

# The “Yes-No” Dhole Theriotype

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When I first found the otherkin community, I thought I was a dhole therian. This was in part because of my shifts—tails, fur, paws, specifically-shaped ears and teeth, and a clearly canine prey drive—and in part because of a long-term connection to and self-identification with red-furred canines. I ended up after several years coming to realize that dhole wasn't quite a theriotype after all, but also that it wasn't quite *not* a theriotype, either. This is partially because of how this not-identity manifests, but also in part because of how complex and divided the therian community (and thus, interpretations of therianthropy) can be.

The therian community is something that I have, in my mind, divided into two communities based on my personal experiences and research. For the sake of clarity in this essay, I'll term them the Otherian community, a subset of the otherkin community, and the Shiftherian community, a standalone animal-person community. Silliness and informality of the terms aside, let me explain the differences between the two and their relevancy:

**Otherian** (*Otherkin + Therian*): Therianthropy with a basis in how animality is understood from an animal perspective. Therians who tend towards otherkin and alterhuman spaces, who usually seem to understand themselves as animals-first-human-second (or, sometimes, as just animal). There is a focus and centralization of the experience of animality, where humanity can or cannot be mentioned and considered applicable. Shifting is viewed more as a side-effect than as the entirety of the experience itself: what is important is that you identify *as* the animal in question, regardless of what you do or do not experience in addition to that identity.

**Shiftherian** (*Shifter + Therian*): Therianthropy with a basis in how animality is understood from a human perspective. Therians who tend towards therian-only spaces, who understand themselves as animal-people. A focus on shifting narratives, where identification as and identification with are viewed with equal legitimacy so long as there are nonhuman experiences in the mix. A centralization of the experience of animal-human, or animality-as-human. What matters is that you have animal-person related *experiences*, regardless of how you apply those experiences into your identity.

A good example of the difference would perhaps be from Kusani's essay on therianthropy: “[Our therianthropic] animal core is expressed through the human body,

intellect, and how one was raised, making us animal-people and not just animals wearing human skins.”<sup>1</sup> An “animal-[person]” as Kusani put it would be an example of a Shiftherian identity; an “animal wearing [a] human skin” would be an example of an Otherian identity. One could also potentially consider it a generational difference, with ‘old guard therians’ fitting more into Shiftherian categories, and younger therians fitting more into Otherian categories.

My identification with/as red-furred canines, but most especially with the dhole, would potentially fit the idea of therianthropy as a human-focused experience, Shiftherian, but would not fit the idea of therianthropy as a significant animal identity, Otherian. Thus, my difficulty when people have asked, “Is dhole still a theriotype for you?” The answer is yes and no in equal measure.

I am not a red-furred canine. I am not a dhole. But dholes, and other red-furred canines, are to some extent me. How does this work?

Red-furred canines have always had personal significance to me. As a bright-eyed copper-haired too-small canine-child, I saw myself in the fictional stories of foxes: the ways they were so often treated as liminal beings, the types of transformative creatures to be both human-animal and animal-human as needed. Clever, cryptic, and fond of poking their noses into situations they would inevitably need to get themselves out of. The fox was lithe and usually underestimated, typically to others’ disadvantage.

I saw both traits physical and metaphorical of myself in these animals, as though to some degree I was looking into a mirror or through stories of family members’ antics past rather than being told fictional stories. It was familiar and comforting in equal measure. Likely because of my internal identification as a larger, bulkier canine and possibly in part because of the sturdy, strong physical build I grew into, this familiarity expanded to all wild, red-furred canines rather than just red foxes.

As an adult unconsciously developing their personal mythological narratives and understandings of the world, white-red-black became a sacred color combination for me. It was representative of the others in my system, composed of a white dragon, black dragon, and red dragon (and, eventually, a red-black basilisk); it was something I connected to my personal spirituality and religious beliefs, especially symbology that continuously popped up in relationship to my gods, most notably cardinals and bluejays; it was a palette I found unique

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<sup>1</sup> Kusani, “An Introduction to Animality” *Being Lion*, <http://beinglion.com/introduction.php>

comfort and confidence in wearing, something of a second-skin in how I liked to portray myself to others and see myself in.

My fursona has the palette of a dhole for that specific reason, in the same way it has multiple heads and limbs to represent my plurality, and skull-faces to represent my nonhumanity, and a ghostly dual-colored flame to represent my spirituality. I'm not a dhole, but dholes and other red-furred wild canines are me in an underlying, almost archetypal way. These animals are, in an odd way, how I understand and portray my invasive and unnatural humanity.

I'm a canine all the time, but by virtue of being part of a system, I'm only a human some of the time. To bridge that gap, to see myself in the overlaps of identity, red-furred wild canines are what I instinctively, unconsciously jump to first. To be what people need me to be, to be both human *and* animal in such a transformative, liminal, fiery, trouble-causing way, red-furred canines are the coat and mask I wear, so neatly overlaying my own wolf skull face as to fit perfectly and without a second thought. It's why I haven't changed my dhole profile picture online for the last six years, since 2015: Page-the-Psychopomp is who I *am*, but Page-the-Dhole is a representation of me on a different level. It's the passion of a snarl that a skinless face just can't produce, the warm sunlight on fur that a body of shadow can't feel, the light in an eye that empty sockets will never have. These things come from my occasional humanity, from the experience of human *and* canine that can become combined while I'm at front. These things are an important part of me, a part of how I experience fronting and portraying myself while at front (while I am "human" some singlets might even go so far as to say), but I am not these things—and that is the difference between a Shiftherian theriotype and an Otherian theriotype, and the crux of my inability to give what dholes are to me a meaningful label. Am I dhole therian? Do I have a dhole theriotype? Yes, and no. No, and yes.

I'm the Grim's dog, come to knock on your door wearing the mask of a dhole and claiming to have a personal investment in humans and humankind and human experiences. What does that make me? A psychopomp? A dhole? A man? Or something else entirely? Am I Schrödinger's alterhuman, only counted as a dhole therian—a human experiencing animality, or an animal wearing human skin, or both, or neither—while at front? I couldn't tell you. Yes and no, maybe.