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**Aesthetic Fandom:
Furries in the 1970s**

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**Aesthetic Fandom:
Furries in the 1970s**

by

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Abstract

Aesthetic Fandom: Furries in the 1970s

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This report offers a cultural history of the furry fandom by analyzing their emergence in the 1970s within broader transnational economic and cultural flows. The furry fandom is a community of people interested in anthropomorphic animals, the kind you see in Disney animated films and newspaper cartoons. This aesthetic interest differentiates furries from other fandoms emerging at this time whose congregation is normally predicated on an interest in a particular piece of media, such as Trekkies and their love of Star Trek. Furries interest in the aesthetics of anthropomorphic animals can be transformative and places them within a group of people who foster this niche interest as well as aspects of their queerness. Indeed, the furry fandom is majority LGBTQ+-identifying. This history examines niche interest and the queerness of the furry fandom, placing these facets into broader conversations of queer theory and consumer capitalism. Ultimately, this report shows how furries co-construct a sort of utopic reality within broader society's political and economic anxiety in the 1970s, and how these originating practices continue today. Furry cultural production demonstrates elements of American

cartoons as well as Japanese anime made manifest in their art, such as their alter-egos known as “fursonas.” This blending of anthropomorphic styles into something uniquely furry is a practice that continues today. This report utilizes a mixed methods approach including historiography and visual analysis to tell this story of furies’ origins in the 1970s and their persistence to today.

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Introduction: Drawing Eggs, Drawing Dogs

I had a conversation with a furry (furries use lower-case, as will I) at one of the premiere furry conventions in the United States, FurtherConfusion 2018, in San Jose, California.¹ The furry, here named “Dan,” bent towards me a bit to ask a question while I sat on the floor opposite the convention hall’s restrooms: “Can I draw you an egg?” He held sketch paper and a watercolor pallet whose pad of yellow had worn away in the middle. Knowing whatever happened would be an interesting story for my friends, I accepted his request. In astonishingly few strokes, Dan painted a simple and elegant sunny side up egg and gave me the page to keep. I tucked it away, and he bounced off to others to offer the same service.

I wandered through the convention spaces, and I saw Dan again and again painting eggs for people, cranking them out like a cook in a diner. I approached him at some point in one of the hotel lobbies and asked him something to the effect of *Why?* He explained his behavior by showing me art of his custom avatar, what furries call a “fursona” (a blend of “furry persona”). His fursona was a dog—the sort you might see in a Disney cartoon—anthropomorphized and sitting on a bed. At first glance, this art seemed typical: an anthropomorphic-animal character in a bedroom. However, looking more deeply, I noticed that elements of the room, such as its boundaries and shapes, were

¹ “Furries” or “furry” are not proper nouns. In the same way “trombonist” or “boulderer” would not be capitalized, so it is with “furry” and “furry fandom.”

amorphous and gooey. Dan's fursona held a pail in his paws that he cartoonishly vomited more of this goo into, his own self-insertion into an oozing fantasy-scape.

Eggs. The room, the fluid, the space, the material, the fursona: the artist Dan commissioned had manifested his fantasy of a world of eggs. I looked around the noisy hotel lobby at congoers in various states of animal dress, at the furies who held sketch paper with sunny-side eggs Dan had drawn on akin to the one stowed away in my hotel room, and I returned my gaze to the art and then to Dan's visage: he was elated.

Dan's art afforded him connection with me and others by wrapping us into a larger reality-reconstruction process he had been undergoing in the days, months, or years up to our encounter in the hotel lobby.² The specific social situation of the furry fandom offered him means to scratch an itch within a community of people whose creative production figured into his identity. His fursona sits at the center of his aesthetic engagement, a character of his own creation, a vehicle for determining certain aspects of identity and driving his desire to connect with others in his own way.

The furry fandom is a community of a people who share an intense interest in anthropomorphic-animals, or rather, a particular genre or aesthetic of these creatures. Think to animated films like those out of Disney studios, cereal box mascots, or Looney Tunes cartoons. Animals that walk on two feet, chat, and have personalities appeal to furies, though they often gravitate to certain kinds and genres of them. Furies take aspects of anthro-art in mainstream depictions and refigure these bits into their own

² James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press, 2014), <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/10.4324/9781315740218>.

creations, like what Dan did with his fursona and eggs. Furrries are a community of people whose formation is predicated on a shared aesthetic interest. They are also notable among other groups in that they are largely LGBTQ+, with only around 20% of furrries identifying as “exclusively heterosexual” and nearly 14% identifying as transgender or gender-nonconforming.³ The fandom is an inclusive space for those who share these identities, and the opportunities for expression and connection with others make being a furry a worthwhile experience.

The furry fandom began in earnest in the 1970s alongside the rise of other sci-fi and anime fandoms.⁴ Furrries in the 1970s United States found themselves enmeshed in an unprecedented economic downturn, newfound anxieties around gay and animal rights, and heaps of new media distributed domestically and imported from abroad. The trajectory of Dan and the furrries in 2018 can be traced back to these original furrries who began forming meetings of their own in the 1970s, sharing art and comics, and getting close with one another in new, life-altering ways.⁵ These original furrries remixed the components of a growing American transnational anxiety into transformative works, a practice that continues in the fandom today. Nowadays, furry conventions can number

³ Courtney N. Plante, Stephen Reysen, Sharon E. Roberts, and Kathleen Gerbasi, *Fur Science! A Summary of Five Years of Research from the International Anthropomorphic Research Project*, (Waterloo, Ontario: FurScience, 2016).

⁴ Joe Strike, *Furry Nation: The True Story of America's Most Misunderstood Subculture* (Jersey City: Cleis Press, 2017).

⁵ Ash Coyote, “The Fandom: A Furry Documentary FULL MOVIE,” Ash Coyote, July 3, 2020, YouTube video, 1:28:47, <https://youtu.be/iv0QaTW3kEY>.

over 10,000 people, and they happen all over the globe.⁶ It may be tough to find an accurate number of current-day furies because furies exist across numerous online platforms and in-real-life across many nations. The seeds of this growth were planted in the 1970s with a regular crew of founding members, whose early work in the fandom propelled the gatherings of furies who share this niche interest in anthropomorphic-animal aesthetics.

This Master's Report tells a history of the furry fandom by locating their community's formation within larger global economic and cultural processes. After defining my methods in the first section, I offer a wide view of the U.S. at a distressing moment in the 1970s. Following this, I focus on the crystallization of the furry fandom by describing early furry gatherings and creative works, turning the narrative to the fandom's founders. I subsequently show how these historical threads stretch to the present-day furry fandom by analyzing contemporary furry art and piecing out their originating parts. I follow this with a deeper analysis of the fandom, illustrating the wider theoretical implications of furies and their community. Finally, I conclude by pointing to future directions for my larger project on the furry fandom.

I returned to the convention in San Jose two more times after that before the onset of COVID-19, and each time, I dug my claws deeper into the fandom. I felt so tied to the people around me in those crowded spaces. A slowly spinning Sputnik in a Soviet-themed room simply named "The Communist Party," entrancing footage of reruns of the

⁶ "List of conventions by attendance," Wikifur, last modified February 14, 2021, accessed April 16, 2021, https://en.wikifur.com/wiki/List_of_conventions_by_attendance.

now-canceled *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* TV show in the Brony room, taking simultaneous shots on stage with my bandmates at the after-dark performance to applause from hundreds of furies in various states of inebriation and textile animality: all memories that fold me into a sense of belonging with my peers. And I reflect: how did we arrive here? How does a preoccupation with cartoon animals bring such disparate folks—a majority of whom identify as LGBTQ+—into a space with one another, into shared affects, and into unique customs, cultural productions, and storytelling? How does this aesthetic interest foster community, and where does it come from? This report sets out to investigate these questions.

Section I: A Brief Overview of Methods and Terms

This report provides a new historical context for the emergence of the furry fandom in its emphasis on their relationship to the cultural life of the 1970s. As such, this project utilizes a mixed-methods approach, relying primarily on historiography—both scholarly and produced within the furry community. I combine furry-created histories as well as broader histories of the United States and its role on the larger global stages of economics and cultural production. From this wide angle, I turn my gaze more specifically to the furry fandom in the early 1970s by recounting the stories of the community’s founders. Their narrative sheds light on the early work in constructing the furry fandom as a community and the underlying motivations for its founding.

I highlight affect in these histories through these stories and through visual analysis of furry artistic production to illustrate an overarching aesthetic interest that moors furries to their community. I utilize the study of affect because, as scholar Donovan O. Schaefer states, “As a method, affect theory asks *what bodies do* – what they want, where they go, what they think, how they decide – and especially how bodies are impelled by forces other than language and reason.”⁷ The draw of the furry aesthetic is affective, an “impelling force” neither language nor reason. Thus, aesthetics and affect are intimately bound, tied as well to larger transnational economic processes. Furries seek and have sought intimate connection within the walls of their fandom. Their interest in anthropomorphic-cartoon animal aesthetics brings them together and offers them

⁷ Donovan O. Schaefer, *The Evolution of Affect Theory: The Humanities, the Sciences, and the Study of Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1.

personal transformation. I enrich the history by locating this interest within larger webs of affect and desire, and I also show how these desires and practices persist today.

Intimacy makes itself known in these narratives, and by intimacy, I mean a desire for raw connection: what Dan shared with other furies in San Jose, what could-be partners share when they look into each other's eyes, what a furry feels when they see themselves reflected in an aesthetic they find desirable. Intimate encounters lead to tight friendships and romance, but often they may also be ephemeral. Furies' intimate desires are bound to their love of aesthetics, a love that figures their relationships with friends and romantic partners, and an interest that brings them together.

This report also challenges "community" as a category of analysis. When employed here to describe furies, I simply mean a group of people who interact with one another primarily based on their intense interest in the anthropomorphic animal, these particular iterations of it. Furies are the community here, and they become the subject of analysis as they form into an identifiable whole in the 1970s. Furies become increasingly aware of their growing numbers at this time, thus representing Benedict Anderson's "imagined community."⁸ Nowadays, furies will call themselves that--"furies"--and will refer to their community as a *fandom*. In this text, I take the designation of *fandom* as a worthy and more accurate category of cultural-historical analysis beyond community, one that merits more attention especially from scholars working within the history of capitalism. Fandoms challenge notions of agency in consumer practices, and furies are

⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2016).

no different. I use the terms community and fandom interchangeably as they suit the prose and framing of my arguments.

Moving into the history, the reader should keep in mind the serendipity of the narratives here. The encounter with Dan I describe at the beginning of this report is a common interaction in spaces furies make together. The founding members, like Mark Merlino, Rod O'Riley, and Fred Patten, discovered one another in ecstatic spaces like the convention hall. Indeed, ecstasy—getting out of oneself—results from these furies' intense love of their aesthetic, identifying themselves in a new co-constructed reality of anthropomorphic-animals. The feeling you may get seeing an old friend in a local coffee shop or clearing every green light on a long residential road is the mood that pervades the encounters and processes described in this report. The actual happenstance-ness may be dubious as the historical record shows, but for the actors here, it is nevertheless felt.

Section II: Historical Context for Furrries

Furrries become an identifiable whole in the 1970s as they began to congregate and produce cultural works.⁹ The founding members of the fandom began organizing for the early conventions like the one in San Jose and helped solidify the aesthetic in artistic production and in media circulation. Indeed, the furry aesthetic manifested within larger transnational economic and cultural flows inspired primarily by American cartoonists as well as Japanese artists whose imports during that time circulated by the original furrries.¹⁰ Certain stateside features such as print and comics cultures and the rise of sci-fi, anime, and role-playing fandoms also engendered the rise of the furry fandom through their initial meetups and sharing of cultural productions.¹¹ Furrries have kept a tight chronology of their fandom and have publicized their origins in various print and online locales, as I have cited. Furrries have done this simply because they enjoy engaging with

⁹ Ash Coyote, “The Fandom: A Furry Documentary FULL MOVIE,” Ash Coyote, July 3, 2020, YouTube video, 1:28:47, <https://youtu.be/iv0QaTW3kEY>; Fred Patten, *Furry Fandom Conventions, 1989-2015*. (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017); Joe Strike, *Furry Nation: The True Story of America’s Most Misunderstood Subculture* (Jersey City: Cleis Press, 2017); “History,” *WikiFur*, last edited December 8, 2020, <https://en.wikifur.com/wiki/History>; Culturally F’d, “A Brief Timeline of the Furry Fandom 1976-Present | Episode 60,” Culturally F’d, June 13, 2018, YouTube video, 17:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyGdA3rU5Yk>.

¹⁰ Of large interest are the works and writings of Fred Patten, one of the original furrries and originators of anime fandom in the United States. He recounts his experiences and charts the rise of interest in anime in the United States in his text *Watching Anime, Reading Manga: 25 Years of Essays and Reviews* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2004).

¹¹ Francesca Coppa, “A Brief History of Media Fandom,” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson: MacFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), 41-59.

the history of their fandom as these public-facing works attest to, and sourcing their own origins has been of great intrigue for members of the fandom. In the pages that follow, I construct a historiography of the origins of the furry fandom and their aesthetic based on both fandom-created and broader histories of the 1970s.

THE UNITED STATES AND JAPAN IN THE 1970S

The larger transnational history of U.S. cultural flows, especially as they relate to Japan, help to illuminate the rise of furies. Before 1970, the image of Japan and its people in the minds of US citizens wrestled with aging versions of itself. This indomitable adversary surrendered to an infantile companion whose wounds could be dressed by the US and its citizens in the decades that followed.¹² Naoko Shibusawa discusses the all-hands-on-deck approach that American political and cultural elites took to transform a hostile Japan to an ally in the years after World War II during the Occupation of Japan.¹³ The Occupation of Japan marked a turning point in Japan's internal political, social, and economic structures as well as Western attitudes towards the country.¹⁴ During the war, the US's racist portrayals of the Japanese as an unquenchably bloodthirsty foe provided a useful rationalization for military action in the Pacific;

¹² Naoko Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ray A. Moore, "The Occupation of Japan as History: Some Recent Research," *Monumenta Nipponica* 36, no. 3 (1981): 317-328, accessed April 24, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2384440>.

though, of course, those same racist sentiments stayed stateside where Americans—the people and their governments—inflicted hatred and violence on the Japanese-Americans who lived among them.¹⁵ As the literal fallout of the nuclear weapons the US detonated in Nagasaki and Hiroshima bled into the biomatter of the Japanese and their land, a subsequent cultural-political fallout followed.¹⁶ As the Cold War heated up, the US needed allies in the Pacific, of which Japan could be highly instrumental.¹⁷ How could American attitudes towards an enemy worthy of nuclear destruction change? Shibusawa demonstrates that certain political and cultural actors—like journalists and politicians—engendered this change, namely through a process of infantilizing and effeminizing the Japanese, creating a new discursive reality for the Japanese in America.¹⁸ This recovery process of the Japanese in the American imaginary took on diverse forms that inched their way into the most niche aspects of American life and culture, most presently

¹⁵ Kristine C. Kuramitsu, “Internment and Identity in Japanese American Art,” *American Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (1995): 619-58, accessed March 6, 2021. doi:10.2307/2713369.

¹⁶ Jennifer M. Miller, “The Struggle to Rearm Japan: Negotiating the Cold War State in US-Japanese Relations.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 1 (2011): 82-108, accessed March 6, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25764610>.

¹⁷ HDP Envall, “Japan: From Passive Partner to Active Ally,” in *Global Allies: Comparing US Alliances in the 21st Century*, ed. Wesley Michael, 15-30. (Australia: ANU Press, 2017), accessed March 6, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1sq5twz.5>.

¹⁸ Naoko Shibusawa, *America’s Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006).

relevant here in media portrayals and subsequent Japanese media consumption.¹⁹ Furies forged their own niche within a burgeoning engagement with Japanese cultural imports.

Their niche was a product of Americans' growing taste for Japanese media in the underground as well as the mainstream in the decades following Japan's surrender. Namely, after World War II, Japan situated itself as an international competitor in a growing global animation industry.²⁰ Americans consumed Japanese-produced media, sometimes unknowingly. For instance, the widely (and still) popular 1964 stop-motion animated film *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, considered a Christmas classic stateside was, in fact, Japanese animation.²¹ Importantly, the establishment of the Tōei Animation studio in 1956 led to the formation of anime fandom in the United States.²² There is an ongoing misconception that Americans did not embrace Japanese animation until the 1980s, but the historical record shows otherwise.²³ Though, as Michal Daliot-Bul and Nissim Otmazgin state in their book *The Anime Boom in the United States*, "Anime introduced to American consumers a new set of sophisticated visual images, imaginative

¹⁹ *Media* here referring to U.S. press coverage of the Japanese (where "Stateside media extended the vision of a gentler, more innocent Japan by highlighting Japanese females and children" (Shibusawa, 26) as well as entertainment.

²⁰ Michal Daliot-Bul and Nissim Otmazgin, *The Anime Boom in the United States: Lessons for Global Creative Industries* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2019), 17.

²¹ Jonathan Clements, *Anime: A History* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 106-107.

²² Michal Daliot-Bul and Nissim Otmazgin, *The Anime Boom in the United States: Lessons for Global Creative Industries* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2019), 17.

²³ Jonathan Clements, *Anime: A History* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 108.

narratives, and artistic qualities that were dramatically different from those they knew before,” Japanese animation had been part and parcel of much of the content Americans consumed decades prior.²⁴ Tezuka Osamu, in many ways the father of modern anime, saw his groundbreaking anime series *Astro Boy* break into American mainstream distribution in the 1960s through NBC Enterprises.²⁵ For Americans, this entry of Japanese animation into their living rooms and convention spaces was met warmly though along with a newfound anxiety as economic instability loomed. Even more, Americans in the 1970s saw themselves in a larger process of globalization unlike they had before.²⁶ Furies all-the-while negotiated their own space in a larger transnational conversation as these historical economic, cultural, and political grew more unstable.

Indeed, the origins of the furry fandom owes to this gestalt between a new, broadly consumable Japan, excitement for their foreign products, and their troubling economic prowess in the wake of 1970s stagflation in the U.S.²⁷ The 1970s saw an emergent underground fandom culture, with *Star Trek* and its Trekkies maintaining the

²⁴ Jonathan Clements, *Anime: A History* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 108; Michal Daliot-Bul and Nissim Otmazgin, *The Anime Boom in the United States: Lessons for Global Creative Industries* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2019), 2.

²⁵ Jonathan Clements, *Anime: A History* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 112-127

²⁶ Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012), 138-139

²⁷ Allan H. Meltzer, *A History of the Federal Reserve: Volume 2, Book 2, 1970-1986* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 850.

most relevance in contemporary American conceptions of fandom.²⁸ However, along with sci-fi, anime and arts more broadly took root among these fandoms, and within and between these various points in a media underground, furies found one another, shared art, and watched anime. They transfigured the anxiety around them into intimate encounters and crafted an aesthetic all their own.

In this way, the emergence of the furry fandom was a byproduct of a larger transnational economic process, a spore in a lichen. In the 1970s, the US had successfully recuperated the image of Japan, and Japan itself had kickstarted a global powerhouse of economic and cultural export. Americans' anxieties about Japan did not fade; rather, they transformed as Japan's highly influential developmental state thrust their country into economic prosperity.²⁹ What emerged from these economic forms was the aforementioned aesthetic in which furies found intensified desire. However, what was the precise economic condition stateside that led not only to furies' interest in this aesthetic, but also to the aesthetic itself?

²⁸ Francesca Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson: MacFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), 41-59.

²⁹ Jennifer M. Miller, *Cold War Democracy: The United States and Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2019): "American observers posited that Japan's rise symbolized America's decline; that it highlighted the deleterious nature of American individualism and the declining potency of American power; that Japan's success negated America's greatest victory in 1945 and represented a threat akin to Pearl Harbor" (281).

PRECARITY IN THE U.S.

The 1970s U.S. affective, social, and political state could best be described as precarious.³⁰ Anne Allison describes precarious labor as conditions that are unstable for the worker, relevant here the economy in the U.S. after the New Deal and after Fordism and the abandonment of the security those models instilled in American workers.³¹ The American worker (white and male, in this instance) had this security ripped from his arms with the onset of “stagflation” in 1973.³² At the same time, a central working class identity—constructed on the bounties of the postwar boom—splintered and washed away as the decade sailed on.³³ In its wake, bobbled up confusion and lostness. Precarity became the de facto affect, as the American economy, which had been tightly wed to one’s security at home, became itself precarious.³⁴ The stability a strong New Deal and Fordist economy provided this genre of the American worker was absent during this time. As Allison states (referring to the work of Lauren Berlant), “Precarity references a particular notion of, and social contract around, work. Work that is secure; work that secures not only income and job but identity and lifestyle, linking capitalism and

³⁰ Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan* (Durham: Duke UP, 2013).

³¹ *Ibid* 6-7.

³² Allan H. Meltzer, *A History of the Federal Reserve: Volume 2, Book 2, 1970-1986* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

³³ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

³⁴ Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan* (Durham: Duke UP, 2013), 7.

intimacy in an affective desire for security itself.”³⁵ Though Japan would see its own precarity come to the fore with the recession of 1991, the 1970s U.S. saw Japan not merely as an ally in the Pacific, but as a dreadful economic adversary.³⁶

What occurred in the fandom underground of the 1970s was a refiguring of the precarious economic and affective state felt by larger American publics.³⁷ Corporate media production—including Japanese imports—held the attention of most Americans throughout the decade with niche interest communities forming along with them. What fandoms did with that media constructed new meanings relevant for those fandom members in more intimate publics. Though fandoms as an analyzable entity can be traced back to 19th-century international theater, the genre of fandom that furies currently find themselves within cropped up within the 1970s precarious economic milieu.³⁸ Star Trek’s Trekkies stood as the preminent example of these sorts of fandoms.³⁹ Furies formed along with them, occupying the same spaces and hanging out with the same members.

³⁵ Anne Allison, *Precairous Japan* (Durham: Duke UP, 2013), 7.

³⁶ Anne Allison, *Precairous Japan* (Durham: Duke UP, 2013); Jennifer M. Miller, *Cold War Democracy: The United States and Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2019).

³⁷ Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 49-90, muse.jhu.edu/article/26277.

³⁸ Sharon Marcus, *The Drama of Celebrity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2019).

³⁹ Francesca Coppa, “A Brief History of Media Fandom,” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson: MacFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), 41-59.

Furries refigured much economic, corporate, and political anxiety into their cultural practice and community formation. Where large swaths of the American working class felt national unity and kinship fracture at the bone, furries grafted bits into their own economy, engendering wholly new forms of queer expression and belonging. Furries engaged with the political moments of the day in their own ways. In all instances, furries spun otherwise upsetting, banal, or severe strains of living in the 1970s United States into a pliable, meaningful engagement with broader society and each other.

THE ORIGINS OF FURRIES

It would be imprecise to locate a single genesis moment for the furry fandom. Testimony from the original furries in the 1970s—told through fandom-curated histories and talks—indicates that different members of the fandom harbored an interest in anthropomorphic-animals before they knew one another. These individuals, who were mostly men, found one another and hosted informal events where they could celebrate their love and production of anthropomorphic-animal media. Thus, it may be worthwhile to locate a unified fandom within these initial meetings and the individuals who started them up.

The meetings of the Cartoon/Fantasy Organization (C/FO), which convened the first time in 1977, allowed the original furries to congregate.⁴⁰ These events were led by inner-fandom-famous legend Mark Merlino. Merlino is credited as an originating

⁴⁰ Joe Strike, *Furry Nation: The True Story of America's Most Misunderstood Subculture* (Jersey City: Cleis Press, 2017), 68.

member of the furry fandom, an early furry artist and organizer of events. A co-sponsor of the group was the prolific anime fan and furry, Fred Patten, who is responsible for a large amount of documentation on the early anime and furry communities.⁴¹ Patten's work in these underground fandoms has been largely influential in these communities' coming-to-be. Their group C/FO screened popular titles in the sci-fi/anime underground at the time such as *Kimba*, one of the first anime to receive a large audience in the U.S.⁴² In this way, furies engaged with Japanese imported media in the underground in a distinctly fandom fashion, influencing their own means of congregating and cultural production.

Furies also began meeting one another in scheduled room parties within larger sci-fi conventions such as Westercon in Sacramento in 1985 and BayCon in San Jose in 1987.⁴³ Following these successful gatherings, Mark Merlino and his partner Rod O'Riley—another original member of the furry fandom—founded ConFurence 0, the very first

⁴¹ His work *Watching Anime, Reading Manga* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2004) is utilized by researchers on early anime and associated fandoms. He mentions in his own role in these early furry gatherings in another published work *Furry Fandom Conventions, 1989-2015* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017).

⁴² Joe Strike, *Furry Nation: The True Story of America's Most Misunderstood Subculture* (Jersey City: Cleis Press, 2017), 68. Anime from then to now are released in packages, making Japan's cultural production a bit different than the U.S. *Kimba* was not merely a series, movie, or manga, but all together. The creator of *Kimba*—Osamu Tezuka—is considered to be the father of modern anime. His appeal to furies was the shows titular character: a white lion hero. For a very in-depth overview of *Kimba*, see this video: Adam Johnston, "YMS: *Kimba the White Lion*," YourMovieSucksDOTorg, May 27, 2020, YouTube video, 2:27:09, <https://youtu.be/G5B1mIfQuo4>.

⁴³ Fred Patten, *Furry Fandom Conventions, 1989-2015* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017), 9.

furry convention, held in the Holiday Inn Bristol Plaza in Costa Mesa, California in 1989.⁴⁴ Furry cons have only risen in popularity since then, and so, the origins of these gatherings can be charted back to these first room parties and conventions.

In tandem with these meetings was the rise of anthro-comics publishing. A large influence in this networking of artists and early furies was the publication *Vootie*.⁴⁵ *Vootie* was an “amateur press association” (APA) publication that early furry artists utilized to network with one another and share art, cartoons, and stories.⁴⁶ The publication was created by other fandom founders Reed Waller and Ken Fletcher, designating it “the official organ of the Funny Animal Liberation Front” whose political sarcasm with respect to the post-Stonewall moment held its own set of implications.⁴⁷ The premise of an APA like Fletcher and Waller’s *Vootie* was to create an internal community among artists with similar creative proclivities.⁴⁸ Publications from these prints did not go to consumers who bought them, but rather to all those who contributed

⁴⁴ Fred Patten, *Furry Fandom Conventions, 1989-2015* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017), 56.

⁴⁵ “Vootie,” Wikifur, last modified February 15, 2020, accessed December 9, 2020, <https://en.wikifur.com/wiki/Vootie>.

⁴⁶ “Amateur press association,” wikifur, last modified January 14, 2020, accessed December 9, 2020, <https://en.wikifur.com/wiki/APA>. and Strike, 75-91.

⁴⁷ Joe Strike, *Furry Nation: The True Story of America’s Most Misunderstood Subculture* (Jersey City: Cleis Press, 2017), 75-77.

⁴⁸ “Amateur press association.”

to the publication.⁴⁹ “Funny animal” in this instance refers to characters portrayed in newspaper cartoons, or the *funnies*, its own iteration of the anthropomorphic-animal aesthetic.⁵⁰ *Vootie* and its successor *Rowrbrazzle* constituted some of the first communication between people who independently harbored a keen interest in the anthro-animal.⁵¹

Vootie’s tongue-in-cheek references to both the Gay Liberation Front and Peter Singer’s foundational work *Animal Liberation* clued into anxieties around animal and gay rights at the time of the fandom’s formation.⁵² The title of this publication offered a playful spin on this reality, engaging with broader movements but working within the bounds of furry creative expression. With “the official organ of the Funny Animal Liberation Front,” furies established a link between queerness and animality. This process was affective, leaning into the humor of these human/animal creatures’ existence on paper, who would have faced double marginalization should they have stepped outside the page into the animate world.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ash Coyote, “The Fandom: A Furry Documentary FULL MOVIE,” Ash Coyote, July 3, 2020, YouTube video, 1:28:47, <https://youtu.be/iv0QaTW3kEY>, 10:35.

⁵¹ Joe Strike, *Furry Nation: The True Story of America’s Most Misunderstood Subculture* (Jersey City: Cleis Press, 2017), 81.

⁵² Jim Downs, *Stand by Me: The Forgotten History of Gay Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Harper Collins, 1975).

MEANING-MAKING WITH THE FURRY AESTHETIC

There was and is a lot at stake with the anthropomorphic animal for furies. Furies have placed great importance in these characters as interlocuters of their experience of the world. Furies' attachment to anthropomorphic animals have placed them in larger webs of belonging within one another, and it has informed certain attitudes and practices. Most modern-day furry activities—donning fursuits, drawing art, and writing fanfiction—date back to the original furies of the 1970s and their foundational work for their community. These efforts owe to furies' love with anthropomorphic animals and a particular kind of them. This kind of anthropomorphic animal is an aesthetic creation: it is identifiable, replicable, and imbued with meaning.

Dissecting the aesthetic in furry art is a necessary step in understanding their community and its formation.⁵³ Transnationally, anime has had a large influence on furry cultural production from the start, as mentioned before. Early furies embraced these and other Japanese media in their own, fannish way in the meetings of the C/FO that the founding members proudly state was America's first anime fan club.⁵⁴ Thereby, furies'

⁵³ Worth mentioning here is *David K. Johnson's Buying Gay: How Physique Entrepreneurs Sparked a Movement* (New York: Columbia UP, 2019), a text that demonstrates how gay men in the mid-20th century forged community with one another through their interest in homoerotic physique magazines. This could be seen as a similar sort of community formation, where aesthetics of desirable bodies in print connect gay men to one another, another harbored interest.

⁵⁴ Ash Coyote, "The Fandom: A Furry Documentary FULL MOVIE," Ash Coyote, July 3, 2020, YouTube video, 1:28:47, <https://youtu.be/iv0QaTW3kEY>, 7:46.

aesthetic production was informed by Japanese animation styles as the medium became popular in the US during this time.

Furries also drew inspiration from the history of American cartoon and comics production. The aforementioned “funny animals” refers to the Sunday morning cartoons that reside in the colored print of newspapers, for instance. Furries also drew inspiration from animated cartoons, too. In Ash Coyote’s documentary, Mark Merlino states, “I just loved animation: what it looked like and also how it was done.”⁵⁵ The 1970s animated Disney film, *Robin Hood*, has been an ongoing reference point for many early (and present-day) furries’ entrance into the fandom. American animation played a large part of the formation of the furry aesthetic and its fandom as American art and Japanese anime played in the same ensemble of furries’ original creations.

Furries merged these genres of human-animal art into their own style, amplifying the aspects they liked the most into a production of intense love. Rod O’Riley speaks of his interest in cartoons, “I’m into it in a way that my school friends aren’t. I’m into it in a way that my parents aren’t. So, what do I do? I was looking for fandom.”⁵⁶ O’Riley sought out others with similar investment in this aesthetic, people who loved these things the way he did. His love for cartoons and furry iterations of those brought him into a community he co-created.

⁵⁵ Ash Coyote, “The Fandom: A Furry Documentary FULL MOVIE,” Ash Coyote, July 3, 2020, YouTube video, 1:28:47, <https://youtu.be/iv0QaTW3kEY>, 4:40.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 4:46

The queer component of the furry fandom cannot be understated, neither demographically nor in the very practices furies have embarked on themselves. This feature of the fandom can be traced historically, too. Though gay communities as distinct entities have been around since the late 19th century, the 1970s saw a new kind of visibility for gay people in the U.S.⁵⁷ After Stonewall, gay liberation became a more mainstream conversation, and as Jim Downs shows in his text *Stand by Me*, gay communities formed in myriad, culturally diverse ways beneath the larger events that preceded the AIDS crisis of the 80s.⁵⁸ The formation of the furry fandom in the 1970s was another iteration of how gay people (mainly gay men), “[invented] new families and communities that could offer some haven from oppression.”⁵⁹ Furies simply made their own family based on a shared DNA in adherence to anthropomorphic animals.

The aforementioned Mark Merlino and Rod O’Riley were two such examples of gay furies finding haven in their aesthetic and anthro-interests. In Strike’s *Furry Nation*, the two offer their views on the role their own experience of being gay played in their larger sci-fi interest context, as well as in larger LGBTQ+ spheres.⁶⁰ O’Riley states,

⁵⁷ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*, (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Jim Downs, *Stand by Me: The Forgotten History of Gay Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

⁵⁸ Jim Downs, *Stand by Me: The Forgotten History of Gay Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 15.

⁶⁰ Joe Strike, *Furry Nation: The True Story of America’s Most Misunderstood Subculture* (Jersey City: Cleis Press, 2017).

“We’re kind of weirdoes on the outside to the LGBT community because of the [furry] fandom—both of us are geeks before anything else.”⁶¹ Merlino also says, “We never felt like we fit in other than the [sci-fi] fandom connection. When we went to a gay sci-fi convention [and] we showed them gay furry art—they just didn’t get it.”⁶² Here, the two find issue belonging to certain communities. The former quote was predicated on marginalized identity and the latter on niche interest. Finding a sort of home in gay sci-fi, the two’s deeper interest in the anthropomorphic aesthetic still alienated them within that niche. However, the two forged their own community of those who shared this meaningful connection to the anthropomorphic-animal aesthetic.

Of note here is the acknowledgement of these gay communities at various levels: the broadest being “the LGBT community” as Rod says, then the gay sci-fi community, and finally, the gay furry community (the one Mark Merlino and Rod O’Riley helped to start). The visibility of gay people in the Gay Liberation Front, among other groups at this time, indicated the ability for Mark and Rod to find their way into a subsect that more adequately filled their desire for a home, somewhere where they were not seen as “weirdoes” or, rather, embraced for being such.

Even more, regarding showing non-furry gays furry, the remark “they just didn’t get it” art held interesting resonance. The affective register that struck Merlino and O’Riley did not hit these other gay sci-fi hobbyists: something about the aesthetic that appealed to these two did not appeal to the others who met at a similar intersection of

⁶¹ Ibid, 66.

⁶² Ibid.

nice interest and sexual orientation. The furry aesthetic was thereby not universal in its intrigue among gay people who found themselves in adjacent circles. Rather, the aesthetic held special meaning for furies that distinguished them even among people who shared similar lived experiences.

This merging of queerness and animality can be understood through an exploration of contemporary furry artistic production. Furies are (and have historically been) a community built around artistic production. Though furies are mainly an underground, web-based subculture now, they have received significant coverage in mainstream media over time, such as the infamous CSI Episode in 2003 or various articles in trade magazines.⁶³ Most people may be familiar with furies' practice of costuming, wherein they wear a customized mascot costume known as a "fursuit."⁶⁴ They romp around convention hotels for cons like the one in San Jose, but also host meetups in cities, too. Furies populate most online platforms, such as Twitter and YouTube, though

⁶³ I say "infamous" because the CSI episode entitled "Fur and Loathing" is universally hated by furies, who often feel the depiction unfairly pathologized their otherwise innocuous hobby culture. *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, season 4, episode 5, "Fur and Loathing," directed by Richard J. Lewis, written by Anthony E. Zuiker and Jerry Stahl, featuring William Petersen, Marg Helgenberger, and Gary Dourdan, aired October 30, 2003. More nuanced coverage has come out of the popular press, however, such as: EJ Dickson, "Will Furies Ever Go Mainstream?" Culture Features, *Rolling Stone*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/furies-midwest-furfest-mainstream-932924/>.

⁶⁴ Emily Satinsky and Denise Nicole Green, "Negotiating Identities in the Furry Fandom through Costuming," *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion* 3, no. 2 (2016): 107-123, accessed December 8, 2020, doi: 10.1386/csmf.3.2.107_1.

furries have created their own sites for their own uses, such as FurAffinity. In these ways, furries are a community distinct from others they may claim membership to, as well.

Section III: The Persistence of Furrries

Indeed, furrries were and are, more precisely, a *fandom*. Fandom here refers simply to a group of fans, who are identifiable as their own distinct entity. Fans are typically fans of something; however, what furrries are actually fans *of* is a bit harder to pin down than the modes in which they operate. Simply put, furrries behave the way other, easier-to-identify fandoms behave. Furrries cosplay through fursuiting, host their own conventions like the aforementioned San Jose con, and write fanfiction and draw fanart. These processes align furrries with the *fandom* designation, as I will elucidate with more theoretical heft in the next paragraph.

DEFINING FURRIES AS A FANDOM

Furrries are at once textual poachers and textual nomads.⁶⁵ Furrries poach and traverse texts at two levels. On the first, furrries poach text for meanings beyond the intention of the original creators to remix and rework various elements of those media for their own purposes. For instance, furrries may pair off the cartoon wolves from Disney's animated film *Zootopia* (2016) as a romantic couple, where they will draw art of them together and/or write fanfiction about them.⁶⁶ Additionally, furrries are nomadic in that they will poach many different texts for meaning to remix and rework those media, often

⁶⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992). This is a foundational text in the fan studies subfield.

⁶⁶ *Zootopia*, directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore (2016; Walt Disney Pictures). Also, furrries have drawn a significant amount of art based on this film, including the aforementioned wolves in an example I will illustrate later in this document.

putting different elements of media together. For instance, furrries may place characters from one animated film into the scene of another, letting the characters from each respective film interact under new circumstances. Most fans in most fandoms interact with texts as poachers and nomads (within a fan studies construction).

However, furrries also poach and traverse texts for aesthetic reasons, as well. The central uniting feature of the furry fandom is their shared interest in an aesthetic that remixes and reworks elements of anthropomorphic-animal depictions seen in corporate media productions. Furrries may take the large eyes from one studio's style and place them on the slender body of a wolf drawn in another studio's style with a smirk reminiscent of yet another team of creators. In this way, furrries are not merely fans of an aesthetic but actively recreate an aesthetic they perpetually appropriate through poaching and traversing texts for that precise aesthetic meaning. Thereby, furrries fit within a fandom designation.

ANALYZING THE FURRY AESTHETIC THROUGH ART

The furry aesthetic needs further explanation, which I will do here by examining a work of furry art drawn by the popular furry artist Takemoto. Takemoto is a Taiwanese furry artist and cosplayer, who has a large presence on the furry side of Twitter. For reference to his work, see **Figure 1** in the Appendix of Images.⁶⁷ In this example, all the elements of the furry fandom—as *fandom*—can be seen in motion, paying careful mind

⁶⁷ Takemoto is a prominent Taiwanese furry artist. A reference for the work I analyze here: Takemoto, “Time to wake up for a brand new day!! you cutie wolves!! ♥♥♥,” Takemoto Box, Tumblr, <http://takemotoarashi.tumblr.com/post/142855216970/time-to-wake-up-for-a-brand-new-day-you-cutie>.

to how aesthetic interest factors into their community formation. An examination of Takemoto's work can lead to a fuller understanding of how furies rework anthropomorphic-animal aesthetics for their own uses.

In this image, Takemoto at once poaches and traverses texts both at the level of media and, even further, in the realm of the aesthetic. The two characters he depicts in this intimate moment of their waking-up are side characters from Disney's highly successful—and beloved by furies—animated-film *Zootopia* (2016). *Zootopia* tells a coming-of-age story of a rabbit who wants to be a police officer—the first of her species to be so—and the adventures of her investigation of a missing otter, a journey she ropes an unenthusiastic fox into joining. In one element of their quest, they encounter a lair guarded by Timberwolves. The two characters here have a brief moment where one howls and the other, by Canidae impulse, matches in volume and timbre. Though their screen time is brief, Takemoto poaches their relationship and remixes it into something meaningful beyond the constraints of corporate Disney.

On one level, he has drawn simple fanfiction. The wolves are lovers in this image, and probably have been for a while. They wake up early together, presumably to get a head start on their day as henchmen. They are unclothed, sprawling, yawning. One can get a sense of their quotidian romance without needing to read too much into it. Takemoto has poached the Disney film for its character in order to thrust them into a gay, romantic pairing which he disseminated to his audience of furies. He has reworked an original, corporatized meaning of these side characters into something new.

Even more, Takemoto has—through this production as well as his others—poached and traversed many media for their aesthetic qualities, all of which he brings to bear in this drawing. Take note of the contours of these wolves and the composition of their anatomy. They resemble the wolves from the original film, yes, (see **Figure 2**) but they also have qualities that align them more with furry aesthetic tastes. For instance, they also share certain similarities to wolves prevalent in Japanese anime, such as in Hayao Miyazaki’s *Princess Mononoke* (see **Figure 3**).⁶⁸ The jagged lines of their fur fit more within anime style than with Disney’s. Takemoto has poached both the Disney anthropomorphic-wolf style as well as Miyazaki’s (and others) to rework the wolves in an appropriated, decidedly furry aesthetic. By merging the styles together, perhaps adding his own flair, too, he has acted nomadically, traversing the aesthetics of texts to create his own aesthetic meaning in his work. Takemoto’s process, here, is resonant of many similar works across a collective furry oeuvre.

Most furry aesthetic productions are not relegated to derivative remixes of corporative works, however. Instead, most furry-made visuals, fanfiction, and cosplay are rooted in original characters (OC’s), distinguishing furies further from other fandoms. Most notably, furies create an alter-ego of themselves rendered in the furry aesthetic, the aforementioned “fursona.” The fursona may play a key role in furry self-identity, as one

⁶⁸ *Princess Mononoke*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (1997; Studio Ghibli).

can customize the fursona as much as they would like: species, bodily form, gender, and sexual orientation among other features.⁶⁹

Here is a discussion of several original works of furrries' fursonas where elements of anime, American morning comics, and American animated films can all be detected.

Figure 4 shows another artist, Jao Kuma's, rendering of a Bernese Mountain Dog character in his own style. This dog and his owner's name are Sam, and looking at him, one may start to wonder what he sees out of frame. Jao's art here leans heavily into the anime aspect of furry art. Take, for instance, the way Sam's eyes are drawn. Take, also, the jagged lines around his fur, as well as the buildings behind him: all reminiscent of long lines of anime art that came before this piece.

Figure 5 and **Figure 6** show two pieces that fit more in line with American traditions of animated cartoons. **Figure 5** is a piece by the furry artist Silvixen for a fox fursona named "Cadenza." Cadenza's trademark brown marks on his muzzle distinguish him from other fox fursonas. He looks back at the viewer, who may either feel somewhat threatened or perhaps touched to be recognized as evidenced by his widening grin. This piece feels has movement, assisted by the digital paint style, like a still from an animated film. Finally, **Figure 6** is an original character by the artist ArtMutt, named "Duncan." Duncan, who is a dog, offers a seat by him either to the viewer or someone out of frame.

⁶⁹ The role of the fursona and identity formation has been explored in Stephen Reysen, Courtney N. Plante, Sharon E. Roberts, and Kathleen Gerbasi, "Psychology and Fursonas in the Furry Fandom," in *Furries Among Us 3: Essays by Furries about Furries*, ed. Thurston Howl, 86-104. Thurston Howl Publications, 2020. And Plante, *Fur Science*; though, I am investigating it within other projects, too.

Duncan looks more like a “funny animal” from a newspaper than an anime character like Sam the Bernese Mountain Dog or an American animated still like Cadenza.

There is something cohesive about these three pieces of art. Beyond their obvious similarities—each are portraits of anthropomorphic-animals—something about all of them appeals to furies in a unique way. Furies spend much of their time in the fandom looking at images like these, renderings of anthropomorphic animals that they like. I have historically situated certain elements that get altered or amplified in furry art, but furies intuit these and other elements that make furry art its own distinct genre. Artists take their favorite aspects of anthro-art in the mainstream and refigure it into something other furies can readily identify and take interest in. In general, furies gravitate towards the same media. Familiar titles show up again and again: *Robin Hood*, *The Lion King*, *Beastars*, *Zootopia*, *Redwall*, etc. All these media appeal to furies’ aesthetic sensibilities, and furry artists like the ones mention here tap into that desire, resulting in fannish productions rendered in an aesthetic furies find desirable.

Furies’ reworking of elements of anthro-aesthetics extant in mainstream, corporate productions has significant impact on the level of the personal, emotional, and one’s identity for them. Furies poach and traverse aesthetics present across corporate media and appropriate them for their own, personal uses. These fannish practices are as much products of economics as they are of personal investment. In the following paragraphs, I want to theorize the furry aesthetic beyond the definitional and into the realm of the intimate and affective. Looking at Takemoto’s work on the wolves (and other artists’ works) and ruminating on the role the fursona plays in a furry’s sense of self

and belonging, the aesthetic furies find interest in has ramifications that seem almost spiritual at times.

AESTHETICS, AFFECT, QUEERNESS

In order to investigate these questions, I want to construct an operative model of aesthetics that, if proven credible, holds important ramifications for studying cultures and subcultures beyond furies. For a diagram of the model I explain here, see **Figure 7**. In the following paragraphs, I will explain its component parts and relevance to the analysis at hand.

In essence, an aesthetic—like the one furies adhere to—both informs and is informed by a set of practices, an identity, and an ideology, and all in conjunction imbue affect into a subject. For furies, those practices include fannish modes of production: creation of fanart, going to cons, and watching furry YouTube videos, etc. A furry identity can at times be salient, varying between furry-specific and non-furry contexts, but oftentimes, a furry will simply describe herself as such.⁷⁰ Here, I want to focus on the ideological component, the aesthetic itself, and the affect it imbues in furies within a broader economic conversation.

⁷⁰ Work on feelings of furry in-group status: Stephen Reysen, Courtney N. Plante, Sharon E. Roberts, and Kathleen C. Gerbasi, “Ingroup Bias and Ingroup Projection in the Furry Fandom,” *International Journal of Psychological Studies* 7, no. 4 (2015): 49-58, accessed December 8, 2020, doi:10.5539/ijps.v7n4p49.

Ideologically, the furry aesthetic skews towards queer utopic world-building in José Esteban Muñoz's construction in his work *Cruising Utopia*.⁷¹ Furies can be considered a queer subculture at the very least in terms of their demographic composition.⁷² Thereby, furies have created a safe space for LGBTQ+ people composed of queer people and (mostly) allies and engage in queer processes, including aesthetic production that pertains to Muñoz *Cruising Utopia*. In his text, he argues, "Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic."⁷³ He also says, "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."⁷⁴ In essence, when furies like Takemoto appropriate anthropomorphic-animal aesthetics for their own meanings, they do not necessarily offer an escape from reality but rather imagine a new future within that reality, one often predicated on queerness or involving queer processes.

Takemoto's art reworks a staunchly non-queer Disney corporate production and *queers* it in a near literal sense. Disney offers scant representation in terms of LGBTQ+ identity in the characters they illustrate in their films, and the wolves of interest in

⁷¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2019).

⁷² Courtney N. Plante, Stephen Reysen, Sharon E. Roberts, and Kathleen Gerbasi, *Fur Science! A Summary of Five Years of Research from the International Anthropomorphic Research Project*, (Waterloo, Ontario: FurScience, 2016).

⁷³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Takemoto's art show no real identification of queerness in the film itself.⁷⁵ Takemoto and other furies reconstruct the reality of the scene into one of queer vision: the wolves can be a gay couple. This fannish process of poaching the text and reconfiguring its meaning thereby functions as a utopic world-building practice within the furry fandom

Even more, this queer vision occurs “in the realm of the aesthetic,” a specifically furry one.⁷⁶ Furies distinguish themselves from other fandoms in that their poaching and traversing of texts alters the very frameworks of those texts: that is, the aesthetics in which they are rendered. In this way, Takemoto's pairing of the wolves in *Zootopia* aligns more with Muñoz's utopic ideal he sees in contemporary queer cultural production than other fandoms. Though his text often highlights fine artists like Andy Warhol, furies' practices still fit within his definition.⁷⁷ Based on Warhol, Muñoz asserts, “Utopia exists in the quotidian. Both queer cultural workers [Warhol and O'Hara] are able to detect an opening and indeterminacy in what for many people is a locked-down dead commodity.”⁷⁸ Takemoto takes the commodified corporate production of the Disney

⁷⁵ However, the creators of *Zootopia* did offer furies a name for this wolf pairing after the film's release and positive reception. See: Byron Howard (@ByronPHoward), “@mytoiletpaper Hmm. We didn't give him one. Maybe ..Larry? I like the sound of Gary & Larry. What do you think, Jared? @thejaredbush,” Twitter, April 23, 2016, 11:15 am. <https://twitter.com/byronphoward/status/723908141570764800?lang=en>.

⁷⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

animated film—an otherwise mundane, popular flick—and imbues it with queer meaning, one that relies on aesthetic reconstruction.

Furthermore, I want to highlight the quotidian aspect of furry aesthetic cultural production. As mentioned before, furies operate with one another through aesthetic mediation. That is, furies utilize fursonas and furry art to communicate with one another and to role-play in fandom spaces. During their day, a furry may talk to several friends wherein they all refer to one another by their fursona's name and likeness. Applications like Telegram and Twitter enable furies to wield their fursona's face as an avatar and utilize the fursona's name as a header to be referred. Furies can also utilize custom stickers and gifs that feature furry art of their fursona—or others' fursonas they happen to like—to communicate outside of text. These versions of furry-specific communication happen every day for many furies. In this way, the utopic world-building vis-à-vis a furry aesthetic occurs in the quotidian, refiguring otherwise banal media productions into meaningful reconstructions of lived experience.

But, again, what is it that furies see when they encounter their own cultural productions, or encounter the fandom's cultural productions before folding into the fandom themselves? Here, careful mind should be paid to the affective component of these aesthetic works and the ends these cultural productions ultimately serve for furies. The work of Sianne Ngai and her book *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* is particularly applicable here.⁷⁹ Though furies' affective response to art may vary,

⁷⁹ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012).

furries' embrace of *cuteness* is central to Ngai's analysis. She observes that beyond a rote biological response to neoteny, one's experience of cuteness is predicated on a sense of power over the powerless in Ngai's understanding.⁸⁰ She states, "There is no judgment or experience of a (*sic*) object as cute that does not call up one's sense of power over it as something less powerful."⁸¹ (Though, she notes that this may encompass more than mere dominance to include "a surprisingly complex power struggle").⁸² She also states, "Whether in response to socks or to large-scale, mass-mediated spectacles of public intimacy, cuteness solicits a regard of the commodity as an anthropomorphic being less powerful than the aesthetic subject, appealing specifically to us for protection and care."⁸³ In essence, one's experience with cuteness—to say this or that is cute—is to recognize one's own power over something, and a subsequent desire to nurture whatever that thing is, whether it be a commodity (as in Ngai's analysis) or a fellow sentient being.

When furries see art they deem cute, they experience an affective cuteness bound up at once by the commodity-nature of this art Ngai discusses and in larger webs of transnational media production that all fold into an overarching desire for intimacy.

⁸⁰ Melanie L. Glocker, Daniel D. Langleben, Kosha Ruparel, James W. Loughead, Ruben C. Gur, and Norbert Sachser, "Baby Schema in Infant Faces Induces Cuteness Perception and Motivation for Caretaking in Adults," *Ethology* 115, no. 3, (2009): 257-263, accessed December 9, 2020, doi: 10.1111/j.1439-0310.2008.01603.x.

⁸¹ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012), 11.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 60.

Taking Takemoto's example again, these elements of cuteness at work in this popular furry cultural production can be seen. Disney films are commodity productions, so in a grander sense, Takemoto has wrenched the power away from the creators of Disney and forged his own iteration of the commodity, one other furies can use to claim a sense of power.⁸⁴ Transnationally, Takemoto utilizes Japanese aesthetics to craft an aesthetic of cuteness that resonates even more with furies.⁸⁵ The other artists do something similar, drawing inspiration from various transnational sources. This interest and production of cuteness illustrates that the cuteness furies experience when viewing their art is wrapped up in larger economic webs.

Takemoto's—as well as the other artists mentioned here—can trace these artistic practices and the transnational political and economic currents in which they are swept back to the fandom's founders in the 1970s. These influences can be observed in two parts: 1. the certain affective component of furry artistic production and 2. the specific practices furies in the 1970s engendered that continue today. Takemoto has inherited a legacy of furry artists, and the distribution of his works follows channels dug out in the decades prior to his Twitter account's creation.

Thus, conceiving of furies as a fandom allows for an accurate historical framing of the community. On the first, point, locating an identifiable furry aesthetic necessitates

⁸⁴ This may overstate the matter because at the end of the day, the rights of the film are still held by Disney. That being said, there is a certain sense of independence fans the world over gain by remixing media they enjoy and “making it their own” in a sense.

⁸⁵ Perhaps more obviously, the wolves themselves are somewhat neotenized appealing to a deeper, more biological register of cuteness.

there is a fandom that orbits it. The relationship furies have to their aesthetic is fannish and follows the same sort of investments of other fandoms appearing in the 1970s.

However, furies distinguish themselves from other communities, in ways that can be observed with the second point. Practices that developed among furies in the 1970s are unique to them, namely in the way aspects of corporate media get repurposed for queer artistic expression. These media come from within the United States, as well as they are imported from other countries.

FANDOM AS A CATEGORY FOR HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

For furies, *fandom* can be a reliable historical category in which to analyze their behavior and cultural production. In the academy, fandom has been relegated to the subfield of fan studies, where the category has been accepted on premise and contested in practice.⁸⁶ Fandoms are more than spaces for mere enjoyment of media: rather, these communities are sites of transformation.⁸⁷ In this subfield, communities of fans of certain media are treated as a site of analysis akin to other groups, leading to theorization over what fandoms actually *are*.⁸⁸ Furthermore, the *fandom* designation necessitates certain

⁸⁶ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992)

⁸⁷ Consider the preeminent journal in the field: *Transformative Works and Culture*

⁸⁸ Lori Hitchcock Morimoto and Bertha Chin, "Reimagining the Imagined Community: Online Media Fandoms in the Age of Global Convergence," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York UP, 2007), 174-188.

assumptions about a group's behavior and cultural practices. This has resulted in many ethnographic accounts of fandoms and close-reading into fandom-produced works.

What is often missing from this body of work are scholarly historical accounts of fandom. Indeed, the previously cited fandom history by Coppa is one of the few broad views of the emergence of the sorts of fandoms that are analyzed within the subfield of fan studies.⁸⁹ Though ethnographic accounts of fans and serious critiques of their works are necessary in understanding fannish cultural production, historical context may often be missing. As a result, attributing meaning to fan activity and identification may lack the rigor to establish a strong, generalizable scholarly argument. Though I take care to chart a specific fandom-lineage from its origins to today, certain facets of the furry fandom may serve more general inquiry into fandoms as a whole.

Fandom as a site of historical analysis has been largely left out of cultural histories of the United States. A key area in which engaging with this designation may prove useful will be in histories of capitalism, where questions of agency in consumer culture become important. In early critical Marxist thought on mass culture, agency seemed trivial within larger systems of power.⁹⁰ The 1990s, however, saw a new turn towards agency in these histories. Historians like Robin D.G. Kelley, Nan Enstad, and Kathy Peiss treat historical actors working within larger capitalist systems as serious

⁸⁹ Francesca Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson: MacFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), 41-59.

⁹⁰ Consider the writings of the Frankfurt School.

players in larger global systems.⁹¹ Each one focuses on certain groups: Kelly, working class black people; Enstad, working class women; and Peiss, women's makeup culture. Each author highlights the agency of the historical actors in their writings, adding nuance to narratives of power within capitalist systems. In pursuing histories of capitalism, an investigation of the furry fandom may build on these insights into agency and consumer culture.

Fandom is a useful category in considering the role agency plays within larger capitalist processes. In this context, agency pertains to some semblance or capacity for choice in consumer capitalism. Furrries' rise in the underground shows how their choices run counter to mainstream consumer practices, namely through their remixing of words and finding queer meaning in corporate art. Furrries' emergence in the 1970s shows how they were placed within broader conversations around transnational media consumption, as well as queerness and belonging. Furry practices align with other fandoms as these sorts of communities are studied within the subfield of fan studies. Fannish practices, like those of furrries, challenge pre-existing notions of agency in capitalism.

Furrries very much figure their own role within a calamitous economic and cultural moment in the 1970s in a very fannish way. The publication *Vootie* with its tagline "the official organ of the Funny Animal Liberation Front" interacts with broader

⁹¹ Robin D.G. Kelly, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999); Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

anxieties in a particularly fandom manner. Animal Liberation and Gay Liberation meet one another in this slogan. Singer's work *Animal Liberation* in 1975 offered a moral foundation for a subsequent proliferation of animal rights activism, giving nonhuman-animals a renewed value in mainstream conversation.⁹² The Gay Liberation Front was founded following the Stonewall protests in 1969, a response to ongoing violence against queer people.⁹³ These were serious events in mainstream conversation. Furrries, through the *Vootie* publication, offered a playful response to this political climate that affected the humans and nonhumans in their lives. This was a fannish spin to a larger, more severe cultural moment. Furrries, as a fandom, responded to these events, offering insight into their role in larger political processes.

Furrries also do not merely passively consume media; rather, they remix those media into something new. Even more, through commissioning and selling of artwork—as well as the vast amount of conventions held—furrries have established their own economy predicated on their own transformative processes, renegotiating facets of consumerism into something individualized. These practices of breaking apart mainstream, corporate media and rearranging pieces into something novel and niche has

⁹² Gonzalo Villanueva, "Against Animal Liberation? Peter Singer and His Critics," *Sophia* 57 (2017): 5-19, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-017-0597-6>.

⁹³ "Gay Liberation Front at Alternate U." NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/gay-liberation-front-at-alternate-u/>.

been a feature of fandoms from the beginning.⁹⁴ Therefore, taking fandom as the object of historical analysis, as a central community of study, may prove useful beyond the bounds of fan studies and shed light on historical circumstances within capitalism and how people navigate through larger global processes.

Again, furies are still distinct from other fandoms in that their primary object of fandom is not a bit of media but rather an aesthetic that hybridizes elements of various media. To understand both the fandom's and the aesthetics' origins requires historical context, situating furies within larger transnational narratives, economic processes, and affect. Furies' draw inspiration for their fandom—both their aesthetic and cultural practices—from sources domestic and international.

Thus, to understand fandoms and their behavior more fully, the scholar must reckon with the historical preconditions that have initiated their coming-to-be. I argue that fan studies and United States cultural history share a mutual goal in understanding with subcultures' transformation of mass consumption into something that elucidates agency. The fields' potential intermingling could shed light beyond this shared goal into aspects more specific to their own and related fields. This history of furies (a fandom) gives unique insight into larger transnational flows that enabled their rise alongside other influential fandoms like Trekkies and how these groups of people responded to corporate media. In conversation with one another, these two fields prompt new insights into agency and other questions related to fan studies and history.

⁹⁴ Henry Jenkins, "Star Trek Return, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5, no. 2 (1988): 85-107.

Conclusion: Future Directions

Furries show a different side of the 1970s United States. Often remembered as a time of cultural fracturing, furries forged a unity among themselves that had not existed in the decades prior to their founding. Groups of people who harbored a desire in the anthropomorphic animal came together to share that interest and to share what they made and loved because of it. They remixed more than mainstream iterations of anthro-art but also larger national and transnational political and economic anxieties into their own bits of meaning. Furries' collective meaning-making forged their community—their fandom—and engendered furry practices that continue today. Furries' cultural and economic legacy in the 1970s seemed different, and maybe a bit more optimistic, than the nation as a whole.

Moving forward with this project, however, I do not want to proceed naively. This Master's Report is an exercise in sincerity, embracing and highlighting the positive components of a fandom to which I claim membership. I will build this report into a larger research project that I hope adds more nuance to the history of the fandom and its endurance today. I also hazard overstatement: that furries truly reclaim dominant political narratives and make them their own, that they wrench the power from corporate media and refigure production into something wholly original and queer, or that they create spaces that are *truly* utopic. In a larger project, I want to complicate these claims and theorize a bit more on the concepts I conjure here.

This process requires fieldwork and archival research I have not had the opportunity to conduct due to the ongoing pandemic. In my larger project, I hope to do

dig through Fred Patten's papers at the University of California—Riverside once those archives become available. I also hope to interview the furries whose narratives I highlight in this report, such as Mark Merlino, Rod O'Riley, Reed Waller, and Ken Fletcher among other furries who could offer historical insight into the fandom's origins. Ethnographic accounts of the furry fandom—largely not present here—will constitute a large portion of this work, too. Gathering these data will allow me to offer a more nuanced perspective on the furry fandom and their role within larger U.S. and transnational cultural and capitalist processes.

I am continually inspired by furries and the work they do for each other, and I hope with my growing research I can do my own share of it.

Appendix



Figure 1: This is a popular fanfiction drawing of two side characters from Disney’s *Zootopia* (2016) retroactively-named “Gary and Larry” by the film’s creators. Here, the two are sharing an early morning together in an intimate portrait.



Figure 2: Pictured here are the original wolf characters from the original Disney film, *Zootopia*.



Figure 3: These are the wolf characters in Miyazaki's eco-epic *Princess Mononoke* (1997).



Figure 4: A piece by Jao Kuma of a Bernese Mountain Dog fursona.



Figure 5: Silvixen's drawing of Cadenza.



Figure 6: ArtMutt's dog Duncan.

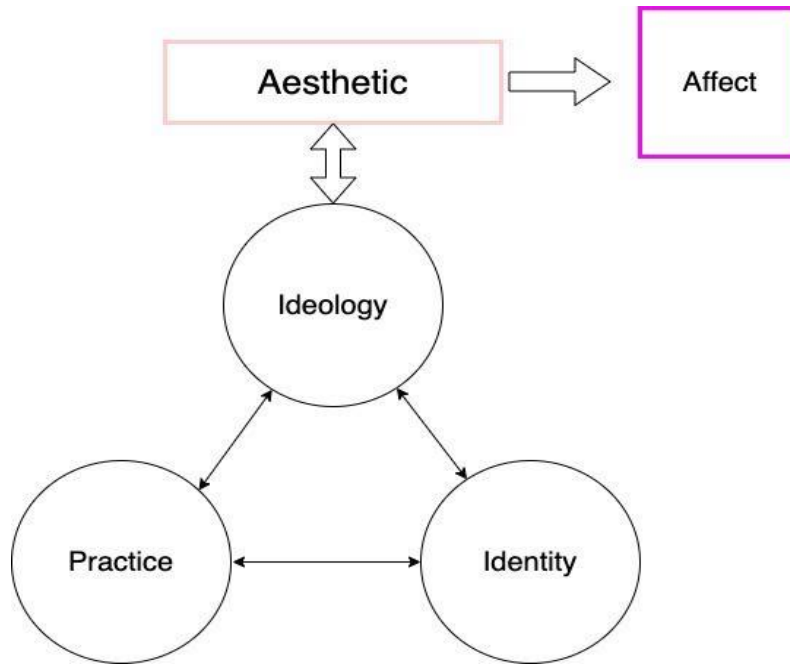


Figure 7: A new model for aesthetics. I explain this fully in the body text.

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