

THE DECOLONIAL POWER OF SHAPESHIFTING:  
SUBVERSIVE ECOFEMINIST RHETORICS

by

Sarah Evan Rosenbaum, B.A.

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Committee Members:

Rebecca Jackson, Chair

Eric Leake

Octavio Pimentel

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## **DEDICATION**

Dedicated with love to those who became spirit while I was writing.

My beloved friend Trinity, who taught me magic, laughter, and freedom.

My father, Stuart Evan Rosenbaum, who taught me to be still, breathe deep, and seek peace.

and

Dedicated with gratitude to the San Marcos River, who baptized my grief and hope in equal measure.

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## ABSTRACT

There is a repeating pattern in rhetoric in which women discursively re-shape their bodies into that of a nonhuman animal. This thesis utilizes a framework of ecofeminism and rhetorical empathy in order to understand this kind of shapeshifting. Three primary rhetors comprise the basis of this investigation: Terry Tempest Williams, a Mormon conservationist, Gloria Anzaldúa, a queer feminist Chicana scholar, and Tanya Tagaq, a Nunavut singer. Contrasting against patterns of animalization which enable Othering tactics, shapeshifting centers empathy in order to subversively *build* relationship. Shapeshifting is internally composed, while animalization is externally imposed. Additionally, the rhetoric of shapeshifting is unruly and multimodal. It is enacted across a wide range of persuasive performances, from the written word to songs and videos. It stems from an ecofeminist exigence and functions to build empathy which would otherwise be less available to the audience.



## I. ARTICULATING THE SKELETON

My body sends tendrils of awareness from my solar plexus to the snake's body, and my consciousness flows out along these threads and into la víbora. My tongue becomes her tongue, testing and tasting the air. When my consciousness flows into an animal, it becomes my vehicle to see, feel, touch, hear, taste, and smell in the underworld or otherworld.

-Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 2015, pp, 27.

### **Preface**

I dreamed once that I walked through marble hallways, confident, comfortable, entirely naked except for the snake corpse slung around my hips like a belt. Its dangling tail and head tapped gently against my legs as I navigated toward my destination. The walls around me were embellished with sculptures of scholars with stone eyes, and men with waxen bones fled in the face of my shamelessness. I entered a set of double doors. A desk lay before me, covered over with pages and pages of writing. Stepping upward onto the desk, I paused to breathe and notice the way gravity and air bound me into my body. Safe, complete. Then I took the snake and unwound it from my hips, coil over coil, smooth and cool. I held it before me, exhaled, and pressed my palms into it like clay. Its lifeless body animated, twisted, and fell apart into thousands of tiny, perfect human infants. My children. I opened my hands and let them fall to the paper, where they were meant to go, where they could speak and learn. I have reshaped reality, and I wake, naked before myself.

This dream was so vibrant it haunted me for years. It rose once again to the top of my mind while I examined the living rhetorics discussed within this thesis, particularly when I read the words of renowned scholar Gloria E. Anzaldúa:

My feminism is grounded not on incorporeal abstraction but on corporeal realities. The material body is center, and central. The body is the ground of thought. The body is a text. Writing is not about being in your head; it's about being in your body. (Light in the Dark 5)

The embodied pattern began to emerge. The boundaries between woman, language, and nonhuman animal diffused, blurred, and even disappeared entirely across a broad swath of feminist rhetoric. The rhetors are shapeshifting. The women shapeshift. Anzaldúa describes her own transformation: “That night....I dreamed rattler fangs filled my mouth, scales covered my body. In the morning I saw through snake eyes, felt snake blood course through my body” (Borderlands 48). Through language, women rhetorically reshape their bodies into that of a nonhuman animals. It is a flavor of discourse that aches with connectivity, with relationality. My thesis will move from a framework of ecofeminism and rhetorical empathy in order to grow toward an understanding of how, when, and why rhetorical shapeshifting transpires.

## **Introduction**

Symbolic representation of nonhuman animals moves through human discourse in dynamic, intriguing ways: it is used to illustrate abstract concepts, impart sensory nuance to arguments and ideas, and represent aspects of human experience. The Latin word *anima*, which forms the etymological root of the word animal, literally indicates

breath/soul. This connotation of life/vitality is utilized to animate human discourse and communication—to animate, after all, means to imbue with life. From a rhetorical perspective, this animal imagery can be traced back to the origin of rhetoric itself as a discipline: from the classical Greek rhetors who forged the scholastic field that still flourishes.

### **Zoostylistics: To Move the Animal is To Move the Soul**

Through the work of classical rhetoricians, symbolic imagery provides the precedent for the rhetorical use of nonhuman animals. Plato in particular provides apt examples of symbolic animals deployed for a rhetorical purpose. Animals feature prominently in his body of work, with roughly a dozen species making over 500 appearances throughout his texts (Naas 5). Within the renowned work *Phaedrus*, which discusses the art of rhetoric, Plato effectively adds meaning and sensation to his work by means of cicadas: small, winged insects. He leverages their capacity to produce copious noise, as well as the divine implications of their creation story, to strengthen the rhetoric of his work. For example, the cicadas' noise crafts tone at the beginning of *Phaedrus*, while the characters are in the process of verbally setting the scene for the audience. The insects are positioned as integral aspects of the environment—their low drone permeates the setting with background noise. G.R.F. Ferrari refers to this section of the text as “stage-managing,” and expands upon the presence of the insects as part of an abstract play by adding “the theatre even has a resident chorus: the ‘chorus of cicadas’” (1). Although the auditory contribution of the cicadas enriches *Phaedrus* from a sensory perspective, their true significance is revealed through the characters' discussion of the Greek cicada origin story.

The characters of *Phaedrus*, Socrates and his pupil (the namesake of the title), are discussing philosophy whilst meandering through the countryside. Socrates urges Phaedrus to continue their discussion in the presence of the cicadas. He asserts that he and Phaedrus must not drowse and must continue speaking for “if they see us conversing and sailing past them unmoved by the charm of their Siren voices, perhaps they will be pleased and give us the gift which the gods bestowed on them to give to men” (Plato 156). In other words, the cicadas carry with them the ability to impart divine gifts directly from the gods. Socrates proceeds to deliver the creation myth of the cicada to his student. He explains that the cicadas were initially men, whom upon the birth of the Muses were so intoxicated with pure inspiration they did not cease singing until they died of thirst. Reborn as cicadas, they serve as messengers, transiting between worlds of men and gods. Socrates claims that “they make report of those who pass their lives in philosophy and who worship these Muses who are most concerned with heaven and with thought divine” (Plato 156). This elaborate myth—that the insects are direct servants to the muses—positions the introduction of *Phaedrus* in a much more inspired context. The implied auditory (sensory) divinity lends enormous impact and weight to the words of Socrates by setting up the implication that his words are a boon directly granted from the Muses. His rhetoric, as a consequence, is elevated to an almost godly status. In this manner, the cicadas function within Plato’s work as rhetorical tools that impart a connotation of divinity. Additionally, their constant noise, woven throughout the backdrop of *Phaedrus*, adds a sensory texture to the work. The tiny cicada insects as rhetorical tools are no mere baubles.

The consistent presence of animals throughout classical rhetoric, such as the cicadas, has prompted an abundance of scholarly work which primarily examines their function within metaphors, allegories, and parables. Debra Hawhee is a seminal scholar investigating these discursive nonhuman animals, coining the term ‘*zoostylistics*’ in 2016 to describe the way in which rhetoricians utilize animal imagery to imbue abstract philosophies with embodied sensation (10). Zoostylistics is therefore high vitality prose featuring nonhuman animals being portrayed with *sensory* language. These animal-borne (zoonotic) sensations are leveraged to more powerfully convey ideas or arguments. The key feature of zoostylistics is the goal of *sensation activation* in order to “invigorate a speech or piece of writing and, by extension, an audience” (39). Hawhee affirms that “nonhuman animals bring energy to language in its broadest, fullest conception—verbal and bodily, rational and sensuous—and to the teaching and theorizing of its artful use” (169). This helps illuminate the utilitarian power of the cicadas within *Phaedrus*. Their raucous noise, referenced throughout the text, energizes the rhetoric and evokes the embodied sensation of listening from within the audience. They are external validation of Plato’s Socrates’ message.

Hawhee’s depiction of the strategic use of sensation deployed through rhetorical animals is reminiscent of the classical concept *phantasia*. The unknown author of *On The Sublime*, entitled Longinus, presents a treatise on the artful use of emotion and imagery within rhetoric. Within his treatise, he discusses the utility of *phantasia* as an effective tool to sway an audience. *Phantasia* is a method of image-production in which “enthusiasm and emotion make the speaker see what he is saying and bring it *visually* before his audience” (Longinus 356). *Phantasia* is therefore a rhetorical strategy of

deploying thoughtful imagery in order to cause resonance between audience and rhetor by way of an embodied sense—in this case, visuals. Although Longinus does not explicitly offer nonhuman animals as instruments of *phantasia*, his examples of applied *phantasia* feature animals, or even isolated animal body parts—specifically, snakes and the tails of bulls (356). Additionally, he takes pains to distinguish image-production (*phantasia*) with a poetic purpose from image-production with a rhetorical purpose: “It will not escape you that rhetorical visualization has a different intention than that of the poets: in poetry the aim is astonishment, in oratory it is **clarity**” (356; emphasis mine). That is to say, rhetorically sharing visual imagery with an audience increases comprehensibility of the subject matter. Hawhee’s zoostylistics specifically enriches the concept of *phantasia* with the addition of nonhuman animals as the primary agents of image-production, ones which are adept at conveying embodied sensation.

Once again, Plato’s *Phaedrus* provides a clean example, one that is more extensively discussed than the cicadas. A powerful demonstration of zoostylistics comes furiously into the text on the backs of horses. Dr. Jeremy Bell states that “the horse has forged an exceptionally broad path throughout Plato’s corpus, one that cuts across nearly every text and terrain therein” (91). *Phaedrus* flaunts Plato’s documented pattern of using horses as rhetorical tools through the well-known chariot allegory. This allegory features the human (and to Plato, inherently male) soul portrayed as a team of two horses drawing a chariot. The two horses represent a binary Plato constructs within the human soul, one part seeking glory/reason and the other motivated by physical gratification. This parable is so wealthy in sensory detail that it is thoroughly dissected within scholarly works, many of them focused on minutiae of the nonhuman animals therein. Dr. Elizabeth

Belfiore states that “this passage has been the subject of much controversy, especially concerning the role of the black horse” (186). The scholarly focus on the black horse can be argued to be a consequence of Plato’s greater attention to the zoostylistics of that specific animal. Plato builds a sense of enormous struggle and conflict between the parts of the soul by illuminating the black horse, the non-compliant animal seeking gratification, with stronger zoostylistics than the placid horse. There is more invocation of sensation—that is, the symbolic representation of the horse’s body is utilized to summon an embodied feeling within the audience. The narrative of the black horse portrays it struggling violently against the higher nature of the soul, as “he lowers his head, raises his tail, takes the bit in his teeth, and pulls shamelessly.” In order to be checked, the black horse must be subdued as the charioteer wrestles him down until he “covers his scurrilous tongue and jaws with blood, and forces his legs and haunches to the ground” (Plato 153). The physical body parts of a horse are chronicled here within the context of a power struggle, from head to tail and legs to tongue; bodily fluids even play a part in strengthening the allegory, as blood and sweat are both mentioned. The visuals imparted to the audience through this allegory (the zoostylistics it contains) illuminate the lesson with a memorability it would not otherwise possess. The concepts *Phaedrus* presents are discursively actualized into the physical realm of the horse, which is more clearly and vividly comprehended by the audience. This is what makes the chariot allegory so memorable, and able to so comprehensively underscore the arguments contained in *Phaedrus*. Dr. Jeremy Bell goes so far as to assert that “without his animals, Plato would have never been able to develop a philosophy as coherent, comprehensive, and authoritative as the one he has” (3).

This is a straightforward example of a classical rhetorician utilizing zoostylistics (and the *phantasia* inherent therein) to produce evocative discursive imagery—the symbolic representation of animals in this context functions as a teaching tool. That is, animals are employed to better illustrate abstract concepts by prompting empathetic embodied sensation within the audience through rhetoric that calls upon the physical senses to make meaning and produce vivid images. Zoostylistics.

Debra Hawhee's work clearly illuminates the power of animals as rhetorical image-bearers. Symbolic animal imagery is interwoven with the genesis of the field of rhetoric itself, through the work of classical rhetoricians/philosophers. Hawhee's work on zoostylistics is rooted in this classical foundation in order to set contemporary scholarly precedent for recognizing the value of nonhuman animal images as rhetorical tools. However, although her work does a revelatory job of examining how classical Greek rhetoricians draw from animal imagery, her work does not extend to an examination of the intense presence of animals that infuses and enriches contemporary feminist rhetoric. Having established a background in canonical academic rhetoric, this thesis will now digress from Eurocentric modes of rhetoric in order to investigate contemporary concatenations of nonhuman animals in feminist rhetoric.

### **Shapeshifting: To Become the Animal is to Embody the Soul**

Contemporary feminist rhetoricians align *with* nonhuman animals through language and through their own bodies, which stands in stark contrast to the classical (patriarchal) rhetoricians who utilize animals as tools of image production or sensory enrichment. Toni Morrison and Terry Tempest Williams are two such contemporary rhetoricians. Both elegantly interweave language and animal into a single unit. In the



demonstrative iterations of rhetoric presented hereafter, they've each chosen to use birds—nonhuman animals which are continuity noted through literature and poetry for their ability to produce what human ears perceive as song. It is not surprising that with such recognition, birds have been chosen by Morrison and Williams to examine the true breadth, width, and capacity of human language.

Toni Morrison accepted her 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature award with a striking acceptance speech. As the first Black woman to receive the award, she crafted her oratory around the same folklore that Fannie Lou Hamer, a grassroots anti-racist activist, had used to address the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in 1971 (263). The folklore depicts an elderly person who is blind, renowned for their wisdom. A group of youths comes before the elder, with the intent of framing a question that can only be answered with vision, and thereby confound the elder: is the bird they have brought with them alive, or is it dead? Hamer uses this lore to conclude her speech on racial inequality, presenting the answer of the elder as her own closing words: "He looked at the young people and he smiled. And he said, 'It's in your hands.'" (266). Hamer's elder is a man. His answer centers the responsibility for the bird, whether alive or dead, on the youths before him. In the context of a speech on racial justice, it serves to emphasize duty. Morrison takes this lore and expands it enormously, transforming it into a parable on the nature of language itself.

Morrison attentively sets up the lore, opening her lecture with the phrase: "Fiction...has never been entertainment for me. It has been the work that I have done for most of my adult life. I believe that one of the principal ways in which we acquire, hold, and digest information, is via narrative" (00:30 – 00:46). She thereby anchors the parable that follows in an epistemological framework. In the version that Morrison tells, slowly

and with gravitas, the elder who is blind is a woman. Specifically a Black woman, a daughter of slaves, who lives alone and whose reputation for deep wisdom is known throughout many communities near and far. Similarly to Hamer's narration, a group of youths come to visit the elder, seeking to bewilder her blindness with a question about a bird that she cannot see. They put to Morrison's elder the same question that they did to Hamer's: "I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead" (03:25 – 03:33). Morrison says that the elder cannot know the gender, color, or origin of her visitors—but she does know their motive. And so, with her own voice low and clear, Morrison tells her audience how the elder replies: "Finally she speaks and her voice is soft but stern. 'I don't know,' she says. 'I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I *do* know is that it is in your hands. It is in *your* hands.'" (04:23 – 04:47). As Hamer before her, Morrison constructs a structure of responsibility around the bird. She then diverges, changing the scope of the tale with a simple sentence. She solemnly tells the audience how she perceives the heart of the story: "I choose to read the bird as language and the woman as a practiced writer" (06:11 – 06:20). The youths, standing before the elder, have language itself in their hands. Whether it is living language or a language that has been killed is unknown. In Morrison's own words, this "shifts attention away from assertions of power **to the instrument through which that power is exercised**" (05:35 – 05:47; emphasis mine). Language, symbolized with the captured body of a bird, is the instrument through which power is exercised. Morrison's stunning lecture, offered in her soft and heavy voice, moves forward to discuss the nature of language itself—how it can be used for good or for ill, to uplift and connect or oppress and separate. When used for the latter, she says that "the heart of such language is

languishing, or perhaps not beating at all—if the bird is already dead” (15:10 – 15:27) reaffirming that her metaphor of language is contained within a small, feathered animal body. It has a heart, it can live or die, it can be handled. It is a tool through which power is leveraged. Morrison closes out her lecture with the parting words of the elder to the youths: “I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done—together” (33:08 – 33:19). Her speech features a parable on the true nature of language (a tool, an instrument of creation or destruction), as portrayed through the body of a nonhuman animal. Hers is a rhetoric that weaves animal and language into a single entity.

Terry Tempest Williams, a Utah-based conservation activist, also merges language and birds within her work. Indeed, in many instances she conflates bird bodies with punctuation: “lazuli buntings were turquoise exclamation marks singing in a canopy of green; and blue-gray gnatcatchers became commas in an ongoing narrative of wild nature” (*Women Were Birds* 42). Here she presents grammatical aspects of language as living creatures, and thereby migrates her communication off the page and into the material world. However, the bird-language unification that Morrison and Williams enact in this context only brushes the surface of how nonhuman animals function as agents of embodied language in feminist work.

Feminist rhetoricians not only conflate animals with language itself, they also align their identities with that of the nonhuman animal to the point that within their work, their woman body transforms into the body of an animal. Williams is one such rhetor that frequently performs this, one of her most dramatic examples being:

A black bear crossed the meadow. The man fixed his scope on the bear and pulled the trigger. The bear screamed. He brought down his rifle and found himself shaking. This had never happened before. He walked over to the warm beast, now dead, and placed his hand on its shoulder. Setting his gun down, he pulled out his buck knife and began skinning the bear that he would pack out on his horse. As he pulled the fur coat away from the muscle, down the breasts and over the swell of the hips, he suddenly stopped. This was not a bear. It was a woman (Unspoken Hunger 51).

Here Williams has merged the physical body of woman and bear. She uses this story to open an essay on cycles of writing and womanhood. The delineations/divides between woman, language, and animal become diffused and even disappear entirely within works such as these: the women *shapeshift*. This strategic, dynamic interplay between women, language, and animal seems to denote a powerful sense of unified life and vitality. As William's passage demonstrates, it sometimes comments on the violence of patriarchy against women and against nonhuman animals—together a unified entity through rhetoric. Women become the embodied life force of language by aligning with nonhuman animals—through shapeshifting.

Rhetorical shapeshifting comprises the core of this proposed thesis. An ecofeminist lens, defined and discussed in the literature review, will be utilized in order to illuminate the rhetoric of human/nonhuman animal metaphors as they have been rhetorically deployed and situate shapeshifting among them. Additionally, this thesis will investigate rhetorical shapeshifting while attending to its multimodal performance. Written word, spoken word, visual, and auditory rhetorics will be included in the scope of

examination, with attentiveness to the rhetorical ecologies of each event, and how *material* identity and agency is *rhetorically* shifted.

“I pick the ground from which to speak

a reality into existence.

I have chosen to struggle against unnatural boundaries.”

-Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 2015, pp, 23.

### **Visitation**

During the summer of 2020, my friend and fellow rhetoric scholar Olivia Hinojosa and I made a detour on our way back home after participating in a protest. We trundled away from the highway in Olivia’s sparkling sapphire car, Zaidy thwapping me with her thin chihuahua tail as I cradled her in suspension against the turns. We pulled out onto a dirt shoulder to gather late summer wildflowers, other cars passing by only occasionally. We bundled them together carefully—an offering. Down the road a little further, and we turned right into a tiny cemetery. Bells jangled from the collars of nearby goats as we quietly walked up and down the rows of headstones. Zaidy found it first. Engraved snakes and lizards framed Gloria E. Anzaldúa, PhD. Olivia laid the flowers down, and we breathed. A strange rush, *whomp-whomp-whomp*, and a white peacock descended from the trees to glide amongst the memorials. We stared at the bird in disbelief, then broke into laughter.

“She’s here!”

## Operational Definition

Shapeshifting tightly navigates in the space of when and how human culture uses rhetorical animal imagery and symbolism. It is therefore worth taking a moment to split hairs about what does *not* count as shapeshifting—after all, symbolic animals are ubiquitous in daily life. Team mascots, commercial product representatives, memes, emojis, turns of phrase, and art are only the beginnings of our heavy use of animals as symbol and metaphor. Rhetorical shapeshifting is distinct from the previously listed examples because it is concerned with *embodiment* of nonhuman animals—how and when a human body rhetorically transforms/shifts into that of an animal, or vice versa. Additionally, the scope of my thesis will be limited to contemporary feminist rhetoric. This automatically excludes shapeshifting narratives in ancient cultures.

## Research Questions

An examination of the contemporary pattern of feminist shapeshifting and its implications thereof has not yet been performed, despite the abundance of scholarly work on feminist praxis and human/animal metaphor. My research will move to fill this gap. It will explore the rhetorical ecologies in which feminists use nonhuman animals to materially represent themselves. In light of this, my research questions are:

- How, when and why do women shapeshift?
- *Why does shapeshifting matter?*
- What makes shapeshifting rhetorical?
- How does it differ from externally imposed animalizing?

## II. METHODOLOGY: BINOCULAR VISION

### Introduction

The methodological approach I employ to investigate shapeshifting is a rhetorical analysis which relies on the complimentary use of two different frameworks. Each of these are leveraged in concert with each other to perform a comprehensive exploration. Respectively, the frameworks are of rhetorical ecologies and feminist rhetoric, worked together to achieve depth perception. This chapter will provide the background and justification for such an approach, as well as briefly chart the conventions of rhetorical analysis, while defending the benefits of utilizing multiple angles in approaching scholarly topics.

The concept of utilizing two approaches to understand a single subject is not new. As an apt example, I present *etuaptmumk*. This is a two-pronged methodology, which was created and named by a triad of indigenous Mi'kmaw elders and biology faculty at Cape Breton University (Bartlett et. al). Their purpose was to create a research methodology and framework that would gift scientific research communities a way to unite western scientific practices and Indigenous traditional knowledge. *Etuaptmumk* translates as *two-eyed seeing* (Bartlett et. al), honoring the two differing epistemologies. It is described by the team as “learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing” (Bartlett et. al 335). Although it was constructed within the field of biology and intended to inform scientific projects—and it has indeed been successfully demonstrated within published scientific studies (Gray et. al)—*etuaptmumk* can and should be applied to scholarship on rhetoric. Although I will

not strictly be implementing *etuaptomumk* (which entails a team comprised of culturally different perspectives co-creating a project) I will be using the spirit of the method to inform my dual frameworks.

Binocular vision is a specialized feature of sight permitted with the simple attribute of having two eyes. Primates in particular enjoy highly developed binocular vision, which enables the function of depth perception. In other words, it creates a three-dimensional understanding of what is being viewed, as well as a sense of orientation to what is being viewed. This is only possible with the use of two separate eyes, because they are located in different places on the head. Each eye receives a different perspective due to their placement, which enables “the formation of a sense of depth through neural comparison of disparities in the images seen by both eyes” (Cronin 110). That is, using two perspectives to examine the same object creates a much more comprehensive understanding of that object. This, in my view, is part of the driving concept behind *etuaptomumk*. This is what I perceive to be the spirit of the methodology, and it is what I shall utilize in my work: different perspectives/frameworks focused together on the same object/subject to create an image with depth perception/veracity.

### **Rhetorical Analysis**

Rhetorical analysis, like writing, is a social activity. It involves not simply passively decoding a message but actively understanding the designs the message has for readers who are living and breathing within a given culture (Selzer 293).

Jack Selzer points out that a widely accepted definition of rhetorical analysis does not exist and posits that this is likely due to the fact that “there is no generally accepted



definition of rhetoric” (279). For this reason, it is important that I present how I am utilizing rhetorical analysis as the foundation of my methodology. Firstly, I use Selzer’s elegant argument that “rhetorical analysis...can be understood as an effort to understand how people within specific social situations attempt to influence others through language (281). Of course, rhetoric is not confined to written or spoken language—it is multimodal. Selzer accounts for this by expanding the idea of language to encompass “every kind of important symbolic action” (281). Therefore, rhetorical analysis might grant attention to an incredible range of meaning-making actions. It works to understand what makes these meaning-making actions persuasive and reveals values and ideologies which are communicated/perpetuated through that persuasion. My methodological choice of rhetorical analysis is rooted in this move to discern communicated values through examining symbolic action—examining rhetoric.

My chosen frameworks of rhetorical ecologies and feminist rhetorics are each heavily grounded in a more contextual kind of rhetorical analysis. As opposed to textual rhetorical analysis, which focuses on *discrete* units of rhetoric, contextual rhetorical analysis lends attention to the unfolding networks of influence that surround and inform performances of rhetoric. It adds the element of environment (time and place) to the analysis in order to comprehend rhetorical performances as “an integral part of culture” (292). According to Selzer, who painstakingly depicts the differences in textual and contextual analysis, contextual rhetorical analysis “demands an appreciation of the social circumstances that call rhetorical events into being and that orchestrate the course of those events” (292). This harmonizes beautifully with the concept of rhetorical ecologies, which demands attention to the temporal/spatial web of rhetoric—and of which I shall

shortly discuss in further depth. This thesis will ultimately employ a combination of textual and contextual rhetorical analysis in order to perform a full examination of rhetorical shapeshifting—however, contextual analysis will be utilized more frequently in order to illuminate the landscape from which shapeshifting has risen.

### **Feminist and Ecological Frameworks**

The methodological framework from which I analyze the subject of my thesis is rooted in both an ecological and feminist approach to rhetoric. That is to say, I will *not* be working with rhetoric in an exacting classical sense—or as Robert Connors puts it, “as the 2,500-year-old discipline of persuasive public discourse” (67). It does not seem logical, practical or reasonable to perform rhetorical analysis on a multimodal practice of contemporary ecofeminist rhetoric through such a unidimensional lens. The exigence of shapeshifting rhetoric likely heavily resists (if not outright defies) description through classical, ancient, (patriarchal) means. Connors’ text illuminates the stagnant, rigid nature of classical rhetoric by means of describing the historic exclusion of women from the field, and how such exclusion was accomplished. He details how records of women were expunged from rhetoric during the era of its inception, and follows the discipline through history until the 1800s, all the while deftly exposing its inherent hostility to women. As he baldly states, “feminist scholarship has clearly shown how women had to fight their way into many intellectual disciplines during the last two millennia of Western culture; but no discipline was as closed to them as rhetorical study” (68). His work echoes that of his academic predecessor, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell.

## Feminist Framework

Campbell, like Connors, discusses the strained relationship of women and classical rhetoric—but with a more personal voice grounded in societal tension instead of historical tension. She writes that “insofar as the role of rhetor entails qualities of self-reliance, self-confidence, and independence, *its very assumption is a violation of the female role*” (75). She continues by discussing how feminist rhetoric attacks the most foundational parts of its own cultural context, which Connors reiterates in his own work by demonstrating the profoundly disruptive force of women entering the academy: “As women were storming and winning the gates of rhetoric, rhetoric could only mutate” (Connors, 79). He is referencing the waxing presence of composition within the field of rhetoric as a result of the inclusion of women’s voices in the academy. Where Campbell and Connors diverge is in their conclusions—while Connors dispassionately presents contemporary discrepancies within the academy as a result of historic tensions, Campbell argues that feminist rhetoric is an entire genre that works by “violating the reality structure” (83). She depicts the consistent stylistic features of the feminist genre, among which are that it is intimate, displays the rhetor persuading *themselves*, operates within a collective, and is powered by narrative.

The work of Campbell and Connors starkly presents the past and ongoing cultural friction generated by women mastering and performing rhetoric. They demonstrate that women break rhetorical genre convention simply by existing as non-male human beings. In order to more fully analyze the breadth, depth, and scope of shapeshifting, I will therefore be working from a framework of feminist rhetoric, which grants space for

multimodal performance which “violates the reality structure” through intimate narrative and composition.

### **Ecological Framework**

In order to increase the depth perception I have access to within feminist rhetoric, I will further augment my rhetorical analysis framework with an ecological perspective. Jenny Edbauer (now Jenny Rice) provides work that enriches discussion of rhetoric by resituating it from discrete events into dynamic ecologies: she deftly reweaves static sender-receiver (classical) conceptions of rhetoric into an amalgamation of processes that are dynamic, responsive, and exist as “lived fluxes” (9). Her take on rhetorical ecology is rooted in life, transformation, and connection. Edbauer underscores again and again that rhetorical actions are *never* discrete events. She examines how rhetoric exists within living networks: “to say that we are connected is another way of saying that we are never outside the networked interconnection of forces, energies, rhetorics, moods, and experiences. In other words, our practical consciousness is never outside the prior and ongoing structures of feeling that shape the social field” (10). This mode of framing rhetoric presents an infinitely complex, scaffolded web to work/play with. It transforms instances of rhetoric from singular performances into a continuous unfolding within a network of influence. It also explains why Connor chose to incorporate individual narratives (lived fluxes) into his history review, and how Campbell was able to comprehend the relationship of feminist rhetoric to psychosocial structure (and transgression thereof). Rhetoric does not make sense until it is situated within an ecology, and as Campbell demonstrates, women cannot make rhetorical moves without feminist

transgression. Therefore, I work from a feminist, ecological framework of rhetorical analysis.

### III. SHAPESHIFTING

#### Introduction

When in the presence of natural order, we remember the potentiality of life, which has been overgrown by civilization (Williams, *Unspoken Hunger* 8).

Nonhuman animals are woven throughout human society both literally and symbolically. We are entangled across species. This entanglement is reflected within human rhetoric—nonhuman animal imagery is frequently used to illustrate abstract ideas, impart sensory information to texts, and add cultural subtext to communication. Rhetorical shapeshifting is the practice of discursively transforming into or embodying a nonhuman animal through symbolic action—for example, writing or spoken word or visual art or music. It represents a dynamic intersection between nonhuman animal imagery and methods of persuasion. This chapter will present an in-depth window to this imbrication of nonhuman animal imagery and rhetoric through thoughtful examination of three relevant rhetors. The shapeshifters are: Tanya Tagaq, a Nunavut indigenous rights and climate advocate, Terry Tempest Williams, a Mormon conservationist, and Gloria Anzaldúa, a renowned queer Chicana scholar. Each of their rhetoric employs shapeshifting as symbolic persuasive action. The purpose of this chapter is to open a rhetorical analysis to illuminate how they perform shapeshifting as well as establish shapeshifting as a multimodal rhetorical strategy.

#### Tanya Tagaq: Animism

Shapeshifting is rhetorical, and it is unruly. It is certainly not confined to the written or spoken word. Shapeshifting concerns the body undergoing rhetorical transformation into a nonhuman animal body, and this can transpire through visual art,

music, or literal stage performance. Tanya Tagaq presents examples of *all* these rhetorical conduits to shapeshifting within a single rhetor. She began her international career as a punk Inuit throat singer and has consistently used her platform (in her music lyrics, social media, and interviews) to unapologetically voice political topics such as environmental and indigenous issues. For example, Tagaq recently posted on Instagram one of her early paintings in order to honor the recently discovered unmarked mass graves of indigenous children hidden by the state-sanctioned Catholic church (tanyatagaq). She seems to shrug off an activist label, saying “people call me an activist, but I don’t call – I don’t consider myself an activist. I consider myself somebody that is alive and has been living this life...hoping to make life better for people I see hurting” (Live at Massey Hall, 10: 28 – 10:33). Her music still manages to delve deeply and disconcertingly into heavy political topics. This is part of her brand; her official website describes her 2016 album *Retribution* as: “This album is not dinner party ambience music. This album is a cohesive, whole statement. Why sugarcoat it? This album is about rape. Rape of women, rape of the land, rape of children, despoiling of traditional lands without consent” (tanyatagaq.com). Indeed, Tagaq’s music can be profoundly unsettling and is instantly recognizable. She utilizes a spectrum of noise that extends far beyond what is generally considered socially acceptable. Tagaq screams, wails, whispers and hisses, growls, and eerily mimics animal noises such as wolf howls and horse whinnies. Her music is an unabashed vocal performance of shapeshifting, and though she does vocally transgress her human identity within songs she also incorporates another form of shapeshifting on stage. She crouches, claws the air, charges towards the audience, and at times bites the

microphone. Tagaq is a rhetor who therefore performs shapeshifting through both song and with her literal body movement.

Tagaq uses shapeshifting to comment on the consequences of forgetting what it means to be part of a natural system. For example, one of the tracks in her awarded 2014 album *Animism* is entitled *Fracking*. Fracking, shorthand for hydraulic fracturing, is the practice of pressurizing liquid suspensions and injecting them into the interstitial spaces of porous earth in order to force gas upward out of the ground. When it is not strictly regulated it contaminates ground and surface water with carcinogens, and it always fractures bedrock. In at least one instance, earthquakes have been caused by fracking (BBC). Tagaq's track features four minutes of unaccompanied moaning and screaming. She uses her human voice to embody the earth as it is subjected to fracking. Her tracks frequently address (directly or indirectly) how human people relate to natural systems. She creates an imaginary, simulated experience of being land/earth through her human voice. This is still shapeshifting, even though this particular track centers an abiotic feature of the biosphere. There is still a discursive transformation into an aspect of the environment.

In an even more plain example of shapeshifting, the official trailer for *Animism*, released by Six Shooter Records, features Tagaq falling into the water and turning into a seal. The seal swims to a breathing hole in the ice, where it is killed and eaten by another woman (0:31 – 0:56). This emphasizes how strongly Tagaq demands connection to natural systems within her works. Everything she communicates moves through the medium of relationality to nature, conveyed through swapping identities between species. Tagaq's multimodal rhetoric has expanded even further with the 2020 publication of her



already acclaimed book *Split Tooth*. In one of many examples, she writes “my legs sprout white fur that grows all over me. I can feel every hair form inside me and poke through tough bear-skin,” and also “I am invincible. Bear mother, rabbit daughter, seal eater” (93). The audiobook version of *Split Tooth*, read by Tagaq herself, is punctuated throughout with her trademark throat singing. The end of each chapter features a brief interlude in which Tagaq sings, grunts, sighs, or wails. Though the content of her written text contains shapeshifting, the vocals of the audiobook version add another dimension in the form of representations of nonhuman parts of the landscape. Shapeshifting seems to be the core of Tagaq’s rhetoric in whichever medium she is utilizing in the moment, skillfully navigating genres. Her work is a vivid example of how unbounded and unruly shapeshifting is in practice. Her work elegantly and eerily illuminates that shapeshifting is multimodal—as rhetoric itself is.

### **Terry Tempest Williams: Wedded to Wilderness**

The Feminine teaches us experience is our way back home, the psychic bridge that spans rational and intuitive waters. To embrace the Feminine is to embrace paradox. Paradox preserves mystery, and mystery inspires belief. I believe in the power of Bear. (Williams, *Unspoken Hunger* 53)

Terry Tempest Williams is an author, professor, and politically active conservationist. Although she is Mormon, she frequently infuses her writings with indigenous lore, particularly in the context of relationality to wilderness spaces. This could be conceptualized as appropriation, and is worthy of further discussion—however, this thesis will continue to grow along the lines of understanding shapeshifting (while leaving this window for future paths of inquiry). William’s interweaving of indigenous

epistemologies with her Mormon perspective could contribute to her tendency to employ shapeshifting rhetoric—an evocative example being the woman/bear parable presented in the introduction of this thesis. Within her chapter *Undressing the Bear*, Williams opens with this brief narrative of a soldier returning home from international war in order to reconnect with the land of his birth. He ritualistically hunts and kills a black bear—which he discovers, upon beginning to flay it, is actually a woman. What follows is a chapter in which Williams presents what she names “the Feminine” as mythologically related to bears. By interweaving women and bears, she presents her view on relationality to land. To her, the Feminine represented through the bodies of bears is “a reconnection to the Self, a commitment to the wildness within—our instincts, our capacity to create and destroy; our hunger for connection as well as sovereignty, interdependence and independence, at once” (53). Williams, by shapeshifting women into bears, is arguing that Feminine identity is rooted in land itself: “My connection to the natural world is my connection to self—erotic, mysterious, and whole” (56). Embodiment of bears (shapeshifting) therefore allows Williams to reconnect a human identity to wilderness spaces. It also allows her to gently comment on the violence enacted by men upon the bodies of bears, women, and wilderness itself. This is one of many performances of shapeshifting by Williams. She frequently draws it from her rhetorical toolbox, particularly while writing explicitly about navigating in spaces dominated by men.

William’s themes of womanhood and relationality to wilderness are emphatically echoed throughout her body of work. In her book *When Women Were Birds*, she again explicitly references the connection of women and land: “Earth. Mother. Goddess. **In every culture the voice of the Feminine emerges from the land itself.** We clothe her as

Eve or Isis or Demeter. In the desert, she appears as Changing Woman. She can shift shapes like the wind and cut through stone with her voice like water” (92; emphasis mine). In this passage, Williams directly names shapeshifting as a Feminine ability, one that is related to connection with the land. In her chapter *Cahoots with Coyote*, which is part of her book *An Unspoken Hunger*, Williams builds on this idea to create a parable around the work and life of Georgia O’Keefe, the renowned New Mexican painter. Williams tells a story in which O’Keefe strikes a deal with Coyote, who she discovers dancing around a shining cow skeleton. O’Keefe agrees not to reveal the secrets of the desert, and in return coyote brings her bones to paint. Williams writes that throughout their partnership, O’Keefe never painted Coyote himself because she instead chose to *embody* him. Here again, Williams is presenting shapeshifting as a representation of women’s relationship to the wilderness.

Williams also writes about the pedagogical applications of shapeshifting, specifically within a first-grade biology classroom. During a section in which Williams was teaching her students about whales, she covered the windows over with blue paper and switched off the overhead lights—the classroom became an ocean. She played recordings of whale songs and invited the children to close their eyes, lay down, and listen. While they listened, she talked about the ecology of whales and how they use sound to locate each other within the sea. Eventually, “the children began wildly, joyously swimming around the room, not only imagining what it might be like to be a whale, but becoming one” (*Women Were Birds* 82). Humorously, Williams relays that she was promptly fired due to the headmistress walking in on this scene (and immediately rehired in the same conversation, owing to the students’ love for her class). Shifting from

human to animal and back in order to learn, teach, or achieve a new perspective seems underpin much of Williams' work, which is always centered on the earth.

### **Gloria E. Anzaldúa: Gestures of the Body**

Gloria E. Anzaldúa was a queer Chicana feminist writer who hailed from the Rio Grande Valley. She is known for her work on borderlands and the painful realities of navigating between cultures. She utilizes shapeshifting throughout her works, focusing on snakes as embodied knowledge. In *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, her seminal text, she tells a story in which she was bitten by a rattlesnake. She writes that after she sucked the venom out of her foot, she “dreamed rattler fangs filled my mouth, scales covered my body. In the morning I saw through snake eyes, felt snake blood course through my body” (48). The encounter with the snake transformed her on an embodied level—her vision and vitality were altered. The theme of snakes continues into *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, which was edited and published after her death. Anzaldúa explicitly unravels her relationship with shapeshifting itself, using snakes as a vehicle to discuss her personal approach. She names la Llorona as Serpent Woman, “whose ghostly body carries el nagual (a human who shapeshifts into an animal or one’s guardian spirit) possessing la facultad, the capacity for shape-changing form and identity” (26). Anzaldúa goes on to share that her fascination with naguals (which she also references as wereanimals) began in her childhood. Snakes, for her, represent transformation itself, something that “awakens me to another reality” (27). Echoing her previous book, Anzaldúa again describes herself shapeshifting into a snake.

I feel my body’s intense focus on and awareness of the snake—I’m seeing it, and it’s seeing me. My body sends tendrils of awareness from my solar

plexus to the snake's body, and my consciousness flows out along these threads and into la víbora. My tongue becomes her tongue, testing and tasting the air. When my consciousness flows into an animal, it becomes my vehicle to see, feel, touch, hear, taste, and smell in the underworld or otherworld. (27)

She gathers information—transforms perspectives and gains knowledge—through shapeshifting. Anzaldúa positions this as a method that can be utilized in order to achieve “the ability to control perception” (28), much in the same way that the research methodology *etnografía* positions two different perspectives as a way to gain greater insight on a subject.

Anzaldúa is heavily referenced as a visionary writer and researcher who midwifed the legitimization of Chicana studies in academia. Fewer scholars seem to reference her relationality to nature, although it deeply supports her epistemologies. She describes sitting and meditating with her favorite tree for artistic inspiration (67), as well as the beach supporting her thought process as she depicts her personal struggle with the events of 9/11 (20). This reliance on nature as a muse may be tied to her interest in “Mesoamerican magic supernaturalism,” or “Chamanería,” which Anzaldúa describes as animistic/nature-based (32). She again emphasizes the importance of gaining new perspectives and depicts practitioners of Chamanería as those who walk between worlds in order to gain new information intended for healing (33). She explicitly presents shapeshifting as a tool which is part of this practice: “shapeshifting (the ability to become an animal or a thing) and traveling to other realities” (32).

Anzaldúa's shapeshifting is deeply spiritual and connected to her exploration of what it means to navigate identity in a wounding/wounded borderlands. She writes herself as one who travels between worlds, both material and spiritual, taking on new perspectives and at times shifting shape to broaden her access to new ways of thinking/knowing. She describes the process of learning to access a multitude of realities, and in that doing so "you learn a new language and a new way of viewing the world, and you bring this "magical" knowledge and apply it to the everyday world" (45). Shapeshifting, for Anzaldúa, is epistemology, ontology, inspiration.

### **Ecofeminism**

The kind of knowledge gathering and sharing that Anzaldúa performs by shapeshifting is similar to what Terry Tempest Williams does when she bids her students become whales in order to envision a new way of being/access a new reality. She taught them a new way of viewing and understanding the world through shapeshifting. Tagaq, Williams, and Anzaldúa each shapeshift in different kinds of texts—music, poetry, teaching, writing—and they all change shape as a way to relate to the earth, to knowledge, and to themselves. They enact an embodied ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism is the intersection of feminism and environmentalism. It emerged as a remedy to the "the othering of women and animals" by structures of power that also "contribute to the increasing destruction of the environment" (Adams 1). It resists epistemologies that rely on subjugating hierarchies, and it

nurtures an ontology of connection to nature. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva describe the genesis of ecofeminism, writing that:

Wherever women acted against ecological destruction or / and the threat of atomic annihilation, they immediately became aware of the connection between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature, and that: In defying this patriarchy we are loyal to future generations and to life and this planet itself. We have a deep and particular understanding of this both through our natures and our experience as women. (Mies 14)

In other words, ecofeminism represents a profound alliance between women and the earth against the violence of patriarchal systems. Shapeshifting enacts this alliance, as women rhetors present themselves as nonhuman animals, as part of natural systems. Each rhetor makes a case for recognizing life as sacred.

Tagaq dedicates her writing to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and sings about the science of warming ocean currents. She wails lyrics about the consequences of disconnection from natural systems and performs onstage in front of the scrolling names of murdered indigenous women. Loudly, irreverently, and sometimes disturbingly, she blurs the boundaries between her body and the bodies of animals. Her shapeshifting rhetoric unites her identity as woman with the earth itself.

Williams discusses what it is to have a woman's voice in the arena of environmental policy; what it means to be unheard. She writes of being a woman in a family of dying women, struck down by cancer caused by radiation—by

nuclear testing: “the female body ravaged. What I feared most, happened. Their deaths were a summons: Speak or die” (127). She shapeshifts to affirm, again and again, that she belongs to the earth, and that to violate the earth is to violate women. She aligns her written and spoken voice with animals and wilderness.

Anzaldúa writes of borderlands—how material divides in the land cause social, spiritual, and mental divides. She writes of mythical Goddesses being culturally subjugated through colonization and patriarchy. She shapeshifts to claim ancient ways of relating to the land, to the self, and to knowledge. Just as the other shapeshifting rhetors do, Anzaldúa presents ecofeminism within the text of her own body. They all resist ontologies of hierarchy by blurring the boundaries between themselves and animals, by rhetorically embodying animals and shifting identities.



## IV. LITERATURE REVIEW: NOCTURNAL HEARING

### Introduction

I am thinking about owls because they remind me of how they see what we fear, like death. It's what they do with a startling grace. (Erosion, Williams 27)

In order to move toward an answer (or generate better questions) about how shapeshifting works as a rhetorical tool, this chapter will review relevant literature that is rooted within ecofeminism (the intersection of women and environment) and ecocomposition (the intersection of composition and environment) as well as rhetoric. Scholastic works that investigate relationality to environment are emphasized. I have worked to draw knowledge from multiple disciplines in order to build a more comprehensive perspective of shapeshifting—in order to increase depth perception, to increase the ability to approach something from different angles.

Owls are predatory birds that locate their prey primarily through their sense of hearing. Nocturnal species of owls feature asymmetrical skulls; their ears are situated in very different places on each side of the head. A storied list of scholarship demonstrates that “these attributes are linked to a highly developed sense of directional hearing” (Coles et al. 1989). The asymmetry of the owl's ears allow them to pinpoint the targets they seek with greater accuracy. This gives them a hearing advantage over crepuscular and diurnal species of owl, which have symmetrical ears. Comparative studies have “shown that the latter species...locate sources of sound in the horizontal plane only, while species with asymmetrical ears also localise sound vertically (Volman & Konishi 1990). Echoing the design of *etuaptomuk*, or two-eyed seeing, using two different angles to gather information results in a more accurate understanding of the subject. Various disciplines

have been woven together in this literature review in order to view shapeshifting from multiple angles. This will support an understanding of how, when, and why women shapeshift, as well as investigating *why it matters*, and what makes it rhetorical.

### **Feminist Rhetoric**

A contract has been made and broken between human beings and the land. A new contract was being drawn by women, who understood the fate of the earth as their own  
(One-Breasted Women, Williams 406).

Feminist rhetoric builds connectivity and understanding through a set of tools that are markedly different from classical rhetoric. One of these tools is the application of personal *story*, of personal narrative, in order to make appeals or create bridges of understanding. Dr. Lisa Blankenship, a scholar of rhetorical empathy, bases her work on a foundation of feminist rhetoric. She describes that “personal narratives, a precursor and part of the #MeToo movement, are a defining characteristic of feminist rhetoric and have long been used by women for social change” (63). She expands upon the utilitarian function of personal narrative by writing that “stories invite us to imagine what an Other has gone through in ways other rhetorical appeals cannot” (63). Feminist narrative, in this rhetorical context, serves to create connection between rhetor and audience, within the audience, and perhaps even from audience to rhetor.

Olivia Hinojosa also cites the power of personal narrative in her own research on feminist rhetoric, describing how bereaved mothers who have lost children to violent/homicidal racism and sexism communicate pain through story in order to make connections with their audience. Hinojosa describes how Sybrina Fulton’s path from

normal motherhood to activist was marked by her expressed narrative, how “her detailed narrative brings her audience into the most devastating moments of her life and allows them to understand her perspective as they walk through the motions of the months and years following Trayvon’s death” (40). Narrative, as Hinojosa and Blankenship describe, is a fundamental tool of feminist rhetoric. This contrasts against classical approaches to rhetoric. Feminist rhetoric does not navigate in the rigid confines the “2,500-year-old discipline of persuasive public discourse” (Connors 67), as mentioned in Chapter II, because that discipline was designed to exclude women. Blankenship clarifies *why* classical rhetoric doesn’t function well in the feminist area: “traditional Euro-American rhetorical theory has most often been about how to gain power over or persuade an audience. The goal of rhetoric within patriarchal systems and established in Aristotle is to defeat an opponent through persuading him (certainly a *him*) that your position, and by extension you, are superior” (22). Feminist rhetoric resists this approach by connecting to the audience through narrative. Relationship is prioritized over hierarchy. Blankenship presents its function as one that relies on deep listening, deep understanding, and “willingness to yield in a stance of self-risk and vulnerability” (22). It is an approach that negotiates difference in lieu of moving to win a conflict or gain power (Blankenship 22). In other words, feminist rhetoric serves to unite people, not divide into winner/loser or correct/incorrect. Narrative is one of the ways that it accomplishes this.

Terry Tempest Williams, shapeshifter, frequently leverages personal narrative—indeed, she frankly discusses the devastation of losing seven women in her family, including her mother, to cancer caused by the atomic bomb testing in the 1950s and 60s. She uses her personal story to explicate how women’s bodies/voices are

destroyed/silenced by the same forces that destroy the land. She writes in detail how one by one, she tended to the women of her family as they died in protracted suffering. This intimate narrative is one she uses to present one of her core beliefs, one which she describes as transgressive to her Mormon identity: “the price of obedience has become too high” and also “tolerating blind obedience in the name of patriotism or religion ultimately takes our lives” (One-Breasted Women 405). She presents the rampant death in her family and in the state of Utah as a consequence of forgetting humankind’s genealogy with the land (406). Her narrative, in this way, grows from feminist rhetoric into ecofeminist rhetoric.

### **Ecofeminism**

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### **Cultural-Symbolics and Socio-Economics**

Rosemary Radford Ruether provides detailed information over different *levels* of ecofeminism. She outlines that the first level deals mainly with a symbolic understanding of the “connection between the domination of women

and the domination of nature” (11). This cultural-symbolic understanding engages with how feminine identity is constructed (in relation to body/earth) and how masculine identity is constructed (in relation to mind/power). However, the second level deals with the “socio-economic underpinnings of this ideology of women’s similarity to nonhuman nature” (11). Ruether’s commentary is extremely relevant to this thesis, because shapeshifting works at a rhetorical level—a cultural-symbolic level. It is crucial to emphasize that an ecofeminist understanding of patriarchal modes of power reveals abject disparities in material financial conditions, exposure to horrific gender-based violence, and environmental devastation that directly impacts human life. Narrative-driven feminist rhetoric, as discussed by Blankenship, can move at each of these levels. However, shapeshifting rhetoric falls primarily within the first level. It functions on a cultural-symbolic understanding in order to build connectivity. Ruether takes pains to clearly chart how the levels of ecofeminism are *interconnected*—the material conditions of the socio-economic level perpetuates/responds to the cultural-symbolic level, just as the latter also perpetuates/responds to the former (11).

### **Ecocomposition**

Environment is as much a construct of discourse as discourse is a product of environment (Dobrin 14).

Dobrin and Weisser credit ecofeminism as a source of inspiration and guidance for their work on ecocomposition. The connection between fields is clear—one is concerned with the relationality of discourse and the environment, and one is concerned

with the relationality of women and the earth (allied against the same source of violence). Dobrin and Weisser's *Natural Discourse: Toward Ecomposition* is a seminal piece that reveals the powerful bridges between human discourse and perceptions of nature. Simply stated, ecomposition is "the study of the relationships between environments.....and discourse" (6). As an example, they offer a sample of eight Hawaiian words used to describe different kinds of rainbows, compared to eight Inuit words used to describe different kinds of snow (13). The point being made by these vocabulary lists is simply that *environment shapes language*. Environment shapes discourse. According to Dobrin and Weisser, the implication of this relationship is that working to preserve wilderness (and the creatures that inhabit them) is also work to preserve the "fullness, depth, and precision of our discourse" (13). Language and wilderness, from this perspective, depend on each other for their mutual flourishing. Perhaps this begins to explain why Terry Tempest Williams presents language as living pieces of the landscape, writing that sentences and punctuation are carried in the wings of birds. William's conservationist rhetoric, along with Tanya Tagaq's songs of resistance against the oil industry, consistently draw language from the environment to make meaning.

Laura R. Micchiche's insightful essay, *Writing Material*, utilizes the same basic concepts as Dobrin and Weisser. However, because Micchiche's scholarship falls under the discipline of rhetoric, she uses different vocabulary. Her primary goal within the essay is to reposition discussions on materiality (how writing tools influence writing process) to include broader networks of influence than presented by previous scholars. She offers an ecological framework for composition that honors forces which are traditionally excluded from conceptualizations and discussions of writing. In other words,

just as Dobrin and Weisser present, environment influences discourse. The forces that Micchiche describes can present themselves in the form of beloved pets or beloved friends, or as the physical environment in which the writing takes place. Micchiche offers several examples of authors recognizing the contributions of those with whom they worked—such as cats and dogs—as evidence that composition does not transpire as an isolated intellectual activity. She writes that in these cases, “animals are not mere props or background to the work of writing but are intimately intertwined in it” (500). Micchiche expands this idea by moving the web of influence outward to include abiotic factors: “writers frequently reveal locale, environment, and place, rooting writing in particular scenes and temporal contexts” (501). The foundation that Micchiche shares with Dobrin and Weisser is that composition/discourse is informed by the environment that it emerges from. Micchiche focuses more closely on how this transpires in practice than Dobrin and Weisser, as well as pays more attention to composition in particular as opposed to generalized discourse.

Micchiche’s new materiality and Dobrin and Weisser’s ecocomposition frame shapeshifting in a network in which rhetoric and environment nourish each other. This network is one in which shapeshifting rhetoric becomes an enacted practice of discursively framing relationality to the earth. The earth and its wilderness inform the shapes that the rhetors shift into—Williams into whales, boars, and birds, Tagaq into foxes and bears and ice, and Anzaldúa into serpents and trees. Conversely, their shapeshifting informs perception of the environment; relationality to the earth is framed through rhetoric.



## Rhetorical Empathy

Rhetorical empathy functions as a conscious choice to connect with an Other—an inventional topos and a rhetorical strategy or *pisteis*—that can result in an emotional response (Blankenship 6).

Remember the owl. Those that are nocturnal flaunt asymmetrical ears, each angled differently to allow better triangulation (and therefore understanding) of the target. The two angles grant them a more comprehensive picture of the environment in which they navigate. What does it mean that shapeshifters avail themselves of different perspectives by embodying different forms? What understanding is gained by becoming more-than-human, both by the shifter and by the audience? Turning to scholarship that handles rhetorical empathy suggests an answer. Two perspectives from two bodies create more space (to feel) using empathy as a medium of epistemology. When ecofeminists discursively transform their bodies into animals, they offer a platform for empathy that would not otherwise exist. The audience/witness to the shapeshifting is more able to ‘feel into’ the experience of an Other when it is presented from within a human body—one which the audience can recognize themselves within.

Empathy is a concept described in many different ways and across many different fields. Dr. Amy Coplan offers a utilitarian definition by showing that empathy occurs when three processes happen in concert: affective matching, perspective taking, and self-other differentiation (5). The first process is the state of observer and subject sharing emotional/affective experience. The second, perspective taking, is to imagine (or ‘feel into’) the experience of the empathetic subject. This occurs through imagination-facilitated simulation of being the empathetic subject (6). The final process, self-other

differentiation, indicates the presence of internal boundaries. Simply put, the observer does not lose grip on their own discrete selfhood during the other two processes.

Dr. Donna J. Haraway, a scholar of feminist theory, has dissected how philosophy traditionally relates to animals—a relationality that spurns empathy, particularly empathy as Coplan defines it. Haraway uses Jacques Derrida, the renowned philosopher, as an example of traditional academic relationality to animals. She focuses on Derrida's work regarding nonhuman animals, presenting him as a scholar that “came right to the edge of respect, of the move to *respecere*, but he was sidetracked by his textual canon of Western philosophy and literature” (20). Western/Eurocentric perspectives interfere with a clear understanding of animals and how they operate within human society and language. It interferes by relying on ontology based in hierarchy—the same kind of hierarchy Plato disseminated in his various discussions on souls. There is no room for empathy in the construction of hierarchical ontology. Haraway unravels Derrida's work (after highlighting its numerous strengths) by writing: “with his cat, Derrida failed a simple obligation of companion species; he did not become curious about what the cat might actually be doing, feeling, thinking, or perhaps making available to him in looking back at him that morning” (20). In other words, Derrida did not practice empathy when he observed his cat, either intellectually or emotionally. There was no perspective-taking, one of the requirements of empathy. Shapeshifting rhetoric, as an ecofeminist tool, facilitates empathy—working in direct contrast to classical rhetoricians which rely on the assertion of power and correctness over the audience.

An example: it may be difficult to empathize with a snake. How can you practice affective matching with a species that does not have mammalian social systems of

communication? How can you practice perspective taking with a creature that has such a radically different body plan from your own? Gloria E Anzaldúa writes of what it *feels like*, in terms of bodily and emotional sensation, to become a snake. She describes what it feels like for a human body to sprout fangs, become clothed in scales, and be powered by serpent blood. She closes her transformation by writing: “Forty years it’s taken me to enter into the Serpent, to acknowledge that I have a body, that I am a body and to assimilate the animal body, the animal soul” (48). She has drawn the snake into a realm that can be empathized with by presenting it from within the text of her own body and identity. Once a human body has shapeshifted into the body of a different animal, that animal can be ‘felt into’ and ‘experienced with:’ it can become the subject of empathy. In this way, shapeshifting functions as empathetically projecting into the body of a nonhuman animal—a projection of perspective; taking on another angle of epistemology.

Blankenship writes that rhetorical empathy has enormous promise—she asserts that it facilitates such a connection between the rhetoric and the audience, between the *I* of discourse and the Other, “both experience identification and are changed in some fashion” (19). Coplan’s components of empathy present a path to understanding *how* rhetorical empathy persuades those involved—through affective matching, perspective taking, and self-other differentiation—and Tagaq’s unruly stage performances serve as an apt example of how rhetorical empathy presents in praxis. In 2014, Tanya Tagaq won the Polaris prize with her unsettling album *Animism*—an album about violation, as mentioned in chapter I. Her performance at the Polaris gala ran over 10 minutes; it featured layers of rhetoric meticulously crafted and embodied by Tagaq to engage the audience’s full attention. Its gripping quality comes from her skill in evoking empathetic

responses from the audience. Through empathy, she imparts emotional and bodily awareness to what for many are abstract, removed concepts—such as the practice of fracking or the collapse of ancient ice shelves. Tagaq’s wild rhetoric utilizes empathy as a tool to give audiences an embodied road of understanding to issues they don’t access in their daily lives.

Tagaq’s music, as a general rule, is not easy to listen to. The noises she emits while singing are described in reviews and comments as demonic, satanic, dark...in other words, profoundly unsettling and capable of provoking strong emotional reaction. She moves her audience away from a sphere of comfort through vocalizations that are generally socially unacceptable in public settings. Her 2014 Polaris stage performance works in the same way. She opened with her customary deep, growling grunts interspersed with high, clear notes that more closely resemble her childlike speaking voice. There is no accompaniment by instruments or the choir waiting behind her. She moves freely, rocking back and forth in time with her singing. Behind her, a black screen begins to scroll a list of names—enough names to keep rolling through her entire 10-minute performance. They are the names of missing and murdered indigenous women. Tagaq is making a rhetorical statement, presenting issues as worthy of attention. She demands empathy in the service of communicating this rhetorical statement.

Tagaq, centered in a dim light on a dark stage in a dark auditorium, conjures the audience’s empathy. While she opens her performance by building rhythm and melody through grunts, growls and sighs, she stares out at the audience. She uses whichever hand is not holding the microphone to involve the audience, extending outwards towards them when she sings on exhalations and then beckoning back towards herself when she sings on

inhales. Tagaq involves the audience in the noises she makes through her bodily gestures and through intense eye contact—and while she does this, she begins to moan as if in agony. The necessary space for affective matching is created. Emotion is being constructed and projected through her music, turning Tagaq into a subject of empathy and the audience into the observer. On emotional decrescendos within her singing, she takes long steps back away from the audience, creating space for the audience to breathe/take a small respite from the intensity of her music. When she builds towards emotional crescendos, she stalks towards the audience. During the climax of the performance, she even lunges past the speakers at the edge of the stage, glaring outward and curling her fingers in a disconcerting come-hither gesture. Her face is even more active than her body, shifting through an emotional range from ecstasy to grief to rage. She demands affective matching, while the names scrolling behind and indigenous artwork create a visual landscape that facilitates the audience's imaginary simulation of the indigenous perspective in Canada. Tagaq's appearance deepens the centrality of indigenous experience within her performance and music. The seal fur on her arms are signposts of her activism around indigenous hunting rights, and her red dress is a symbol of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

This is powerful rhetoric because her voice and body, unified through her musical performance, create a subject that the audience can empathize with in a real, immediate sense. Her stuttering wails of grief force the audience to engage with the emotional reality of violence, which could not occur by simply looking at a list of names. Tagaq's disturbing and wild performance is an empathetic bridge between the audience and what would otherwise be flat text. She forces a confrontation, through her own body and voice,

between the audience and issues they don't normally contend with. Tagaq enforces this rhetorical purpose during her statement upon winning the Polaris prize: "There's so much hurt in the world and within indigenous cultures with colonialism. Canada is in desperate need for repair and I think a lot of people are tired of living this way and just to have people understand where we're coming from makes me hope that we can move forward and expose the true history of Canada" (Brophy). The audience cannot look away from Tagaq—through empathy they are ensnared and must engage, intellectually or emotionally, with an Other.

Terry Tempest Williams and Gloria Anzaldúa also rely on rhetorical empathy in order to communicate with their audience (although in less dramatic fashions). By presenting human bodies transforming into animal bodies, modes of relationally prompted by empathy must adapt—perspective taking, as defined by Coplan, requires an imagination-fueled simulation of the experience of the other. The shapeshifters, by changing themselves, change the shape of audience perspective—and thereby bring the audience with them into new modes of thinking, new modes of epistemology, new modes of relating to Other...and to life.

Anzaldúa names the move into this new space as "nepantla" (Light in the Dark 28). She describes this move as soul work, one that calls for "perceiving something from two different angles" which leads to "a split in awareness that can lead to the ability to control perception" (Luz 28). The nocturnal owl's deep listening and the clarity of vision afforded by binocular vision are echoed in her emphasis of perceiving from multiple angles. Anzaldúa also echoes a word Coplan leverages within her definitions of empathy: imagination. She writes that the soul dimensions of imagination "bridges body and nature

to spirit and mind,” which in turn generates connective spaces within nepantla. In closing her writing on nepantla as a place of connection and transformation, Anzaldúa also reminds her audience that it can only be reached through a shift in perspective. Using Coplan and Blankenship’s scholarship on empathy as a framework, shapeshifting becomes a powerful tool that can facilitate this transformation of perspective. Shapeshifting rhetorically weaves empathy/empathetically weaves rhetoric.

Conversely, it is critically important to attend to how empathy has been rhetorically stripped from communities and people through colonial/postcolonial moves. Rhetorically stripping humanity from people through animalization (to portray someone as closely aligned with nonhuman animals over human animal) is a system of enforcing hierarchies—seemingly the very opposite of what shapeshifting works to do.

### **Postcolonial Rhetoric**

Elite males, in different ways in different cultures, create hierarchies over subjugated humans and non-humans, men over women, whites over Blacks, ruling class over slaves, serfs and workers (Ruether 12).

Shapeshifting, as I have uncovered it in (eco)feminist rhetoric, creatively transgresses the boundary between human and nonhuman animal in order to build relationality with the earth. However, rhetorical transgression of species boundaries has been utilized for deeply violent/racist purposes across a variety of historical and current colonial and postcolonial contexts. Dominating/colonizing communities utilize language to portray people outside of their own community as nonhuman animals, and thereby justify action that would otherwise be unacceptable to inflict on human beings. Plainly

stated, ‘animalizing’ has historically functioned (and continues to function) as a colonial othering tactic that justifies systematic violence. Contemporary scholars have investigated the phenomenon in both critical race studies and animal studies. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, one such scholar, meticulously discusses “discourses that have historically bestialized blackness,” (18) emphasizing Black women’s bodies as the crux of animalization. Carol J. Adams, a scholar of ecofeminism, echoes this: “Black feminists are keenly aware of the ways in which species is racialized and race is animalized, most glaringly in the context of black women’s sexuality” (Adams 1). There are also studies that offer quantitative data that link animalization to attitudes of dehumanization, and consequently an increase in death penalties to Black Americans (Goff et al).

Phillip Atiba Goff, Jennifer L. Eberhardt, Melissa J. Williams, and Matthew Christian Jackson’s research over contemporary results of entrenched animalization (dehumanization) is entitled *Not Yet Human: Implicit Knowledge, Historical Dehumanization, and Contemporary Consequences*. They work within the field of social psychology to track how contemporary perceptions of police violence against people who are Black are influenced by historical animalization of Black people. The results of their study quantified that unconscious, associations between Black people and apes persist as a result of past, explicit animalization rhetoric. They assert that this is important because “it is commonly thought that old-fashioned prejudice has given way to a modern bias that is implicit, subtle, and often unintended” (292). This belief relegates dehumanization/subjugation against people who are Black to a mere historical phenomenon—however, their study demonstrates an ongoing association as a consequence of past animalizing rhetoric. And this has concrete consequences: the



“association influences study participants’ basic cognitive processes and significantly alters their judgments in criminal justice contexts” (293). More succinctly, study participants were inclined to endorse violence against Black suspects at a significantly higher rate than against white suspects as a result of an implicit association between apes and Black people. Goff et al provide case studies that further demonstrate the results of their study; for example, police in California referenced cases as N.H.I (No Humans Involved) when Black youth were involved as recently as the 1990s (Wynter, 1992). The conclusion of their study presents that animalization does (in a quantifiable manner) generate violence—it leads to moral exclusion. In other words, the group that imposes animalization rhetoric on another group moves that group “outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply” (Opatow, 1990, p. 1). To be blunt, racist rhetoric utilizes animalization to enact violence. Animalization as a dividing strategy of violence can also be traced back to the genesis of rhetoric as a field.

In John Heath’s *The Talking Greeks: Speech, Animals, and the Other in Homer, Aeschylus, and Plato*, Heath illuminates how “Plato consistently links children with women, slaves, and animals” due in part to a belief that none of these groups have access to rationality and/or language. This is a hierarchical ontology, just as Blankenship described in the methodology of classic rhetoricians. Rhetorical empathy as a framework helps illuminate the processes that are involved in rhetorically animalizing peoples.

Externally-imposed animalization can be framed as a darkly strategic use of inverted empathy—a strategy in which aligning other groups with animals is designed to decrease empathetic connection between peoples and communities. This creates gateways

for abject violence; if there is no affective matching or perspective taking, there is no empathy, no ‘feeling into’ the experience of another, and no alliance. This constructed and enforced dearth of rhetorical empathy encourages violence. Considering that conflation of people and animals have/are utilized to permit violence, how is shapeshifting different? What does it mean when ecofeminist rhetors choose to rhetorically dissolve boundaries between themselves and animals?

Animalization is externally imposed. It is applied to a human community by another human community that stands to gain from the subjugation and dehumanization of the first group. The genesis of shapeshifting is very different—it is internally composed, not externally imposed. The rhetor shifts themselves (in order to shift audience perspective) in response to exigence that demands deeper alliance, connectivity, or understanding. For example, Terry Tempest Williams, whose exigence is the loss and destruction of wilderness as well as the loss and destruction of women, writes that: “Earth. Mother. Goddess. In every culture the voice of the Feminine emerges from the land itself” (Women Were Birds 92). She constructs women and land as intertwined and presents the voice of women as a force that emanates from the planet. However, this stands in contrast to how postcolonial scholars view the association of women and the earth. Dr. Ania Loomba, a postcolonial scholar, examines how colonial subjects become represented by a woman’s body by the colonizer: “the woman/land analogy...signify both the joys of the female body as well as its status as a legitimate object for male possession” (84). Loomba’s text, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, unravels how rhetorically constructing land as a woman’s body permits violence against it; it becomes an object through its association with women, as well as the peoples that live on it. Similar to the

function of animalization rhetoric, this association sanctions violence which benefits the group dehumanizing another group. In this case, the colonizer benefits from constructing women/wilderness as unified—they both, in this construction, can be owned, utilized, destroyed, obliterated. Tanya Tagaq, in her shapeshifting rhetoric, explicitly *confronts* this conflation when she describes her album *Animism* as addressing rape. She expresses rape to mean violence enacted against land *and* women. She builds an alliance with the land, absorbs its pain as her own. Shapeshifting pushes back against externally imposed animalization and woman/land conflations by centering unity as opposed to division. Rhetorical shapeshifting moves to generate connection and shift perspective, not divide in order to further violence or narrow/close perspective (as animalization does).

2Shapeshifting is different from animalization in both execution and in purpose. In execution it is not externally imposed—rather, it is internally composed. In purpose, shapeshifting shoulders open circles of empathy to be *more* inclusive, not less. In this way it works to close pathways of violence and open pathways of discourse and community.

## V. DISCUSSION

A woman is cradling between her fingertips and jaw  
The lower mandible of a coyote, every yellowed molar rooted strongly still.  
When she opens her mouth and wild rivers pour out,  
                    They pass over two different sets of canine teeth  
                    Before they bless the desert.

### Introduction

This thesis has investigated different paths of scholastic inquiry in order to move toward a deeper understanding of how, when and why women shapeshift. Ecofeminist frameworks, as well as investigations of rhetorical empathy and postcolonial rhetoric, grant insight into the implications of a shapeshifting practice. Shapeshifting works through empathy—rhetors shapeshift to conjure empathy, to transform perspective and create connectivity. They weave empathetic experiences by transforming the text of their bodies and thereby making alien Others accessible to the human experience. It allows the observer/audience to feel with/experience that which was previously alien, and as a consequence, opens possibilities for allyship, stewardship, and deeper engagement with natural systems.

The exigence of shapeshifting rhetors is the wounding of the land and of women. Terry Tempest Williams ardently argues for political action that preserves wilderness, relating the necessity of doing so to the people that live upon it (Williams, *Unspoken Hunger* 125). Gloria Anzaldúa defends the sacredness of language, of identity, of freedom to exist authentically while crediting the source of her inspiration to the earth and the animals upon it (*Light in the Dark* 28). Tanya Tagaq ferociously sings about the consequences of neglecting the wellbeing of the earth. In her song *Retribution*, released in 2016, she gently murmurs over a background over groaning:

“Our mother grows angry

Retribution will be swift

We squander her soil and suck out her sweet black blood to burn it.”

In this lyrical construction, earth is a woman who has been profoundly wronged—an ecofeminist rhetorical move. Tagaq also uses her platforms to speak about violence enacted against indigenous peoples, both past and ongoing. As shapeshifting rhetors, they all move in defense of unified life through the bodies of women and earth.

This thesis also moved to investigate the question: why does shapeshifting matter? Against the backdrop of colonial patterns of animalization, shapeshifting centers empathy and subversively flips tactics in order to build relationship. Rhetorical shapeshifting tactics are comparable to animalization—each of the discursively collapses different species into a single unit. However, shapeshifting uses these tactics in different ways (internally composed in lieu of externally imposed) and for different ends (build empathy in lieu of obliterate it). Additionally, the rhetoric of shapeshifting is unruly and multimodal. It is enacted across a wide range of persuasive performances, from the written word to songs, videos, and stage performances. It clearly stems from an ecofeminist exigence, and functions to build empathy across audience. The rhetoric of shapeshifting is wild.

## **Flight**

When I moved to Panama in 2015, barely exiting my teenage years, my dreams turned technicolor. Overnight I would give birth to a child, raise it, love it, and awake in a world in which that child never existed. I dreamed that I tore open loaves of bread and inside they were flesh. I dreamed that I asked god for an

apocalypse and she sent me an ocean instead. I dreamed that I was standing on tall buildings in Panama City, watching swaths of concrete scab over the earth, and then I flew. Muscles deep in my ribcage supported a wingspan in black and white. I was crowned in a halo of pale feathers, and my feet supported talons as large as that of grizzly bear. I was a harpy eagle, the national bird of Panama, and one of the largest living raptors on planet earth. It was a good dream. My wings strained to lift my body until I could find a warm updraft. I coasted between skyscrapers, heading east towards the wild Darien gap. My world had another axis—my mind had to navigate vertically as well as horizontally. My vision painted the world in odd colors and hyper-definition. When I awoke, I tried immediately to fall back asleep, to return to the other shape. But the portal into had closed. I meticulously recorded the sensations I had experienced, so I might never forget.

### **Enacting Biophilia**

Biophilia literally translates into ‘love of life.’ In the field of ecology, it is used to indicate the human tendency to seek connection with other species and nature. Rhetorical shapeshifting seems to represent an iteration of biophilia within the humanities; it discursively draws animals/nature intimately closer to human experience through embodiment. Shapeshifters weave empathy on the loom of biophilia. This underscores the potential that shapeshifting has for pedagogical applications. Within different learning contexts, it could be utilized to renew relationality to wilderness, or to root epistemological investigation into nature. Terry Tempest Williams’ lesson on whales is a brilliant example of this. Her students, barely prompted, took an empathetic suggestion (listen deeply/feel into) and pivoted immediately into shapeshifting. This indicates a rich

path of exploration for shapeshifting within pedagogical applications. Certainly, it is applicable to lesson planning for environmental education or primary school students, as Williams used it. However, it is also worth exploring how shapeshifting can be leveraged within composition assignments as a means of generating empathetic practice. Perhaps composition students could be issued assignments in which they are audience to an iteration of shapeshifting or must enact it rhetorically themselves. A reflective assignment afterwards could be used to ascertain the affect on empathy that producing shapeshifting-oriented work may have.

### **Future Paths of Inquiry**

Directions that future study might take in regards to shapeshifting may include quantitative analysis over the frequency of shapeshifting in different modes of rhetoric. This thesis provides an introductory survey to shapeshifting as a complex and dynamic ecofeminist strategy—however, quantitative data would provide even more insight by giving potential statistical significance to platforms in which it is enacted. Additionally, it may be worthwhile to investigate physiological responses of the audience to shapeshifting.

There's a precedent for studying how the human brain reacts to immersion in a natural environment—specifically, researchers have quantified brain waves and blood pressure before/during/after walks in a highly urbanized environment in comparison to a natural environment unaltered by human development (Hassan et al). The researchers summarize: “Our study results indicated that physical activities in a bamboo forest can have positive effects on brain activity, which supports the belief that forest bathing can be effective for relaxation” (Hassan et al. 6). Brain activity is altered by exposure to

unaltered natural environments. It might be worth applying similar methodology to investigation over the potential physiological affect of reading/witnessing/enacting discourse on the brain and body. Do performances of rhetorical shapeshifting, which pull heavily on the reader/audience's embodied response through empathy, cause an alteration of brain waves and blood pressure (such as being exposed to a forest does?). What kinds of shapeshifting would evoke more marked physiological responses, if any at all? Would the context of the audience at an individual level change reactions to shapeshifting at a statistically significant level?

Diverging from physiology, there are also many potential paths of inquiry in the humanities. From a postcolonial perspective, investigating storytelling traditions in different cultural context may also be a fruitful path of inquiry for shapeshifting.

Shapeshifting appears to be frequently woven through indigenous narratives and oral histories, often (though not always) in the form of characters who function as tricksters.

Jeanna Smith points out in a chapter entitled *The Trickster Aesthetic: A Cross-Cultural Feminist Theory* that “Tricksters—the ubiquitous shapeshifters who dwell on borders, at crossroads, and between worlds—are the world's oldest, and newest, creations. Long familiar in folklore as Coyote, Anansi, Hermes, Iktomi, Maui, Loki, Monkey, Nanabozho, and Br'er Rabbit (to name a few), tricksters abound in contemporary American literature, especially in works by women of color” (1). In a narrower and more recent work, Jessica Marie Safran Hoover, a Navajo scholar, hones in on coyote as trickster. She asserts that in a decolonizing praxis, the “role of the female author is through the form of Coyotesse” (124) who through cunning and deception brought language to humanity in the form of fire. Terry Tempest Williams, a frequent



shapeshifter, also highlights coyote as a trickster that bears gifts. Recall that she offers a story of Georgia O'Keefe, acclaimed painter, striking a bargain with coyote. Williams is not indigenous, but she frequently cites indigenous knowledge and tradition within her work. This may well have informed her choice to portray coyote. Future research would do well to attend to an understanding of how and when indigenous knowledge is deployed in shapeshifting—and what this means in an academic context which traditionally rejects non-white modes of epistemology.

## VI. CONCLUSION: EARTH MY BODY

Species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect. That is the play of companion species learning to pay attention (Haraway, 19).

Williams closes one of her essays on wilderness with these evocative words: “anticipate resurrection” (Unspoken Hunger 144). In this manner she slyly shares the power that shapeshifting has to renew life, to renew language, to renew women. Shapeshifting has implications of renewal—of resurrection. Shapeshifting rhetoric honors natural epistemology. Nature is the first teacher. This orientation toward Nature and her animals provides a remedy to powerful ongoing losses of grounded meaning-making within hyper-civilized patriarchy. Place-based education (PBE) in the environmental education field works to clearly define and counter this loss by moving learning spaces *away* from the classroom and into fields, forests, rivers...onto the land. Shapeshifting rhetoric works in a similar way—it is, however, much more subversive and transgressive. It plays in shadowy spaces (*nepantla*) that patriarchal norms of epistemology have worked to eliminate, through overt rape/murder and animalizing discourse. Actualized ecofeminist rhetoricians (shapeshifters) identify this hyper-driven push for civilization as deep rejection of nature, and through this rejection, an obliteration of women. This is why alliances between women and animals have such powerful implications. Shapeshifting is resistance. Shapeshifting is resurrection.

Shapeshifting also has reverberating implications for the academy. It counters the stubborn sterility of higher education. Sterility in traditional academia can be conceptualized in two ways, the first being the more obvious. To be sterile is to lack

fecundity, to be unable to reproduce. Traditional patriarchal academia has no virility, it cannot renew itself through conception of new ideas or epistemologies. It functions in order to reinforce itself as it already exists, repeating itself again and again in service to perpetuating binaries of power. There is no space for true innovation or new voices. Sterile. Sterility also signifies a surface that is completely free of microorganisms. Life has been removed from these surfaces, there are no seething colonies or interactions and relationships informing and influencing each other. There is no network of information or ideas, no proliferation of life in multitudes of being. Sterile.

Shapeshifter rhetoric and composition is the medicine to this sterilization of epistemology. It had the potential to reintroduce vitality to the landscape of knowledge with growth and communities of interrelated ideas. It performs this healing through establishing roots in relationality, in connection, through rhetorical empathy. The healing occurs when women rhetoricians/compositionists illuminate animals within discourse and proclaim: *I am this animal, I am this language*. This is a discourse of union, of identification, a profound sense of connection. It is a rhetoric of shapeshifting.

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