

Legalize Awoo: The Problems and Solutions of Howls

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Howls, Gatherings, Meows, Hisses, Roars—whatever you want to call them, they're a staple of the therian and otherkin communities and a tradition passed down from the in-person gatherings held by the were community in the late 90's and early 2000's. They're so important to the communities that they're actually a main focal point of Therianthropy Day's history— what originally started as “International Werewolf Day,” then later becoming “Awereness Day,” before finally transforming into the modern Therianthropy Day we know and love today, was originally decided to be celebrated on the first full moon of each November to coincide with alt.horror.werewolves's first ever Howl.

In-person meetups and group gatherings are just as important to nonhumanity as online and digital groupings, but there's been an issue of Howls, especially large-scale ones, seeming to become less common as the years go on. This is also the more recent outside issue of the global pandemic currently ravaging much of the world, which discourages face-to-face meets for safety and health reasons. Why are Howls becoming less common, even outside of the pandemic's immediate and drastic effects? And how can we navigate the landscape of meetups in this unique plague period we're all living through?

The first question is a multi-layered issue: first and foremost that comes to mind is age and income. A majority of the therian and otherkin community is made up of young adults and older teenagers, with surveys suggesting late teens to mid-twenties as being the largest grouping in specific. Many individuals within this age range are not going to be financially secure while also having the free time to engage in the travel a Howl might entail, with some towards the younger side of the spectrum still being largely reliant on their immediate family. College students and recent graduates have these issues, as they both often have no money and no free time due to schooling and job limitations, while also still being attached at the hip to their family. And if someone doesn't want their family to know about their nonhumanity—a fairly common issue—that can result in Howls simply being an impossibility.

There's also the fact that many, if not most, therians and otherkin are either some shade of queer or LGBT, or are neurodivergent in some form. My own personal observations and surveys seem to support this, though they are largely website-dependent: Kinmunnity's 2016 Census cited 57.92% of its userbase as having some form of neurodivergence, with 212 of the 366 participants saying that they either have been professionally diagnosed or considered themselves self-diagnosed with a mental health condition of some kind. Therian Guide's in-forum poll of "do you have a mental disorder?" similarly reported 72.96% of participants, 143 of 196, said yes. Additionally, on the Kinmunnity's 2016 Census, 18.02% of participants identified as heterosexual, and 46.72% identified as cisgender. In PinkDolphin's Therianthropy and Gender Experience survey from 2020, only 23.2% of participants considered themselves cisgender, or 53 of 228 responses, and only 8% considered themselves straight, or 18 of 225 responses. Posts about connections between therianthropy or otherkinity and mental illnesses or neurodivergency in some form are also not that uncommon on many popular forums: Werelist has threads such as "Similarities between therianthropy and mental/neurological illness" (with posts ranging from 2017 to 2020), Kinmunnity's most recent iteration has threads like "ASD Linked to Therianthropy?" (with posts from 2019 to 2021), Therian Guide has threads such as "Theory of Therianthropy as a Developmental Adaptation to Trauma or Autism" (with posts from 2021), and Nonhuman National Park has threads such as "What if Non-humanity became a medical diagnosis?" (with posts from 2021). With that point ironed out beyond argument, it has to be recognized that there's a likelihood that otherkin and therians have a tendency to be in the lower income brackets we often see neurodivergent and queer and LGBT individuals fall into due in part to this connection and likely also because of other, more blatantly nonhumanity-related, factors such as more niche job preferences or inability to work well with others due to potential misanthropic attitudes. This just furthers the "money" issue that ties into travel and time-off that is often necessary for Howls.

The tendency for therians and otherkin to be LGBT, queer, and/or neurodivergent can also tie into larger disinclinations towards face-to-face meetups. There are general anxieties related to such identities and experiences on a societal level, and neurodivergence within otherkin and therian communities can be something of a

powder keg topic, especially in regards to intrusive thoughts, psychosis, and both disordered and nondisordered forms of plurality. It can be difficult to want to engage with peers when you face the potential of being immediately disregarded or removed from spaces based on facts about yourself that you can't control, but which others have strong opinions on.

This also relates into how some kintypes and theriotypes within the communities are viewed. A phytanthrope, paleotherian, or fictherian is likely to be disinclined from interacting with therian spaces in the same way someone who's nonhuman fictionkin, conceptkin, or mahinekin might be disinclined from interacting in otherkin spaces. When emotions run high over who is and isn't allowed to call themselves one thing or another, or allowed participate within groups in the community, it's perceived as a safer option to just avoid the situation entirely. This is an issue that affects even online therian and otherkin spaces as well, mind you—this is by no means offline-specific or unique.

It may also be worth mentioning that it appears to me that there is a growing divide between online life and offline life in terms of interactivity. While people often enjoy mentioning factors of their offline life in their online lives and vice versa, whether because of the paranoia instilled in us at young ages about online strangers, constant concerns stemming from ideas around the commonality of crimes such as kidnappings, and the general high tensions that exist in this politically charged time (especially/mainly in America), there's a notable resistance to interacting with Internet-met groups and individuals. This is fair and understandable, but also may contribute to some of the anxieties and reasons individuals have for not participating in Howls.

The global pandemic is perhaps the topper of the cake for it all: in-person meetups aren't just discouraged, they're now outright potentially dangerous to engage in depending on meeting size and the vaccination records of attendees. Depending on your location, they even may be outright illegal. So even for therians and otherkin who more often have the time, money, and ability to comfortably attend in-person meetups are largely now unable to do so.

So where does that leave us? With only digital or very small, personal meetups safely available, how do we both encourage more engagements to Howls while keeping them safe and accessible for more people to attend?

Digital Howls and conventions, as demonstrated by OtherCon '20 and '21 and AlterCon '20, have had quite a lot of success in online spaces such as Discord and in VR, and shouldn't be excluded as a possibility. While a far-cry from the woodsy camping physical gatherings that Howls are most frequently associated with, they've successfully provided the community bonding spaces and nonhumanity-engaging that are so critical to what makes Howls important.

Digital Howls and other forms of gatherings also offer the unique benefits of guidelines that can be easily enforced and broadened accessibility. I've heard my fair share of creepos and weirdoes driving people away from Howls and of campsites being on terrain that disabled therians and otherkin find difficult (or impossible) to traverse—this helps to circumvent both neatly, with the assistance of digital ban hammers and a wholly nonphysical space to navigate around.

The broadened accessibility also helps to diversify the Howls themselves, making individuals with less-common identities feel more at-ease and accepted. This can be combined with guidelines, such as ones which blatantly forbid witch-hunting and validity-hounding, for further inclusivity if so desired. All in all, it appears to be that digital Howls easily have the capacity to side-step many of the issues we've seen raised by the pandemic and in-person anxieties people might have, and are a recipe for success for the time being.

There are more benefits as well, that have to do more specifically with the digital aspects of certain spaces: Discord is a surprisingly good space for panels and lectures with their stage feature, and also offers generally positive voice chat. Twitch is useful for gatherings which are focused on a set number of individuals or people who wish to talk or showcase something such as a project, but with more accessible audience engagement and recording than Discord. VR, Second Life, and similar specific spheres offer the benefit of avatars that can look like one's kintype or theriotype, not something that might necessarily be possible IRL outside of fursuits and costumes.

Through advertising these digital Howls and encouraging engagement with them on a variety of platforms, such as social media websites, personal sites, forums, and the like, we also might be able to in turn see a resurgence in in-person Howls once the pandemic fades again in a few years. When we make them places of community bonding and joy and reaffirm that association on a larger scale, then that might encourage individuals to look into hosting them in-person and see how they go—a few successful Howls in-person that are spoken of highly might be just the spark needed to set the flame roaring. Talking vocally about how well Howls in-person go would have the dual affect of interesting individuals who might otherwise not be invested in attending, and reassuring the nerves of new or nervous individuals who are thinking of hosting or joining a local Howl.

Of course, there's other things that need to be taken into account in a theoretical shift from digital Howls to post-pandemic in-person Howls and I'm pinning my faith on the idea that people might find the digital ones so important and wonderful as to be willing to migrate them into physical spaces, but I feel like that's not a misguided leap of faith. Our communities are known for doing exactly that sort of jump of engagement when presented with something they particularly enjoy: we've seen it happen on smaller scales with the ways we see the commonality of essays in the community over the years surge in connection to a few major essay projects or challenges put out into the community, and we've seen it happen on quite a decent scale with the resurgence of small, personal websites of otherkin and therians that were snowballed by a few specific individuals starting up new projects and websites and encouraging others to do the same. The therian and otherkin communities are nothing if not over-exuberant nonhumans at their core, excited about anything they can sink their teeth into.

Of course, I also recognize that digital Howls aren't perfect themselves. They can be potentially difficult for slow typers and individuals who use screenreaders, as well as those who are hard of hearing or have audio processing issues. Not everyone has Discord, or Twitch, or VR avatars, or uses Second Life, or any other number of problems. But that's the thing—what's accessible for one person may not be accessible for others, and that's an unfortunate roadblock in every space. That's part of the reason it's important to have a multitude of options and encourage multiple different meetings rather than a few centralized ones, because if one person can only attend text meetings

and one person can only attend over-voice meetings, that doesn't mean one person can't go to a Howl at all: they just go to separate Howls that work best for them.

I also know that some people are probably perplexed about why I'm going to bat for Howls at all, especially in-person ones. Either because they view it as unneeded—whether because they believe Howls are a thing of the past, or because they find that in-person gatherings are of no particular note—or because they personally view Howls as something that isn't generally worth the risk they present in-person to people. Believe it or not but there is an important reason for this essay, though it isn't readily apparent.

The otherkin and therian communities primarily exist in nonphysical spaces, it's true. That's an undeniable part of these communities that makes them what they are, filled with rambunctious discourses and with polarized scholars. However, the fact that we exist largely in nonphysical spaces does not remove the importance of physical spaces in both individual nonhumanity and in community nonhumanity. Our nonhumanity cannot and does not exist in a vacuum of characters and emojis. It's something we live every day of our lives, in the real, physical world, and it's important that we remember that.

The phrase “go outside and touch grass,” is petty at best, and typically used in infantilizing and downright ableist ways at worst, so I do not want what I say here to be misunderstood as such. But the importance of going out and interacting with the natural world, with humans, and with your nonhuman peers cannot be understated. There is a reason that “warehouses” filled with nonhumans are something that still exist today: we gain something from being physically around others so similar to us on such a fundamental level that I struggle to articulate. A reminder of the connection between us all, of the variety of our experiences, of how much our nonhumanity is us in comparison to non-therians and non-otherkin. Everyone should experience the collective effervescence of nonhumanity with others at least once in their life and get drunk off of it, should experience the raw numinous of being surrounded by other shifted therians and otherkin for the first time, especially under a sky of stars. This not only grounds us and reminds us of what is important, it enriches our lives and helps to connect us to each other, empathize with one another.

I also worry about some sections of the nonhuman communities, I confess. Therian spaces in particular—though by all means they should be going strong, it only seems that the minor-specific spaces are particularly boisterous in their participation, with large-scale places like Therian Amino. I don't have to wonder why this is, given the therian community has previously been the victim in the past of a blaze of grilling and gatekeeping attitudes, and is now currently wrestling with an influx of bestialists that make people hesitant to associate with it.

In encouraging Howls, especially inclusive and accessible Howls, a part of me hopes to see people reclaim therianthropy and the label therian, and to introduce fresh blood in the long-term into the community. I'm not a therian myself and so cannot be involved with any processes that the therian communities go through themselves in terms of what flourishes and what dies out, but I can't help but feel invested and hopeful for the future. I don't want to see therianthropy be relegated into a rarely-used term that many associate with bestiality or zoophilia—I want therianthropy to be molded and shaped into the experiences of animalpeople everywhere, a term used loudly and proudly by individuals of all fur, scales, fin, leaf, shell, and feather. A community to appreciate and admire, with all its flaws and battles, filled with active voices who aren't afraid to talk about their animality even as they grow older. A community whose older members won't either disappear to the sands of time or shelter themselves wholly in otherkin spaces because they no longer feel welcome in therian spaces. But that's just what I'm hopeful for in the future—not necessarily what may happen, and perhaps that vision is not ideal to most current therians, which is also something to consider.

Howls and other gatherings are important. Our connections to each other, the bonds we make with one another, are a backbone to this community of nonhumanity. If we don't inspire each other, if we don't interact with each other, if we don't enjoy each other to some degree, then what's the point of being in communities together at all? Physical gatherings may be out of reach for now, but that doesn't mean we have to sit on our hands and wait to start fostering a sense of connection and cooperation until it becomes more possible—in fact, that makes it more important now than ever that we reach out and interact with each. In some ways, we're all we have.