

Nonhuman Identity: A Guide to Otherkin, Therianthropes and Other Nonhumans for the Social Justice Community

[Trigger warning: This guide talks about bullying people for their identities, self-harm, eating disorders, suicide and body dysmorphic disorder.]

Introduction

Nonhuman identity, what is it?

Nonhuman identity, mostly known as otherkin or therianthropy (though, the writer of this guide personally prefers "nonhuman" as a word for all these identities and any that are outside it), is the experience of people that they do not identify (in whole or in part) with being human. This is not a binary and it can be anything from "I feel mostly human but sometimes I feel more like X" to "I do not identify in any way as human, I feel like X all the time", or "I feel like a mix of X and human", etc.

The experience of transgender people can be described as, "discontent with their biological features that are read as gendered by society, and/or the gender they were assigned at birth". In a similar way, nonhuman people are discontent with their biological species features and/or the species that people read them to be.

Why do I care?

Because nonhuman identities are not often represented in conversations about identity. Because the identity is not treated seriously, not in the social justice community and definitely not in the rest of society, even though it can be the core of someone's identity, and a lot of stress can be caused through the problems of having this identity, and the problems of society

not accepting it.

Issues faced by nonhumans

Species dysmorphia

Species dysmorphia or dysphoria, is a similar experience to other dysmorphia/dysphoria, for example in transgender people. It is a feeling that the physical body does not match the inside image. This lack of match often causes uncomfortable and sometimes painful feelings, in mind and body.

Not all nonhumans have species dysmorphia. Some have only a very mild experience. Some have very strong experiences. It can include:

- an itching frustrating feeling of wanting to escape the body or "crawl out of" the skin
- phantom limb feelings, or, a feeling of missing body parts, which can include physical pain in the "missing" parts
- a feeling of obsession with the wrong appearance and a strong aching wish to change it (body dysmorphic disorder)
- asexuality that is related to feeling other human bodies as uncomfortable/unattractive, and/or the hate of your own human body and feeling that it is wrong in a sexual situation

A lot of nonhumans choose other names from their birth name, in the same way that transgender people do. Often they feel that these names help to represent a nonhuman form better.

Species dysmorphia can lead to other issues. These include:

- self-hate or body hate
- depression

- self-injury: the person cuts, burns or scratches their skin to relieve feelings of wanting to escape it, or because of body hate. For many nonhumans, the skin scratching scenes in the movie *Black Swan* are a realistic view of how they feel.
- eating disorders: a feeling that the body is the wrong shape and size can encourage starving and food control to make the human form "less in the way"
- suicide: as a result of these things

Species dysmorphia, like any dysmorphia, is serious. It might sound silly to people who never experienced it, but, the feelings are painful and real.

No representation

Because of the lack of talking about nonhuman identity, people don't take it seriously. Even inside our own communities, there is a lot of mocking and down playing of the issues. There is a feeling that nonhuman experiences are not serious and should not be talked about. Obviously this creates a cycle.

The idea of a "transspecies" identity is thought as a joke to many. At this time of writing (November 11, 2011), searching for "transspecies" on Google shows scientific articles about transspecies transplants (human-animal organ donations), and a lot of jokes that seem to be mocking transgender people by comparing it to the "obviously silly" idea of transspecies identity. Before we even had a chance to claim it, the word transspecies was used for humour.

Nonhuman identities are not covered in media except as a joke.

Like any group of people, we simply wish to be able to talk about our experiences and be listened to.

FAQ

But how can this be real... Everyone is human!

We don't know how it is this way. We just know that we experience it. In the beginning, the transgender community did not have all the answers either. There was a time when medical studies of transgender people did not exist. Even now, we only have very limited studies of transgender people that suggest the brain is different. But, medical science knows very little about how the brain works and why it might be this way. The medical community accepts transgender people based on their own strong feelings of gender, and the fact that treating transgender people's identities in the way that they present them is the only thing that leads to a positive change in mental health and self-image. The transgender community cried for help and, after a long time, the medical community finally listened, not based on medical studies but based on the deep pain that these people express. Now we are just asking for that same respect.

We do understand that a nonhuman identity "sounds strange", but this is our real experience. We do not know how or why. We just tell as we feel.

But, you can't get surgery to be nonhuman...

No, we can't, and, many of us are frustrated and experience a strong uncomfortable nature with our bodies because of this. Also, not all transgender or nonhuman people wish surgery, and, for some people it would not solve their problems (e.g. nonbinary genders).

I still don't understand how can this be real. It seems too ridiculous.

You don't have to understand. Just, please, listen to us.

You're just appropriation/mocking Native American identities!

No, we are not. There is nothing about identifying as nonhuman, on its own that is limited to Native societies. Nonhuman identity is not the same as claiming to be totemists or shamans and we are not using those particular practices or using their language. The idea of nonhuman identity has existed in all cultures, from the Chinese emperors who believed to descend from dragon blood, to the lycanthrope beliefs of Europe. The experience does not have anything to do with Native beliefs, except in situation where a nonhuman person, is also Native, and mixes their Native beliefs with their nonhuman identity.

You're just appropriation/mocking trans* people's struggles!

No, we are not. Trans* people are not the only people who experience dysmorphia/dysphoria with their bodies. And, there is no mocking. This is serious, we are describing the experiences that we live.

To quote from someone who has both the experience of being trans* and being otherkin:

...speaking as both an Otherkin person and a trans person. My dysphoria in regards to both is...rather mild, speaking comparatively to what I've heard described from others in both groups. But it's the same feeling. The dysphoric sensations I feel regarding my chest being "wrong" feels exactly the same as the ones I get regarding my ears being "wrong".*

--Amara (heathenqueer.tumblr.com)

You're just trying to make up an oppressed identity because you are privileged white people who want to feel special.

No, we are not. It is mentioned above, some nonhumans are also trans*. There is a high number of neurodivergent people in nonhuman communities. The writer of this guide is an Asian, queer, autistic female who struggles with eating disorder and speech disorders.

So, what do you want me to do?

Listen to us.

Accept nonhuman experience as a real experience, not mocking transgender identity. Accept species dysmorphia as a real condition that causes pain. Accept that ignoring and mocking someone's nonhuman identity, like ignoring and mocking any identity, can lead to people feeling isolated, anxious, depressed and suicidal.

Don't make us into a joke just because we sound weird and you "can't image how that can be real".

Don't say things like "I accept trans* identity, but this is going too far", as if we are trying to make a sensation on purpose, instead of just saying what we feel.

Stand with us the same way that you stand with anyone. Help to build a world where we can see counselors without fear. Help to build a world where we can talk honestly about our selves. Help to build a world where there are fair images of us on TV. Help to build a world where it's not assumed that everyone feels human.

They are just small things. Compared to a lot of groups, it is easy to do what you can for us, because there is not a lot that will help our physical condition, except for scientific advance at some time in the future. You can make environments safer for disabled people, you can build gender-neutral restrooms for transgender people, but there's not a lot you can do for us physically. If you can find a way to support the medical acceptance of our nature, and possible scientific advance (maybe your friend is a biologic researcher and you can speak up for us?), that would be great. If it's not, then, just help us to make a world where we can feel a little more comfortable and accepted.

That is all.