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Self as Gem, Fursona as Facet(s): Constructions and Performances of Self in Furry Fandom

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Abstract: This ethnography explores constructions of selfhood in Furry Fandom, the organized body of people fascinated with anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. I argue that furs, who are members of the Fandom, construct the self similarly to a "gemstone," using their fursonas—personally created (re)presentational entities imbued with a sense of personhood—to (re)present different facets of that gemstone. Through the performance of this (re)presentational entity, furs embody socioculturally sanctioned values they associate with their fursonas, and thus, their "true" or "ideal" senses of self. When this performance is validated by other furs, these socioculturally sanctioned values are reinforced in the construction of the self-as-gem, (re)presenting not only the facets of the gem but contributing to the "shaping" of the gem itself.

Introduction: What, and who, is Furry?

  This ethnography begins with an attempt to define Furry, Furry Fandom, and furs, especially (but not only) for those who have never heard these terms before. Broadly, and in the words of Joe Strike (2016:4), Furry involves anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, or the act of ascribing human qualities to nonhumans and nonhuman qualities to humans—it is about "the *idea* of animals...what they represent in our minds." Furry Fandom, then, refers to the organized body of people who engage with Furry in various ways, typically by accessing online forums, attending Furry conventions, or creating Furry art. Fascinated with anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, those who participate in Furry Fandom, or who call themselves "Furry," are more simply referred to as "furs." Both public and academic discourses address furs more often as "furries," but I prefer the term fur for two reasons: first, as Strike (2016) argues, the "-ie" in "furries" is diminutive, and presumes that furs are child-like (5); and, second, it is a helpful way to distinguish between a furry human ("fur"), and a furry animal, which I will instead refer to as "furries." For example, the participants of this ethnography are furs, while Mickey Mouse or Simba from *The Lion King* are furries.

  However, this definition of Furry, and who is a fur, is still incomplete: for nearly all furs, and for every fur with whom I worked, there exists the fursona. Often referred to as a "character" which is created by a fur to represent their "self," the fursona can take the form of any known animal species, mythical species, combination of human/animal species, or fictionalized species. This representation of self can be of the "ideal self" (perhaps one's fursona is more confident in social settings), the "true self" (a near exact representation of everything one believes their self to be), or a "part of the self" (in that it exemplifies only one, or a handful, of characteristics one considers important to their self). Furs may have a single fursona, or they may have multiple

fursonas; some fursonas may also maintain different gender identities, sexual orientations, or lived experiences when compared to their creator. The fursona is performed (sometimes with a "fursuit," a costume constructed to represent the fursona), and is, in this way, what Goffman (1959) might call a kind of "mask." This "mask" functions as a tool of performance, but is still incorporated into the fur's construction of their own "self," becoming "second nature...an integral part of [their] personality" (19).

However, the fursona is not about *being* or *becoming* animal: Therianthropy or Otherkinism—spiritual beliefs that one is in mind, body, or spirit, a nonhuman being—are different from Furry. For some there is crossover, but the fursona is, again, as Strike (2016) posits, about what the nonhuman *represents* to us. The characteristics, personality traits, or identities carried by the fursona are more important than its nonhumanness—*who* the fursona is, in motive, in belief, in person, becomes what is incorporated into the self. There is a relationship between fursona species and personality (one of my informants, whose fursona is a dragon, describes himself as a bit "draconian," which is a common perception of dragons in the fandom, for example), but Furry at large is not defined by the desire to *be* nonhuman. After all, the performance of the fursona is a performance of the anthropomorphic: while, indeed, some of this performance involves a zoomorphosis of the "self" (when in fursuits, for example, some furs may bark, squeak, or refuse human language to communicate), the fur is performing a nonhuman being who is *already* imbued with human characteristics related to one's construction of "self." This complicated, interwoven relationship between the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic may be why all of the participants in this ethnography used the term "anthropomorphic" when referring to Furry and the fursona, and did not speak to Furry as "zoomorphic."

As the primary object of ethnographic study here, I argue that the fursona is best understood as a self-(re)presentation (I acknowledge its demonstrative *and* performative nature with the use of this spelling), and thus, this is an ethnography about selfhood. Despite being of another species, the fursona is not considered by any of my informants as a "multiple" self, but was dialogically constructed as part of the larger "whole" self. This notion of "wholeness" I borrow from Katherine Ewing (1990), and argue that the fursona exemplifies the construction of the self as a series of self-(re)presentations under a guise of wholeness. Riddled with inconsistencies—physically, in species; socially, in performance; and psychologically, in affect—the fursona remains inseparable from a fur's construction of self. As one of the participants of this ethnography told me, he conceives of his self as a gemstone, with his fursona comprising several facets of, and helping to shape, that gemstone. A twist of the gemstone results in a twist of the (re)presented self, but the gemstone is, nonetheless, the same. Commonly echoed by all participants of this ethnography, being Furry and, furthermore, creating and performing the fursona, is a part of *who they are*—it is a way to be their "truest" or most "ideal self" (which, Goffman (1959) argues, when performed also becomes the "truest self"). Therefore, I argue that fursonas offer a glimpse into the construction of self as a collection of (re)presentations, both in how they are created and how they are performed, such that the self is not considered multiple, fractured, or broken, but rather, as a "whole," like a gem with many facets. Moreover, in the performance and validation of the fursona as a self-(re)presentation, a fur actively "shapes" the self-as-gem, reinforcing socioculturally sanctioned values, traits, or characteristics of self and personhood embodied in the fursona as a result of contextuality, intersubjectivity, and the "other."

Methodology

Why Furry Fandom?

In the past six months, almost every friend, family member, or acquaintance in my life has asked me the same question: "Are you a *furry*?"

"I think we're all a little Furry," I'll usually joke. Or, I'll respond with, "No, I'm not. But if I *was*, that'd be okay."

I respond to people in this way because what it means to be Furry is, in my perspective— and in the perspectives of the participants to whom this project owes its life—something that contrasts sharply with common (mis)representations of Furry today. Often still conflated with zoophilia, bestiality, or otherwise presupposed "deviant" behavior, Furry is perceived to be a manifestation of lust for (or at the very least, a desire to *be*) animal(s). But Furry Fandom staunchly rejects both zoophilia and bestiality, and "deviance" is always defined in relation to what is hegemonic. Thus, I address these misconceptions not because they are central to my research, but because they have inevitably informed my navigation of Furry and my relationships with furs and Furry Fandom. They have, also, inevitably informed any fur's navigation of the worlds within and outside of Furry and Furry Fandom.

In addition to being asked whether or not I am a fur, and usually because of my saying that I am not, most people have asked about my interest in the Fandom or why I decided to pursue a project about Furry and fursonas. My answer to these subsequent questions involve my own self (as, I think, does all ethnography), and I was interested in Furry Fandom because I found similarities in many of the people I had known to be Furry. Despite having seen the way that Furry is (mis)represented in the media—for example, in *CSI* or *The Tyra Banks Show*—as

something hypersexual in nature, I also saw queer, geeky mxn[1] who loved animals, fantasy, and video games. I saw goofiness, community, and tenacity. I saw courage: to embrace oneself, to embrace others. I saw in Furry Fandom reflections of values and personhood I strive to maintain and, though I do not have a fursona, imagined I could connect with people in these ways.

I also knew, even before my preliminary Google searches, that there were few people doing research with the Fandom. I wanted to be a part of challenging these existing (mis)representations in some small way, by contributing to this dearth of knowledge, even if that was only to affect my peers, my educators, or my own self. This is not to suggest that Furry Fandom is an idyllic world of fun, togetherness, and strength, nor is it to suggest that I embody these values any more than my peers or educators. It is also not to suggest that furs needed me, or my voice, in the telling of their stories. But I thought that, because of who I am, and because of who I saw in Furry Fandom, I could create a project sensitive or collaborative enough to challenge some of these (mis)representations. Or, if I could not challenge these (mis)representations, then at least furs would be telling the stories about their own communities and their own selves, instead of sensationalized media broadcasts, dramatic television shows, or raw collections of statistical survey data.

Reaching Out, Conducting Interviews, and Processing Data

I first reached out to the community by making a posting in an online forum for furs, asking if there was anyone interested in having a conversation with me or participating in a semi-formal interview. I made an account on the forums, and the post included my name, my email,

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[1] The spelling of "mxn" is used here and throughout (in my voice) to respect and make space for the queer, non-binary, trans-, and other gender-nonconforming members of furry fandom. As a community that is predominantly queer (Plante, Reysen, Roberts, and Gerbasi 2016), and because not all fursonas match the gender (or sexual) identities of their creators, these spellings remain inclusive to the diversity of orientations within Furry Fandom.

and my phone number, as well as my status as an anthropology undergraduate student, my interest in the project (which at the time was as simple as "wanting to learn more" about Furry Fandom and fursonas), and my hopes to create an "honest, compassionate, and curious" project. Seven people responded to the post directly or privately messaged me on the forums' messaging service saying that they were interested in participating, but I only interviewed two of these original seven people. Others eventually expressed disinterest, discomfort, or time constraints and that they no longer wanted to participate. This, I imagine, was a reflection of my positionality as a non-fur, an outsider desiring to work with an already stigmatized and sensationalized group of people.

Of these two interested participants, one met with me in person at a coffee shop for a conversation and then a semi-structured interview, and the other had three extended conversations with me over a popular messaging app (TM) used by the Furry community. Each of these conversations ranged from an hour to an hour and a half in length. One of these participants then connected me with a friend of his who I later interviewed for two hours at a mall in the area. A peer connected me with two people that she knew, who I interviewed over the phone, each for 45 minutes. Another person I met on a different online forum spoke with me informally over TM before connecting me with his partner (whom I interviewed over the phone for 45 minutes), who then connected me with his two friends (one whom I interviewed over the phone for 1.5 hours, and the other for 30 minutes). In total, I worked with eight people on this project, two of whom I spoke with digitally, two of whom I spoke with in person, and four of whom I spoke with over the phone. All participants provided informed consent, either signing in person or over email. I began each interview with broader questions ("Can you describe your introduction to furry fandom?"; "Can you describe to me your fursona?") and became narrower

in scope as each interview progressed. I considered conducting more interviews (there were three other people potentially interested in speaking with me), but because of my own limited time and availability, decided that I would work only with the eight people to whom I had already spoken.

I transcribed and coded all interviews by myself, except for those I conducted over TM, which did not need transcribing. I have provided pseudonyms to each of the furs mentioned in this ethnography, and have decided not to include any unique physical characteristics (except for species) of these furs' fursonas that may be identifiable or particular to them. Some of these pseudonyms are inspired by fantastical media (like Patrick Rothfuss's *Name of the Wind*) to preserve and maintain the importance of fantasy elements in the creation of some fursonas—as well as the fandom at large—while still distancing them from this project. Doing my best to protect the identities of the people who informed this ethnography is critical here, as some have already expressed having dealt with significant stigma because of their Furriness, especially in their younger years. Other furs not involved in this work have also reported losing their jobs (Rodriguez 2016), being ostracized from friends or family (Roberts, Plante, Gerbasi, and Reysen 2015), or concealing their fursonas/Furriness in fear of the accompanied stigmas (Roberts, Plante, Gerbasi, and Reysen 2015; Rodriguez 2016).

Interpretations of Furry and Dialogical Theories of Self

Furscience!, (Sexual) Revitalization, and Performance

As of today, there is little ethnographic data regarding furry fandom, at least if we are considering academic "research" that is "conducted" and not data that takes the form of an autobiography, memoir, or anecdotal essay. Still, this is an indication that the Academy has not observed, challenged, or engaged with (mis)representations of Furry Fandom enough. In response, the International Anthropomorphic Research Project (IARP) released in 2016 its most

seminal work, called *Furscience!*, which is a summary of five years of research covering the most introductory aspects of Furry Fandom, including sections on "Demographics" (most furs are mxn), "Fandom Psychology" (most furs argue being Furry is not a choice) and "Fursonas" (creation of a fursona is nearly universal for furs) among others (Plante, Reysen, Roberts, and Gerbasi 2016). Still, while the work of Plante et al. (2016) was some of the most useful academically conducted research which helped guide my own ethnography—especially because it provides the broadest and potentially most quantitative overview to the fandom—*Furscience!* is lacking in contextuality: the book spends most of its time representing graphs of data, most of which were gathered from collections of surveys handed out at conventions or online. Furthermore, even in their section on "Fursonas," Plante et al. (2016) do not engage with notions of self in a meaningful way, and they end the section acknowledging their data as "correlational," with a call for "further research" (50-76). To that extent, this ethnography situates itself as attempting to contribute to filling this gap in knowledge, thereby "thickening" (to be Geertzian (1973)) the descriptions of preliminary forays into Furry and Furry Fandom.

There are others, though, who have worked with furs and whose research is relevant here, especially as that which is more ethnographic in scope. Morgan (2007:3), for example, attempts to "describe and analyze the culture of furry fandom...[using] Anthony Wallace's model of cultural revitalization movements" and argues that Furry Fandom is a "subculture" formed in response to a hegemonic culture (the United States, in this case) which has not allowed furs to freely express their (sexual) identities. Though Morgan's work (2007) is a potentially valuable venture into the inner-workings of Furry, I believe that he overemphasizes the significance of sex and sexuality in Furry Fandom ("Nearly every fursona represented in art has idyllic sex organs" (77); "many furries still want to believe that the subculture is not defined to a large degree by

sexuality" (88); "[furry fandom] is analogous to a night club...a large number [of furs] come to meet sexual partners" (90)). Sex was not identified as a "primary motivating factor" for most furs by Plante et al. (2016), nor was it an important conversation in my own research. Therefore, I believe Morgan's (2007) analysis of Furry Fandom as a "cultural revitalization movement"—which he eventually concludes is "unfinished," even doubting whether or not the fandom "will last" (89)—is flawed. As one of the participants in my own work suggested, Furry Fandom is instead a "microcosm" of the United States, and the performance of Furry acts as an "expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community [to which it belongs]" (Goffman 1959: 35), not as a form of cultural revitalization at odds with (in this case) "American" culture.

On the other hand, Maase (2015) and Liu (2017), unlike Morgan (2007), both explore Furry Fandom and the way that performance—through roleplay and "fursuiting" (the act of wearing a fursuit)—may play a role in the mediation of identity. Maase (2015), like myself, argues that "fursonas were an extension of the self" (2), that they are "imaginary self-representations" (75). Liu (2017), likewise, argues that fursonas are both an "idealization and representation of the self" (28), his informants reporting that their fursonas are not "characters" in the stricter sense of the word, but that they are, rather, another "dimension of [self]" (29). Both Maase (2015) and Liu (2017) invoke Goffman (1959; 1963), as Goffman's work on "the presentation of self" is critical to their research with Furry as a locus of performance. Defined as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants," performance is about "expression" and "impression" (Goffman 1959:2-15). However, Maase (2015) and Liu's (2017) work focuses more on the fursuit as a tool of performance, whereas mine emphasizes the fursona as a "mask" more conceptually. While the

fursuit is perhaps a more concrete "mask" to examine, most furs do not actually own fursuits (Roberts, Plante, Gerbasi, and Reysen 2015), and none of my informants spoke with me in or showed me their suits, if they had one at all. Still, as a "representational entity" (a term used by an informant), the fursona is, even without a suit, something that must be performed in order to (re)present the "true," "ideal," or facet of the "true/ideal self." Performance, then, is a critical component in the way that the fursona acts as a self-(re)presentation, as something that is both representative and performative.

Situating the Dialogical Self: Representations and Illusions of Wholeness

Katherine Ewing (1990) suggests that the self is relational, contextual, and shifting. Dialogically constructed, the self becomes a representation of who we are in conversation with someone else, and we are, in that sense, always shifting. Furthermore, Ewing (2006) argues, the unfolding of the self in any ethnographic encounter can be understood only as a mediated, intersubjective construction wherein ethnographer *and* participant are responsible for the production of a "self-representation." The use of "self-representation" is important here, especially as it contrasts with notions of "self-presentations" as they are discussed in both Groark's (2008) work with the Tzotzil people of Chiapas, México, or in Goffman's (1959) work on the "presentation of self." A seemingly small linguistic difference, these notions of "representation" and "presentation" differ theoretically, and emphasize or deemphasize one's *awareness* of their construction of the self. While Groark (2008) argues that the Tzotzil of Chiapas move through the world with a *multiplicity* of selves (the "waking self," the "dream self," and the "animal companion") of which they are *aware*, Ewing's (1990; 2006) emphasis on "self-representations" makes the distinction that self-representations are not always consciously constructed—that they are, unlike presentations, often riddled with inconsistencies but are not

considered in the sense of "multiple." While fursonas are, to some extent, conscious constructions of self that are presented or performed, they were not revealed dialogically as multiple, and the importance of Ewing's theory here is regarding the underlying "illusion of wholeness." Thus, I argue the fursona is a representation as much as it is a presentation of self and is best understood as a self-(re)presentation.

Despite the potential inconsistencies of our self-(re)presentations, Ewing (1990; 2006) contends that we approach the world under a guise of wholeness. In her conversations with a key informant, Shamim, Ewing (1990) notices that as these self-(re)presentations become dialogically constructed, and positioned, they rely on specific memories, histories, or experiences with others. When these memories, histories, or experiences are recalled, we perceive them as timeless, continuous, and integrated: for example, Shamim is Shamim, the aspiring Ph.D. candidate pursuing a career in academia; Shamim, the good daughter, willing to sacrifice some of her own ambitions to please her parents with an arranged marriage; Shamim, a good Muslim—and a good Muslim *woman*—who responds to the teachings and demands of her faith. In my conversations with furs, descriptions of fursonas and their relationship to the self always involved the invocation of memories, histories, or experiences that suggested a sense of timelessness when the fursona, and thus, the self, were constructed. Though, like Shamim, my informants were not every "facet" of the "gemstone" of self, at once, they *perceived* their self through a lens of wholeness, and did not question the relative inconsistences of what it would mean to be all of these (re)presentations at any given time. Thus, Ewing (1990) also challenges traditional "Western" conceptualizations of the self as that which is "layered," "authentic," or "cored," concluding that while the self may be *experienced* as that which is whole, it is really comprised of a series of often-conflicting self-(re)presentations. This more nuanced

understanding of the construction of self is also addressed by Kusserow's (1999; 2004) work on

American individualism(s); echoed by Bacigalupo's (2004) experience with Marta, a Mapuche

shaman (machi) who was born a man and became a woman; and discussed in Norrick's (2009)

piece on elderly identities in the context of narrators' stories.

Yet, while I align myself closely with Ewing's (1990; 2006) theory of shifting self-

(re)presentations and the "illusion of wholeness," there are those who challenge this theory as

that which is, perhaps, too "fluid" and not systematized enough in its approach. Bell and Das

(2011), for example, use a dialogical systems theory in attempts to better understand the

construction of what they refer to as a "both" ethnic identity position—a sense of self that, for

those of mixed cultural identity, is both one thing and another (Indian *and* American, for

example). They agree with Ewing's (1990) theoretical work in that they argue variability is

crucial to systems theory, but depart from her notion of "self-representations" in that they posit

the self as an organizational set of internalized (micro-genetic) systems seeking stability, guided

by more "dominant" or "stable" (macro-genetic) systems in order to achieve that sense of

stability. Similarly, Quinn and Mathews (2016) propose a model of "cultural selves" that relies

on neurobiological understandings of "emotional arousal." Like Bell and Das (2011), they

challenge Ewing (1990) and her emphasis on the self as a series of "self-representations," instead

arguing that we move through the world with "cultural schemas" (akin to "micro-genetic

systems) which are subsumed by "cultural selves" (akin to "macro-genetic systems). According

to Quinn and Mathews, these "cultural selves" come from a "universal self" that adapts itself

locally but is, foundationally, the same for every human individual.

I intend to complicate Bell and Das's (2011) systems theory and Quinn and Mathews'

(2016) theory of cultural selves as approaches to the self because I believe they are flawed in

critical ways. System theory's emphasis on "stability" and "variability" as a dichotomy which the self seeks to regulate through a series of systems proposes too strict a binary and pays too much attention to internalized forms of "semiotic autoregulation," a concept developed by Valsiner (2002). This notion of "semiotic autoregulation," wherein meanings from experiences become abstracted (to macro-systems) and are imposed hierarchically upon everyday interactions (to micro-systems), is meant to explain the existence of intra-personal inconsistencies while still accounting for the overall "stability" of the self (Valsiner 2002). But this explanation proposes that the self as it is revealed dialogically is ultimately constrained, and bounded, by the dominant "macro-genetic systems." This notion of a constrained and bounded self is echoed in Quinn and Mathews' (2016) explications of the "cultural schema," which is filtered by the "cultural self," which is bounded by the neurobiological "universal self." Here, there is yet another assumption of the self as "layered," with localized interactions mediated by abstracted and "stable" forms of meaning. But the self, I argue, is conceived more like a gemstone, and each of these theories neglects the intersubjectivity inevitably involved in its construction. We *must* note the importance of other interlocutors, other voices, as they relate to the positioning of the self in relation to the "other," rather than only to the internal "systems" of a self that branches outwards (from inwards) unto the world. The gemstone, after all, is twisted to reflect a particular (re)presentation of self in any dialogical encounter, always performed (Goffman 1959), always in response to the other who stands before us.

Ewing (2006) would speak to Bell and Das's (2011) representations of Yastha (their informant) as "flat"—the "richness of meaning" involved in the dialogical construction of their participant's self is absent from the texts, because the authors themselves are absent from the texts. In their analyses, Bell and Das (2011) lose nearly all of the contextuality in their

reproduction of the dialogical encounters as they exist on the page. Contextuality, as it is conceived by Ewing (1990; 2006) as well as Koven (2014), is about a negotiation of power, a negotiation of interpretive frameworks, between interlocutors. It is about more than what is said—it is about what is unsaid, what is "syn-tactically" made ambiguous, what is present, *relationally*, to modes of transference or identification. I feel that this kind of methodology, informed especially by sociolinguistics, is more relevant to my own work (as it pertains to my analysis of dialogical encounters with informants) and is also especially relevant in Bell and Das's (2011) work. Yet nowhere do Bell and Das (2011) enter the story of their own analysis. Nowhere do we, as readers, see explicit discussion of the intersubjectivity involved in this production of a (re)presentation of Yastha as someone whose identity is hinged on this concept of "both." In the discussion that follows, I attempt to highlight this intersubjectivity as critical in my analysis of the self as it is present in my work with furs and fursonas.

Creating the Fursona: from Character to (Re)presentational Entity

I must note here, again, that being Furry is not described as a choice, but rather, as an integral part of a fur's identity, personality, and self (Plante, Reysen, Roberts, and Gerbasi 2016). Participants of this ethnography describe knowing they were Furry "long before" they knew Furry Fandom existed, and the creation of the Fandom itself is charted as a coming-together of like-minded (Furry) people, excited to learn they were not the "only one!" (Strike 2017:13-21). This notion of Furry-as-self and not Furry-as-choice is why, I suggest, the creation of a fursona is a near-universal process for furs in Furry Fandom (Plante, Reysen, Roberts, and Gerbasi 2016). However, the process of coming to know oneself as Furry (and also, the process of "coming out"[2] as Furry to friends, family, or others) is, for each of my informants, incredibly different: for

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[2] The process of revealing one's Furriness, instead of concealing or hiding Furry identity.

one, his fursona came to him in a vision when he was struggling with numerous health problems in the hospital (Kvothe); for another, he put on a suit-like hood and it "just felt right" (Wakka); and, still, for others, it began with a love, veering on "obsession," with cartoon animal characters from, for example, *The Lion King* (Theon; Wicket). This ethnography is not, however, a collection of ethnographic accounts about the realization of a fur's Furriness, and I must admit that these questions were not central to my research. Instead, this project considers the fursona as the primary object of ethnographic study and, therefore, is about the relationship of Furry and self after this realization, which typically begins with the creation of a fursona.

Perhaps the most ubiquitous way a fur might engage with Furry or Furry Fandom is through art (Morgan 2007; Maase 2015; Roberts, Plante, Gerbasi, and Reysen 2015; Liu 2017), and the creation of a fur's fursona begins with art, or, as my informant Kvothe said, at a "character-creation screen." A fur may commission this artwork of their fursona from another, "more artistic" person, says Kvothe, but the relevance and pervasiveness of art, especially as it pertains to the fursona, is undeniable for Furry Fandom: aside from performance of the fursona, there is no other way to (re)present the fursona except through art. Furry art is bought and sold at conventions (a convention always has an Artists' Alley or Dealers' Den where art is made, bought, and sold) or commissioned or shared online. Several larger websites are used by Furry Fandom, some of which are exclusively for sharing Furry art (Maase 2015; Liu 2017; Strike 2017). These sites were mentioned by multiple informants of mine as significant spaces for furs to "express" their sense of self through sketches, paintings, photographs, digital designs, or narratives. Especially for furs who cannot afford a fursuit (which range from hundreds to upwards of ten thousand USD), art is critical for the (re)presentation of self through the fursona and is way to "explore parts of your personality you may not otherwise get to engage" (Howl

2015:61). Even in other fandoms for which art is important—for example, for "Trekkies" (*Star Trek* fans) or fans of Japanese animation/manga, both of which came up in several of my interviews—artwork plays a unique role in Furry Fandom. When explaining to me the value of art to Furry Fandom, two of my informants, Theon and Kvothe, told me:

> I'd say compared to Anime, or Star Trek, or something, where people are fans of a show, the Furry community is definitely more of a close-knit community because we're not fans of a show because—*we* are the content creators...so I think that's kind of, you know, a little bit unique within the Furry Fandom...we're all fans of each other, you know, I'm a fan of what all my friends are doing—I'm a fan of what *you're* doing, you know, writing this paper and being interested in it, that's really cool (Theon).

> One of the jokes that I know—and you may have heard this from Theon [laughs] but I believe it too—part of the reason that Furry Fandom is as amazing as it is, you know, because, in other things you're fans of things others created. But Furry—we're fans of each other! We're the fandom that starts at a character-creation screen. And we are amazed at who each other are, who you *become*, what you *do*, *your* story...we're fans of each other, and that alone creates this massive support for each other (Kvothe).

In both Kvothe and Theon's elaborations of Furry artwork and "content creation," there is a distinction made that Furry is, by nature of its originality, about being fans of *each other*. Because Furry artwork often involves a fur's, or another fur's, or the interaction between several furs', fursona(s), it is also about the production of self. Involved in this production of the self is, as Kvothe notes, "who you *become*, what you *do*, *your* story"—the facets of self encompassed by a fur's fursona(s) are shared with the Furry community through their own art. Even if the art is commissioned, it stands as a reflection of selfhood, a story told by the hand of another but still in order for the fursona, and the self, to become what Kvothe later described to me as a "representational entity."

Thus, the fursona may "start at the character-creation screen," but it is, I argue, more than just a "character." Imbued with personhood, the fursona represents some of the facets of the "whole self"—the self-as-gem—and is in this way afforded the title of (re)presentational entity. I

prefer to use the term "(re)presentational" instead of "representational" because, as I have argued, the fursona is both a "self-representation" (Ewing 1990) as well as a "presentation of self" (Goffman 1959)—it is both demonstrative and performative. And while the phrase "representational entity" was used only by Kvothe, I feel that, linguistically, it more accurately describes *what* the fursona is, as well as the kind of relationship a fur maintains with their fursona. The word "entity" is more appropriate than "animal," because the fursona is greater than animal: for some fursonas, technology (an informant of mine's fursona had a cannon for an arm); magic (not in the anthropological sense of the word per se, as discussed by those like Evans-Pritchard (1937)); or "scientifically" impossible hybridization of species (kangaroo crossed with gargoyle, for example (Howl 2015)) are incorporated into the construction of the fursona. Furthermore, as an anthropomorphized figure, the fursona cultivates personhood (defined by Grace Harris (1989:602) as "conceptualizing the human or other being as an agent"), spoken either *in relation to*, as a being with whom the fur has a relationship, or *in relation with*, as a being who actually *is* the self. When Kvothe proposed the term "representational entity," it was after I asked him whether or not he or others refer to their fursona(s) as "characters" or "people," also speaking to this notion of *in relation to*:

> It becomes...you could almost call it a representational entity...It's a representational entity—of either the person, or a part of the person...A lot of them [furs] see them [fursonas] as a part of themselves, and you'll often hear them referred to as 'my baby, my son, my daughter, my child—they're a part of me, but they're also my creation.' So sometimes you'll see people treat them [fursonas] a lot as the way you'll see a proud parent treat their child...You hear a lot of that, and it's just funny to listen to. But it [the fursona] is a representational entity, either of the self or of a part of the self.

It is in this way that I argue the fursona achieves a sense of personhood and is more than a "character." Even when the fursona is referred to as "my baby" (*in relation to*), and not directly as "I" or "me" (*in relation with*), there is both an acknowledgment of fursona as agent and

fursona as part of self. A referent of the actively constructed self, even when designated *in relation to*, the fursona is not multiple but still a part of the construction of self-as-whole, or self-as-gem, evidenced by Kvothe's distinction of one's "creation" as also belonging to a "part of the self."

Furs often speak of their fursonas not as static beings but as dynamic ones, furthering their sense of personhood: as furs grow, change, or challenge existing (re)presentations of their own self, their fursona(s) may shift in response. Most of my informants discussed, in some way, who they and their fursona "used to be," and who they and their fursona "are now"—how they both changed with time. This dynamism is natural for any construction of self, especially as it shifts dialogically or as a reflection of "contextuality" (Ewing 1990; Ewing 2006; Koven 2015), and here suggests the importance of fursonas as (re)presentations of self. Because the fursona shifts—sometimes in species, but usually in performance or affect—to more appropriately reflect the self-as-gem or its many facets, I argue it is best understood as this (re)presentational entity, as an affected and affecting agent. The fursona is not just affected but is affecting particularly if the fursona is constructed as a (re)presentation of the "ideal self" and the fur attempts to learn from, embody, or develop the traits and characteristics their fursona maintains. Several furs with whom I worked expressed that their fursona(s) had played a significant role in their continued construction of self, most often acting as a "check" on certain behaviors. For example, my informant, Wicket, said that his fursona's "steadfastness" was something "[he] could see growing" in himself, something his fursona possessed and that he "wanted to work towards." He describes thinking of his fursona as someone who might say "You're doing what?" to him, raising an eyebrow, commenting on and, consequently, mediating his behavior.

Sometimes, though, a single fursona does not encapsulate enough of the self-as-gem on its own, and a fur may create multiple fursonas in attempts to (re)present more of their "whole self." At the end of an interview, one of my informants, Wakka, asked me what my fursona would be (I told him, probably, a wolf, or a wolf-dog), to which he responded:

> Oh, that's cool! I'm actually working on a second fursona, and he's gonna be a wolf...[he's] more representative of the older me, the wiser me, the one who likes to guide and give wisdom and, you know, have a deep soul presence. It's not as fake, or cartoony, or happy [as his first fursona, a panda bear], it's more serious, and grounded, you know. That kind of thing.

When I then asked Wakka if this fursona was how he "saw himself in the future," he continued describing how his second fursona, the one still being created, was different from his first, but that they both represented different parts of his larger self:

> I think when at Festival [name removed], where the whole bear thing was created, I'm more playful, and just lettin' everything loose, and being happy and, just, loving and giving and all that kind of stuff...that's where my head was at when that fursona was created, but, when I'm at home, that's not where my head is at. [Laughs.] You know, I'm more of a mentor, an advisor, and...and a person who gives wisdom and helps people get to a better situation, or develop, or grow. And so that's what the wolf would represent.

Thus, Wakka feels that having two fursonas is a better way to (re)present parts of his self which are revealed in specific cultural settings: when he is at Festival, he chooses to (re)present a more "playful" and "happy" self, whereas at home, he wants to (re)present a "wiser...more serious, and grounded" self which is more appropriate in that space. Despite his desire to have two fursonas, Wakka's construction of self exists through a lens of wholeness, and each fursona (re)presents several facets of the self-as-gem despite their very obvious inconsistencies in species, performance, and affect.

Still, most of the discussion of fursona as (re)presentational entity has involved the construction of the fursona *in relation to*, and I have yet to provide examples of the fursona constructed *in relation with*. This notion of *in relation with* is perhaps best summed up by

Kvothe, as well as another informant of mine, Tails, who both respond to their "legal name" as well as their fursona's name. For Kvothe, the consideration of "legal name" and fursona name is seemingly more equal when he says:

> I go by both, because I see myself as both. I respond to them. He is me, I am him. You know...I have joked with friends that part of the reason I can do as well as I work is because I bring some draconic tenacity to everything I do...My family all know—they all know the name [fursona name]. I will respond just as fast to [legal name] as I do [fursona name]. And I just tailor which side is more presented based upon which group of people I'm with, but I don't see too much difference between them...I see myself the same at both sides. And it's just—there are elements of me that are more human and there are elements of me that are more draconic, but they still are facets of the same whole. It's just, which side of the gem am I choosing to present the most of at any given moment? And usually it's a combination of the two.

Kvothe's claim that "He is me, I am him" illustrates the way the fursona is constructed *in relation with* as much as it is constructed *in relation to*. He delivers "draconic tenacity" in all aspects of his life, and his (re)presentation of self through his fursona (a dragon) is both chosen and unchosen. Kvothe says he "tailors" which side of his self is presented to others, but that both sides are almost the same: the construction of self through fursona is inseparable from linguistic positions of "I," or "me," becoming demonstrative of self-as-gem and not self-as-multiple.

For Tails, the construction of fursona *in relation with* is also apparent, though his positions of "I" and "me" come with more caveats. Below are excerpts from our conversations over TM:

> *Me:* So how is [your fursona] like you or unlike you?
>
> *Tails:* [My fursona] is a fox that is really a reflection of myself. Unofficially earning the nickname of the 'Business Fox,' he organizes a lot of events...[and] he is like me in the sense that he is observing and built around my personality...
>
> *Me:* Are there ways of being [your fursona] that don't involve "suiting up"?
>
> *Tails*: Being myself around those that know me, honestly. I do not have to act any particular way.

> *Me:* Sorry if this is a silly question, but do you go by [fursona name] sometimes and not others?
>
> *Tails:* [Fursona name] most of the times and off and on my real name around people in my circle of friends.

Important to Tails's construction of his fursona is that there is a "reflection of self" which is "built around [his] personality" and emphasizes his (re)presentation of self as a business-oriented person who organizes events. Here, Tails recalled specific examples of events he had organized (not mentioned above), and in this way, these memories acted as "timeless" (Ewing 1990) in the dialogical construction of self. More interesting, however, is that Tails says "being" his fursona involves nothing more than being himself with people who know him, but then also says he goes by his "real name" with his circle of friends. When asked about the (re)presentation of his fursona around his family, Tails responded that he is never his fursona with them (he further elaborated they "didn't understand it [Furry]"), and thus, it seems that Tails uses his "real name" with those who know him not primarily as a fur, performing his fursona (and using his fursona name) with those whom he can more easily be "himself." Tails's dialogical construction of self in this conversation is not as straightforward as Kvothe's but, nonetheless, is indicative of the way he constructs his fursona *in relation with* as well as *in relation to*, reinforcing the notion of fursona as (re)presentational entity and of self-as-gem.

Ultimately, the fursona starts at what furs call the "character creation screen," through personal or commissioned artwork, and becomes a (re)presentational entity. Spoken to as agents, the fursona maintains personhood and, for the fur, is considered a reflection or (re)presentation of the "whole" or of "facets" of the whole self. Dialogically, the fursona is referenced *in relation to* ("my baby" or "my child") or *in relation with* ("I" or "me"), and a fur positions their "self" as a gem with many facets. All furs of this project viewed their fursona(s) as belonging to the same

self, as a (re)presentational entity, and not as a separable or removed being out of touch with all that a fur believes their self to be. Thus far I have spoken to the dialogical construction of the fursona as (re)presentational entity, and it remains unclear in this discussion how the fursona as (re)presentational entity is embodied through performance and, subsequently, what that performance contributes to the construction of self. I continue now with the delineation of fursona as performative, as "mask" (Goffman 1959), as *becoming*.

Performing the Fursona: from (Re)presentational Entity to "Self"

Maase (2015) and Liu (2017) discuss the fursona as performative and point to physical symbols (fursuits, ears, tails, or "badges"[3] for example) that mediate a fur's "identity" through performance. I would be remiss not to talk about performance of the fursona using these "sign vehicles" (Goffman 1959:1) but in the context of this ethnography I was not able to observe the performance of a fursona using any of these sign vehicles. The Furry conventions close enough for me to be able to attend are run during the summer (as most conventions are), and I was not in the area for some of the larger local events or gatherings that were organized during the winter. Therefore, my interpretations of fursona as performance using suits, ears, tails, badges, or other physically identifiable symbols are limited, in many ways, to the direct observations of Maase (2015) and Liu (2017), as well as collections of essays and memoirs written by members of Furry Fandom themselves (Howl 2015; Strike 2017). Instead, I can speak to the performance of the fursona as it saturated my own work: through storytelling and dialogical accounts. I will return to these accounts soon, but first intend to speak to bodily performance of the fursona

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[3] A "badge," or "conbadge," is a personalized form of identification for a fur's fursona, typically worn at conventions or other Furry gatherings/events. The conbadge is often a flat piece of artwork approximating 3" to 4" in size. It may be worn with or without a fursuit, and is sometimes used instead of a suit so that a fur or their fursona is still identifiable, as the conbadge contains the name of a fur's fursona and a portrait of the fursona.

through the work of others, interpreting this bodily performance in relation to the incorporation of fursona into self.

It is important to first establish where, exactly, the fursona is performed, as the performance of the fursona (like other facets of the self-as-gem) is both public and private. Some furs go bowling in their fursuits, some go on "romps,"[4] and some attend conventions. Others perform their fursonas only online, accessing forums, roleplaying games, or messaging apps like TM. Of all the participants in this study, only one fur (Kvothe) expressed performing his fursona around family (excluding a fur's partner, as the partners of furs in this ethnography were themselves furs), though several others did express having "come out"[5] as Furry to their family (Theon, Tails). That the performance of fursona—and, thus, the self in some capacity—is both public and private is not novel, but it is important to note because furs have faced stigmatization in public discourse, at the clinic, and with family and friends (Roberts, Plante, Gerbasi and Reysen 2015; Plante, Reysen, Roberts, and Gerbasi 2016). I stress contextuality and the intersubjectivity of the interview process (Ewing 2006; Koven 2014), acknowledging that, in my conversations with furs, specific (re)presentations of self were revealed to me dialogically as a result of who I am as much as who my informants are. Those who had come out as Furry were more immediately forthcoming than those who had not expressed coming out to their families, and they were also more likely, I noticed, to express performing their fursona(s) in public spaces.

Strike (2017:130) describes the fursuit as a way for furs to "become their character," allowing them to step more easily into the role of their fursona. When the fursuit is donned,

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[4] A "romp" is a public outing in full or partial suit, usually taking the form of a picnic, scenic walk, or group activity (Maase 2015; Liu 2017).

spaces, communications, and relationships may be subverted (Maase 2015; Liu 2017) by a deliberate (re)presentation of "self" that is anthropomorphic but not entirely human. Still, the fursuit is not meant to (re)present animal entirely either, but rather, a constructed (re)presentational entity imbued with a sense of personhood. It is, as Strike (2017) says, "a *skin*, an other self made visible" (142). I note here that Strike (2017) calls this "skin" an *other* self, not *another* self, and he is, in this way, referring not to self-as-multiple but to self-as-whole—to self-as-gem, claiming the fursuit as a sign vehicle for the (re)presentation of a different facet of the same whole. He elaborates:

> To borrow some dialog from *Donnie Darko*, you're as much taking off 'that stupid man suit' as putting on a 'stupid bunny suit.' The suit isn't housing the person wearing it—it's the wearer's alternate personality (and species) manifesting itself. I'd been rejecting fursuits because I thought they were a failed attempt to make an imaginary animal 'real,' when the animal standing in front of me already *was* real (143).

This notion of "taking off" and "putting on" suits speaks to Goffman's (1959) framework of performance in that the fursuit is used to tailor the (re)presentation of a specific part of self, to a specific audience, for a specific purpose. In this way, the "suit" acts like a mask, both literally and symbolically. Still, it may seem unclear how referring to the fursona as a "skin" is not, in fact, about *being* animal, especially because Strike (2017) says when he dons a fursuit, an alternate "species" manifests. However, I argue that the fursona—and even the fursuit—are (re)presentational of personhood, despite species: as Strike (2017) continues to say, when performing his fursona Komos (a Komodo dragon) in suit, he felt "handsome, powerful...*dangerous*" (170); like a "bad boy" (172); and like a ruler (175). Each of these descriptions of how Strike felt when performing Komos in suit is, to some extent, anthropomorphized, and embodying Komos is not about *literally* being a Komodo dragon. Embodying Komos—through performance—is about what he *represents* to Strike, a being who

is bolder, slicker, and more powerful. Furthermore, the fursuit is, as Strike (2017) admits, constructed more often in a specific style, with "toonieness" (174)—it is not meant to look exactly like an animal but like the anthropomorphized entity the fursona instead (re)presents. The Komos suit, for example, has a wide, toothy grin; styles a small, gray, tuft of a mohawk; and wears a "silky dinner jacket adorned with a red carnation boutonnière" (Strike 2017:169) Still, this discussion of "taking off" and "putting on" suits (or masks) implies that, underneath the suit, the self is operating as gem, as whole.

There is also, as I have mentioned prior, sometimes a zoomorphosis of self involved in the performance, and thus, the becoming, of one's fursona. While in suit, one of Liu's (2017) informants describes the importance of being "highly silent" in the performance of his fursona (Dan), communicating instead with "squeakers in [his] paws" or "gestures and such" (26). This allows Dan to (re)present himself as "cute and adorable to entertain people," focusing on "his looks" and the way his expressive performance impresses others (Liu 2017:26). For Strike (2017), a zoomorphosis of performance enters his (re)presentation of Komos not through silence but through accentuation of certain speech patterns: "Sssorry..." (171); "You are under my ssspell..." (172); "Sssoon I will command *all*!" (175) These attempts to zoomorphize the "self" during the performance of the fursona are sign vehicles that prevent what Goffman (1959:141) calls the reveal of "facts" which can "discredit, disrupt, or make useless the impression that the performance fosters." Concealing these "facts" (which, in this case, involve speaking like a human) allow a fur's audience to *believe* in the (re)presentation of their "self" as fursona. Critical to understand, then, are the intended impressions of performance and, furthermore, the extent to which these expressions—with intended impressions—are incorporated into the construction of a fur's self-as-gem. Not about *being* animal, I argue that these expressions, even when

zoomorphic, are in fact about *becoming* fursona: they are about (re)presenting the personhood of the fursona as an anthropomorphized figure, as a (re)presentation of self, with zoomorphic sign vehicles operating as ways to preserve the reveal this self-(re)presentation to a fur's audience.

I return now to some of my own ethnographic data to note that performing the fursona, similarly to the presence of artwork, is considered ubiquitous in Furry Fandom. Below is an excerpt of my conversation with Kvothe about his fursona, sense of self, and the extent to which he performs his fursona despite a physical disability:

> *Kvothe:* You know, I'm never gonna be a suiter. I like to joke it's because I'm a dragon and I'm far too vain to ever do such a thing, and nothing would ever come close to the real glory...but for that matter I do like to cosplay and do different things, I have bad habits with accents...and being able to do that helps, because, you know, unsurprisingly, being the medically disabled kid, I was really shy—[and] I did the most outlandish thing of going into theater, to get over it. And I learned that anything that I can do talking with people is just the same as being in theater, it's just the same as an act. It's the same as what everyone's doing in fursuit, except I'm just doing it without needing to don physical articles.
>
> *Me:* Yeah, and it's something people do even without a suit, too. We perform every day.
>
> *Kvothe:* Yeah, the general population learned how to do it, the people who learned how to deal with...bullshit at work, or stress with family, or anxieties about being out driving or something. Everyone learns how to put on those *masks*. And, in Furry, I just—as far as I'm concerned, the masks are just a little more...visible than others.

Kvothe begins, in this excerpt, by describing why he is "never gonna be a suiter": he is disabled, he says, but he does "the same as what everyone's doing in fursuit" without "physical articles" or sign vehicles. Performing his fursona is about more than just the physical (re)presentation to Kvothe and, in any case, no suit would ever come close to the "real glory" of his fursona. Kvothe acknowledges that the fursona is about a self-(re)presentation, about a "*mask*," about a performance of self in relation to "other". Whether this other involves the "bullshit at work," "stress with family," or general "anxieties," Kvothe speaks to performance as contextual and shifting, and thus, speaks to the (re)presentation of self as contextual and shifting. In Furry, he

suggests, the masks are perhaps more "visible," but they are, nonetheless, indicative of self-as-performance at large, as a twisting of the self-as-gem in response to intersubjectivity. This suggests that a fur constructs their self as a gem *despite* the inconsistency of these "masks," conceptualizing the fursona as a different (re)presentation of the same whole, the same as an "act" or expression with an intended impression.

More than just ubiquitous in Furry Fandom, the performance of the fursona as a (re)presentation is also intended to express values, beliefs, or characteristics that are important to a fur's sense of self. Performing the fursona reinforces these values, beliefs, or characteristics, not just within the fursona, but also within a fur's larger self-as-gem, shaping the construction of the self. For example, Rito discussed his and other furs' collaboration with a local zoo, noting that performing as his fursona there—which involved helping greet and play with children—reinforced the kind of passion he believes is an important part of his self:

> I did that, and, after it I figured out, like, wow, I'm actually feeling this. Acting in this character—this really feels right. And I started thinking more about—you know...about the meaning of a fox, you know, foxes are supposed to be more creatures of passion. And I thought, in terms of my work life, what I do for the fandom, it's—super passionate, I put my all into everything I'm doing for it, you know. And it just sort of clicked at that time—like, wow, this character actually works more for me as a representation.

In a prior, unrecorded conversation with Rito, we also spoke about this annual event at the zoo, which is why I asked him about it a second time. It seemed to me that volunteering for this event was important to Rito, and he suggests here that in the performance of his fursona, there is a strengthening of the "passion" he sees in his own self. He puts "his all" into his "work life" and what he does "for the fandom"—he strives to bring that dimension of his self to the people and spaces around him. Thus, in performing his fursona, Rito reaffirms to himself—as much as he is reaffirmed by others, he goes on to say—that he is a "creature of passion." The "click" that he experiences and describes is indicative of a moment of solidification: in the performance of what

Rito sees as a "creature of passion," he feels, as a result of this performance, that he *is* a creature of passion. Thus, he incorporates this "passion" (re)presented by his fursona into the construction of his self. This account of Rito-(re)presenting-fursona and, as such, Rito-(re)presenting-passion, becomes timeless and speaks to the dialogical construction of self-as-gem or self-as-whole, the account acting as a story upon which Rito can draw in the explication of his self as passionate.

Furthermore, the performance of the fursona "tend[s] to," as Goffman (1959:35) says, "incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society" of which one is a part. In this way, I argue that the fursona is a reflection of the culturally constructed and performed self because it (especially when considered an ideal self) (re)presents values of personhood "accredited" or celebrated by a larger sociocultural space. This notion of the self as constructed and performed culturally is important, because in the construction of the fursona as an ideal self, what is "ideal" for furs in the U.S. seems to be representative of what is considered "ideal" in larger discourses. The values I saw most commonly expressed as "ideal" for self and fursona are also, I noticed, socioculturally sanctioned in the U.S., and are not in larger discourses stigmatized or considered aberrant. Kvothe, in a continuation of our conversation about performance, began to discuss this performance of fursona as healing. In performing the fursona, and in the validation of this performance by other furs in Furry Fandom, Kvothe speaks to the way that self-efficacy, confidence, or a "grasp of skills" are reinforced or strengthened in the self for a fur performing their fursona. Important to note is that these "positive" values are still, I argue, traceable to sociocultural sanctions of particular (and usually individual-centric) traits. The excerpt below is meant to illustrate healing-through-performance, insofar as healing involves the reinforcement of characteristics considered "ideal" or valuable in the U.S.:

> *Kvothe*: But, you see the same effect [in Furry] that you do in all these other people who learned how to do it [perform]. You see them [furs] become healthier, become well-

> adjusted, you see the underlying person affected positively...I've heard this from the parents or the teens, both in the current group and the ones I mentored years ago. Coming and being a part of the Furry group, being able to be *who* they want to be, in an environment where they're not gonna get judged for it—their grades get better, they become more attractable, they become more confident, they show better grasp of their skills, better sense of self, all of these positive things just because they get a chance to be 'strange,' be who they want to be, and not get judged for it.

Thus, Kvothe argues Furry Fandom acts as a network of social support for furs, allowing them to (re)present their selves in desirable ways and that, because of this freedom to "be *who* they want to be," furs ultimately experience a "better sense of self." In performing their fursonas—who are, for many furs, (re)presentative of the ideal self in some capacity—furs become more "attractable" and "confident," two traits characteristically associated with an ideal self for furs and their fursonas, as well as the U.S. at large. Most importantly, however, is that the characteristics (re)presented in the performance of the fursona are embodied into a sense of "self" even after that performance. Kvothe says that the "underlying person"—the person behind the fursuit or, more largely, the mask of performance—changes. The values imbued within the fursona which transform it into a (re)presentational entity in the first place are incorporated back *into* the self, back into the (re)presentation of that sense of self in everyday life, regardless of whether or not a fur dons any physical sign vehicles of their fursona. This I take as the "shaping" of the self-as-gem, the change that a fur sees in their greater sense of self through the performance and validation of the fursona, a (re)presentational entity embodying the "true" or "ideal" senses of self.

Together, my observations in the literature (Maase 2015; Liu 2017), my reading of memoirs and essays (Howl 2015; Strike 2017), and my own conversations with furs suggest that performance of the fursona is critical for a fur to (re)present facets of their Furry self. The performance of the fursona involves the use of sign vehicles, as well as revealing and concealing

with these sign vehicles in public and private spaces; solidification of socioculturally sanctioned values (re)presented in the ideal self through validation of the fursona and its personhood; and changes to the "underlying person" behind the mask of performance. Essential in the performance of the fursona are these changes to the "underlying person," which suggest that the fursona comprises not only facets of the self-as-gem but the *shape* of the self-as-gem. In the performance of the fursona, in its *becoming,* the construction of self shifts as specific (re)presentations are performed through the fursona. As a literal and symbolic "mask," the fursona is donned like any other (re)presentation of self, as a response to context, to intersubjectivity, and to "other."

Conclusion

I have argued in this ethnography that the fursona is a referent of the actively constructed self, moving from a character (and the "character creation screen") to a (re)presentational entity, and from a (re)presentational entity into the construction of the self-as-gem. More than just a character, the fursona is a (re)presentational entity imbued with a sense of personhood, (re)presenting values, beliefs, or characteristics belonging to the "true self," the "ideal self," or of parts of the self. Despite inconsistences in species, affect, and performance, the fursona is not considered by the participants of this project as a multiple self, but instead is conceived under a guise of wholeness. A part of a series of self-(re)presentations, the fursona is dialogically constructed to be a facet, or facets, of the "whole self." In these dialogical accounts of the self, the fursona is invoked through specific stories in a way that is timeless, these stories acting as (re)presentations of the self, reflecting contextuality and intersubjectivity. When the fursona is performed, its status of personhood (and, thus, its (re)presenting of anthropomorphic values, beliefs, or characteristics) is validated, and there is a reinforcing of this personhood in the

construction of self-as-gem. This suggests that the fursona *shapes* the self-as-gem just as it comprises facets of the self-as-gem. Thus, the fursona is (re)presentational in that it *represents* but also *presents*: it illustrates dimensions of the self, but a fur must, too, perform the fursona so that it is incorporated into the "shape" of the self more largely.

These insights of fursona as a performed (re)presentational entity offer a more nuanced understanding of self-construction in Furry Fandom, especially as already discussed by Maase (2015), Plante et al. (2016), and Liu (2017). Supplementing my own work with essays (Howl 2015) and Strike's memoir (2017), I intend for this ethnography to be situated within the existing literature, not just about furry fandom, but about the self. The existing work regarding Furry—of which there is little—fails to capture the distinct lifeworlds of furs and fursonas, the way that the self is constructed dialogically with the performance of the fursona as integral to *who* furs are. I rely on Ewing (1990; 2006) as well as Goffman (1959) here to establish an appropriate theoretical framework through which I understood the articulation of fursona as (re)presentational entity. But I acknowledge, also, that my work is limited, especially because I was not able to observe the performance of the fursona firsthand. Despite these limitations, this ethnography is a deeper foray into the construction and performance of the fursona, and thus, the construction and performance of the self. This is a discussion of selfhood, of creating, of *becoming*. While the fursona is a uniquely fitted ethnographic object through which we can understand more about the creation and becoming of self, I stress once more that we (re)present our "self"—whatever that may mean to us—in myriad ways every day. We may not all have fursonas, but there is something we can, I think, learn from Furry, and it is as Kvothe says: the "masks" of self in Furry may be more visible, but we all, in some way or another, don these masks in the twisting of our self-as-gem, our (re)presentation of self in response to other.

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