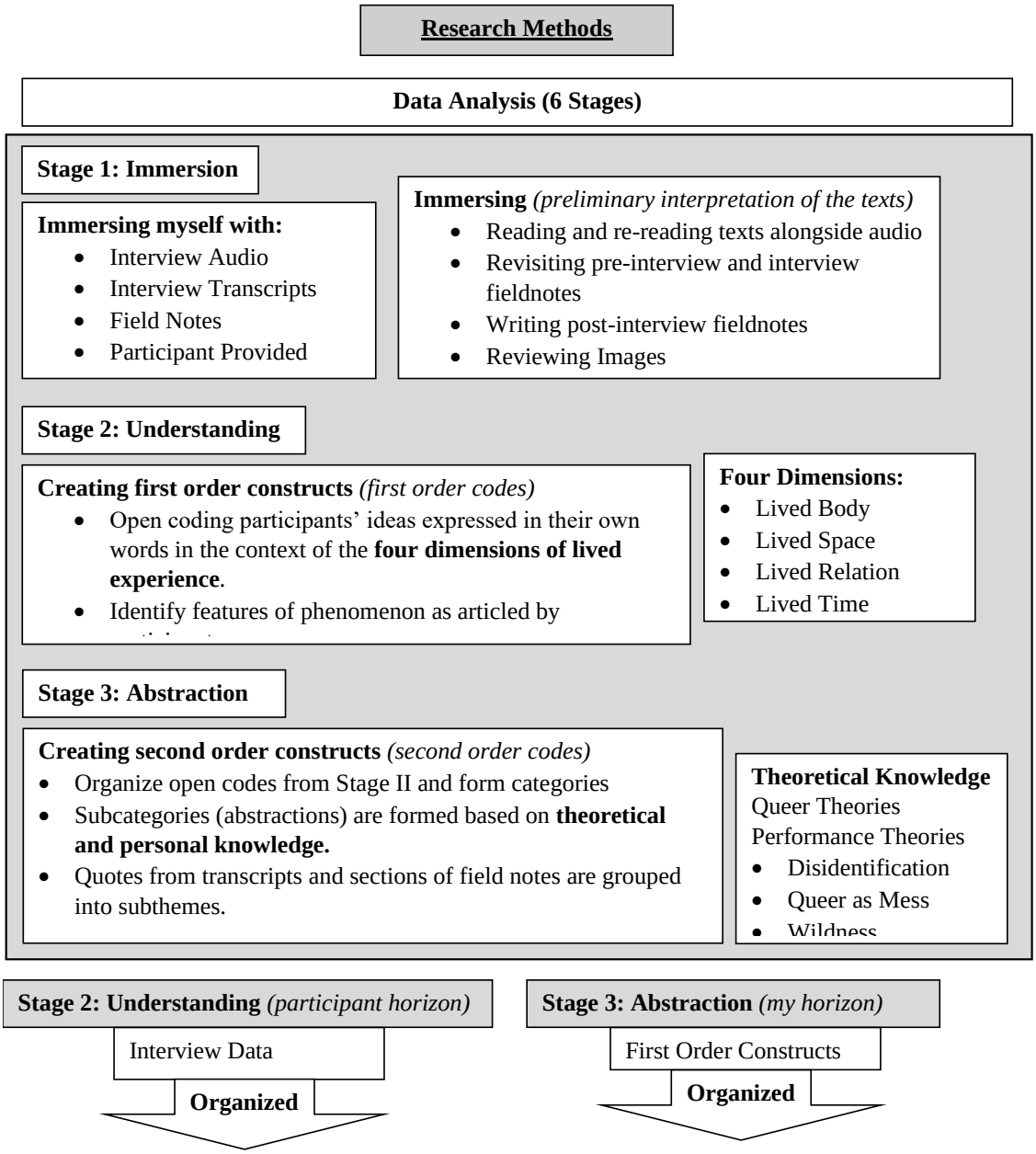
- Don't worry about it. Admit you're stuck and go back to a point where you weren't stuck. Start from there.

## General notes

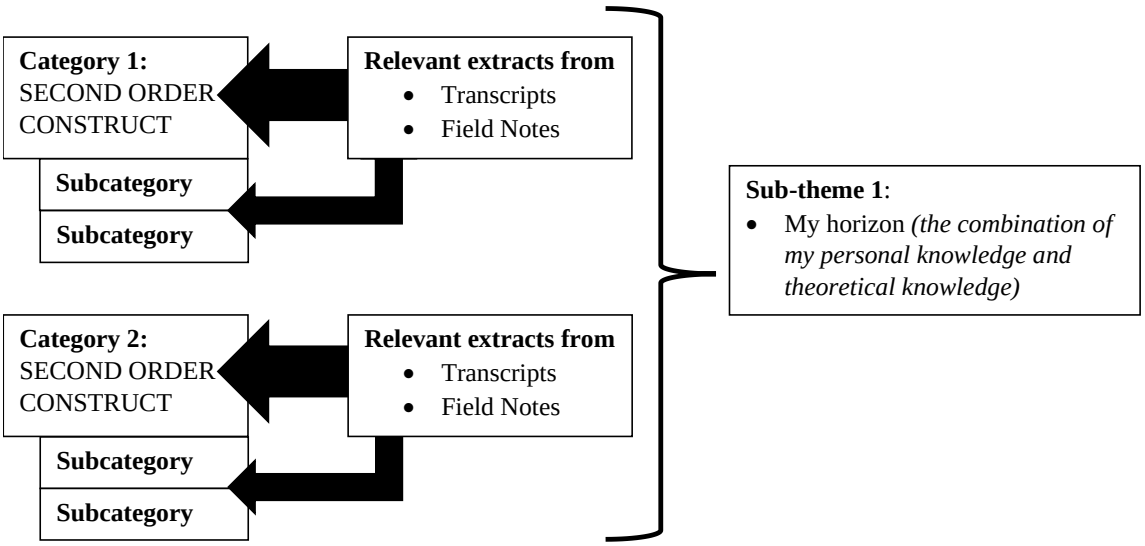
- Avoid "why" questions. They get too general and reflective. Try "what was going on for you when…" questions instead.
- Be transparent, comfortable, and take brief notes of key phrases

## Appendix B – Data Analysis Outline




Research Methods
Data Analysis (6 Stages)
Stage 1: Immersion
Immersing myself with:
Interview Audio
Interview Transcripts
Field Notes
Participant Provided
Immersing (preliminary interpretation of the texts)
Reading and re-reading texts alongside audio
Revisiting pre-interview and interview fieldnotes
Writing post-interview fieldnotes
Reviewing Images
Stage 2: Understanding
Creating first order constructs (first order codes)
Open coding participants' ideas expressed in their own words in the context of the four dimensions of lived experience.
Identify features of phenomenon as articled by
Four Dimensions:
Lived Body
Lived Space
Lived Relation
Lived Time
Stage 3: Abstraction
Creating second order constructs (second order codes)
Organize open codes from Stage II and form categories
Subcategories (abstractions) are formed based on theoretical and personal knowledge.
Quotes from transcripts and sections of field notes are grouped into subthemes.
Theoretical Knowledge
Queer Theories
Performance Theories
Disidentification
Queer as Mess
Wildness
Stage 2: Understanding (participant horizon)
Interview Data
Organized
Stage 3: Abstraction (my horizon)
First Order Constructs
Organized

**Stage 3: Abstraction Example of a Sub-theme** *(my horizon)*




**Stage 4: Theme Development**

**Themes developed from Stages 1-3**

- Meshing the horizons
- Grouping of **sub-themes** into **themes**
- Elaboration of themes and relating to the whole text
- Moving from the parts of text back to the whole text (over and over)

**Stage 5: Illumination and Illustration**

**Creating illustrative stories to the themes and subthemes identified**

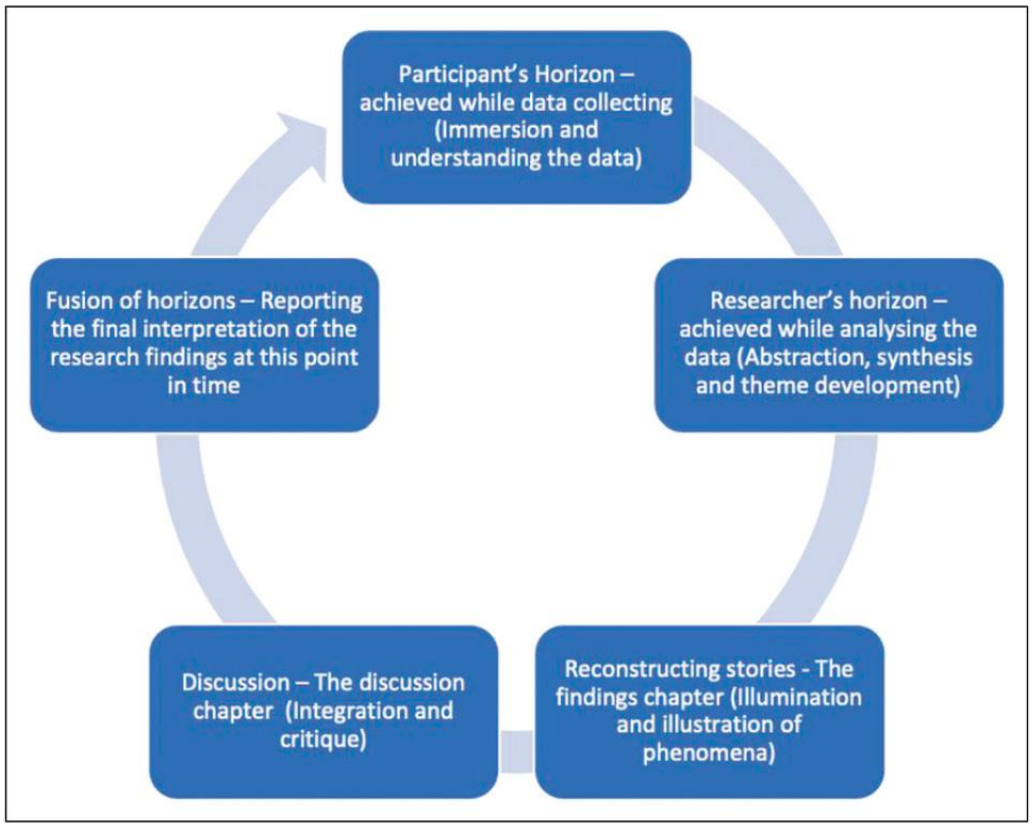
- Using themes and subthemes: identify stories and reconstruct the experience using their own words
- Illuminate the phenomena and highlight key findings from data

**Stage 6: Integration and Critique**

**Fusing of the horizons**

- Critique the themes
- Allow for external critique
- Report final interpretation of findings
- Review recent literature
- Discussion Chapter

**Field Notes:** During all 6 stages of data analysis, self-reflecting field notes will be taken to account for self-reflexivity and deeper insights for continued data analysis. *(See Self-Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations in Proposal)*


Participant's Horizon – achieved while data collecting (Immersion and understanding the data)
Researcher's horizon – achieved while analysing the data (Abstraction, synthesis and theme development)
Reconstructing stories - The findings chapter (Illumination and illustration of phenomena)
Discussion – The discussion chapter (Integration and critique)
Fusion of horizons – Reporting the final interpretation of the research findings at this point in time