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Review

Danielle Kirby, *Fantasy and Belief: Alternative Religions, Popular Narratives and Digital Cultures* (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 224pp

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The Otherkin are an online community of individuals who identify as ontologically non-human; while occupying a human body, their 'true selves' (one might read 'souls') are *other*. The majority of Otherkin identify as animals, beings recognisable from folklore and mythology (dragons, elves, vampires) or characters and races from popular fiction (literature, television, computer games and particularly Japanese manga and anime). In *Fantasy and Belief: Alternative Religions, Popular Narratives and Digital Cultures*, Danielle Kirby presents an analysis of the Otherkin as 'an exploration of the bodies of knowledge that contribute to the creation of such belief systems' (p.1), positioning them at the nexus of religiosity and popular culture.

Of course, there is no strict delineation to be drawn between fictional and religious or mythological narratives; while dragons, fairies and angels all derive from the mythologies of specific historical cultures, their contemporary constructions derive as much, if not more, from recent portrayals in popular fiction. As such, this study is situated within the rapidly developing field of 'hyper-real' (Possamai 2005) or 'invented' religions (Cusack 2010). However, Kirby's analysis helpfully seeks to move the discussion on from the familiar trope of free-market consumerism, and instead to analyse the Otherkin as exemplifying the Internet's role in changes to how identity is formed and negotiated in the contemporary world.

Her theoretical framework, set out in chapter 1, is drawn principally from Partridge's *occulture*, defined as a broad, interrelated network of 'subcultural beliefs and practices' (Partridge 2004, p.68) including but not limited to occultism, Paganism, environmentalism, astrology, UFOs and dream therapy, along with elements from traditional religions including Kabbalah, feng shui and 'esoteric Christianity' (Partridge 2004, p.70). Occulture, then, is constructed as the sum total of all marginal and counter-cultural spiritual practices and beliefs. The problem is, however, that models like occulture or Campbell's *cultic milieu* (1972), from which it was adapted, is that while they delineate a field of analysis (albeit fuzzily), they do not in themselves provide any analytical leverage; while you may identify a community like the Otherkin as being part of occulture, you have simply deferred the question of the function and appeal of the narrative. Campbell's *cultic milieu* was part of an on-going debate concerning the analytical utility of Troeltsch's *church/sect/cult* model, but it is difficult to see what the benefit of appealing to occulture is for Kirby's analysis (nor does this criticism apply only to Kirby).

An ethnographic and sociological survey of the Otherkin community is presented in chapter 2. She also delineates several subgroupings; these include *Mediakin* or *Otakukin*, named after the Japanese term

analogous with *geek* or *nerd*, who identify as being characters from popular fiction. Their position proved somewhat contentious; while some within the Otherkin community argued that the Mediakin's identification with popular cultural figures is shallow or infantile, while others see no difference between these characters and the more familiar mythological tropes, other than age. One group, the Elanari Elves (actually an original narrative, although inspired by Tolkien), are attempting to reconstruct the 'soul memories' of their race, including descriptions of their home worlds (whether planets or dimensions), technology and religion (p.51). An overlapping group, although somewhat different in terms of beliefs and considerably smaller, are *multiples* who claim to contain several personae, which may be Otherkin-type beings or human, suggesting something akin to a controlled schizophrenia. This chapter was the strongest chapter for me; we were given a sense of a lively community in a state of emergence, although I would have liked to have seen the comparison between the community's negotiation of a shared identity (or identities) and Kirby's later argument about the digitally-mediated changes to self-representation and identity developed further. The discussion of *soulbonding*—a process by which a fictional construct can take on a life of its own by occupying mental space in individuals other than its creator—was particularly interesting, as was the discussion of a cosmology based on multiple worlds overlapping ours within certain human bodies.

The weakness of occulture as a methodology is most obvious in chapter 3, entitled 'Fantasy and Re-enchantment', which attempts to locate the Otherkin within the contemporary religious milieu.

Disappointingly, this amounts to a catalogue of potted histories of, firstly, fantastical creatures such as fairies and werewolves, and secondly esoteric groups including the Theosophical Society and the Golden Dawn. While the former are interesting, and should prove useful reference material due to their concision,

the material in the latter section adds little to the discussion and is not particularly relevant. Furthermore, the structural effect is of reading an encyclopaedia rather than a monograph.

Chapter 4 is considerably stronger, however. Kirby uses the Otherkin to discuss how the Internet and its emergent communications technologies is changing identity formation, both individually and collectively. She argues that digital communications technologies 'expand the sense of self beyond the bounds of the body' (p.103), at the same time as enabling communities to coalesce around obscure beliefs whose adherents were previously too separated geographically. She concludes that groups such as the Otherkin are closely aligned to the general trajectory of the development of popular culture, albeit an extreme example. However, in challenging the notion that groups like the Otherkin are necessarily countercultural, she seems to be undermining her theoretical starting-point; if occulture is not countercultural, then it is simply culture, and it is therefore difficult to see its analytic function.

Despite her admonition that her aim was not to provide 'an exhaustive exploration of the Otherkin community' but rather to explore 'the dual influences of speculative (primarily fantasy) fiction and communication technology in the creation of alternative metaphysical systems' (1), the book is nevertheless just that, with chapters devoted to how the Otherkin relate to these themes. Too much of the book is little more than a catalogue of related but not particularly relevant concepts and communities; more space is given over to the background of contemporary esotericism than the book's conclusion, for example.

Although on the surface rather novel, *Fantasy and Belief* theoretically reproduces rather old-fashioned notions of religion. Studies on hyper-real or invented religions are best when they are tempered by

comparison to studies on the construction of broader categories like religion - the category 'invented religion' is defined by its difference to a category 'religion' which is predicated upon being drawn from a revealed, i.e. divinely mandated, source. By taking into accounts critiques which criticise this—most notably Masuzawa (1995)—Kirby's account could have usefully said something about the category 'religion' which she attempts to problematise. Her back cover states, 'Religion and spirituality are being transformed in our late modern and secularising times'. Is this true, or is it rather that scholarly *conceptions* of 'religion' are being transformed now that the internet is making the popular inescapable?

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