

Becoming-Shapeshifter

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Becoming-Shapeshifter

I am becoming-shapeshifter. To become is a bodily process, a creative process. How do you create from a body that is the boundary of others?

Transness is the creative agency. I mean the creation of possibilities from embodiment. I mean the piecing together from memory, out of social dismemberment, the body before its categories. I mean the sovereignty of loving your being. I mean the freedom to form anew.

Shapeshifting is choosing how you embody, unconditionally—with the rootedness of pines; with the gentleness of a tiger's padded prowl; as the breathing depths of the whale's song; as the flow of the river that runs its course; in the dance of dappled sunlight; in the awakening by moonlight on skin; into the boldness of planets; into the softness of stars. Language shapes the somatic. Metaphors map the consciousness.

Embodiment is a story of shifts. Shapeshifting is the creative process embodied.

Introduction:

What Is the Shapeshifter?

What Is the Shapeshifter?

The skin pulled taut over shifting bones, the face fractures, the skull stretches into snout. The limbs elongate, the stumbling steps turn into a gaitful lope. The wolf emerges from the man as though he were giving birth to his true nature. The werewolf encounters its other in the vampire. Mist is a monstrosity coalescing into fanged form. Cloaked shadow dissolves into spectral bats. The entombed human reawakens. A new humanity is unearthed. The human that becomes the other is given the body of the shapeshifter.

As a representational entity, the shapeshifter provides the possibility for us to describe the strange boundaries that we use to delimit what is counted within the category of the human. Within Western consciousness, both the abstraction and materiality of the human has been inseparable from the binaries that succeeded Enlightenment thinking: the man/animal, the mind/body, the man/woman, the masculine/feminine, the consciousness/flesh, the scientific/sensual, the inanimate/sentient, the objective/subjective, the real/supernatural, the light/dark, the civilized/savage, the canon/marginalized, the colonizer/colonized, the self/other. These categories otherize the human. In all the aforementioned binaries, the former was granted more dominance over the latter, as informed by colonialism, racism, cisheteropatriarchy, and ways of othering that have shaped modern knowledge¹. These categorical binaries limit our vocabulary in describing our own humanity, and the shapeshifter, as a maker and marker of boundaries, is summoned to give us the words to describe the transitions between dualisms.

As forms of imperial, empirical knowledge sought to stabilize a definition for humanity, a static line was drawn between what is considered human nature and what is not. In contrast to the fixed nature of humanity, the shapeshifter is the ever-changing other. When we attempt to define

¹ Clifford Siskin, *System: The Shaping of Modern Knowledge* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016) discusses how systems of knowledge have been shaped and reshaped since the Enlightenment.

the shapeshifter, we are asking a question of nature itself, of the naturalization of difference. How is the nature of one entity different from the nature of another? How is a man different from a wolf? What is a man and what is a wolf? What is a werewolf? Etymologically, the modern word for werewolf is evolved from Proto-Germanic words that translate to both “man-wolf” and “wolf-clothed”², and the French loup-garou literally translates to “wolf-werewolf”³. According to these definitions, the werewolf is both a man that is a wolf, a wolf that is clothed as a man, and a wolf that is doubled as itself. In being defined, the shapeshifting werewolf breaks down the illusory boundaries between what is seen or skinned as a man and what is seen or skinned as a wolf (as though to *were* is only a matter of skin-wearing). The werewolf suggests that the nature of the man and the wolf are essentially similar, that one easily embodies the other, that the other can easily shapeshift into self.

What does it mean to shapeshift? As shown with the werewolf—that which wears its own skins—the shapeshifter troubles the fundamental categories that reified Western humanism, upon which the rigid binaries⁴ of such epistemologies as philosophy, language, and science were based⁵. The shapeshifter is a question of epistemological knowledge: how do we know the shapeshifter? In order to know the shapeshifter, one first has to have an idea of what is a shape, what is a different shape, and what constitutes the change from one to the other. The shapeshifter is thus also a question of ontology. In order to provide answers for these questions, it is useful to draw from fields that explore the relationship between the human and non-human, such as monster studies and cyborg feminism. Particularly, scholars of these fields have advocated for a

² Vladimir Orel, *A Handbook of Germanic Etymology* (Brill, 2003).

³ “Loup-garou.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/loup-garou>.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, translated and edited by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 41.

⁵ Rebecca Shamash, “From good vs. evil to rational vs. emotional: A discussion of binaries of knowledge and thought,” *Postcolonial Directions in Education*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2017, pp. 120–144, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/153557167.pdf>.

deconstruction of what it means to be human, of Western-centric ideas of humanity, of categories of difference, and of humanity's capacity for change. The critical study of shapeshifters, drawing from and yet is distinct from other studies of post or problematized humanities, is a discourse that attempts to shift our understandings of human-relational non-human subjects—in other words, to shift our understanding of self/other ⁶. To form alliances with fields that understand the human-other(ed) allows us to realize the one-of-a-kind potential of the shapeshifter.

Shapeshifter: The Monster

The werewolf. The vampire. The skin-sutured monster. Shapeshifting, as an ability possessed by a monster, shadows the study of monstrosity. Particularly, the study of the Gothic monster, for its appearance as a symptom of the emerging unsettledness of modern humanity and what Foucault identifies as modern forms of discipline, is specifically useful for this study of shapeshifters in that the Gothic monster embodies the fears of what is human-like but inhuman in relation to the emergence of the modern body that really lends itself to the relationalities that I suggest the shapeshifter embodies. Jack Halberstam, in *Skin Shows*, writes “Gothic monsters, furthermore, differ from the monsters that come before the nineteenth century in that the monsters of modernity are characterized by their proximity to humans” (23). The shapeshifter, like the Victorian monster, is a figure that straddles boundaries between the dualist categories of Western humanity. Yet, for the shapeshifter, as I will reveal through Anzaldúan and Deleuzian theories of the self/becoming, boundary-crossing is also a relational process. Whereas the monster embodies the fear of the other and the study of monstrosity unburies the othering produced by defining the human against the non-human, the shapeshifter becomes the other by

⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Geographies of Selves—Reimagining Identity: Nos/Otras (Us/Other), las Nepantleras, and the New Tribalism*, edited by AnaLouise Keating (Duke University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822375036-005>.

becoming self and the study of shapeshifting brings forth an embrace of the human and the non-human as a relational spectrum. The monster may “make strange the categories of beauty, humanity, and identity that we still cling to,” and the shapeshifter may estrange us to such categories altogether (6). Halberstam identifies the monster as threatening a “crisis of knowledge, a ‘category crisis’”—so does the shapeshifter (6). It is in recognizing that “we need monsters” to “represen[t] the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities,” that we might also recognize that we need shapeshifters to represent the negotiation of categories, the fluidity of boundaries, and the becoming of differences (27).

Shapeshifter: The Cyborg

The shapeshifter draws allegiance to another figure that sees itself as monstrous, formed from boundaries. Insofar as Jack Halberstam’s illustration of the Gothic monster mines nineteenth century anxieties over the stakes of humanity, Donna Haraway’s cyborg is born from her analysis of how twentieth century’s “boundary breakdowns” between human and animal, human and machine, material and immaterial, such that that “[i]n the ‘Western’ sense, the end of man is at stake” (119, 127). Indeed, Haraway succinctly says: “By the late 20th century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized, and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (118). The shapeshifter, embodying transformation into alterity, draws natural kinship with the cyborg’s chimeric embodying of categories, with the cyborg’s embodying of boundaries and breaches between Western dualist categories, with how the cyborg’s existence in the “partial, fluid” (146). The shapeshifter may find itself home in a cyborg world:

From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints (122).

The cyborg is a communal figure, born out of what Haraway sees as socialist-feminism's necessity to embrace a way of organizing that is affinity rather than identity based, as a survival tactic for women that reaches for a "post-gender world" (118). The shapeshifter might even, in its subversion of the rigidities of scientific categories, find an ally in the cyborg's "feminist science" (140). The chimeric, contradictory, connective vocabulary of the cyborg can be common to the shapeshifter's relationalities.

Shapeshifter: Shifts

In the relational process through which skin shifts to scales, when animal howl becomes human scream—what happens? Therein lies two assumptions: one, in identifying the shapeshifter, we reveal the culture and epistemologies that produced it, that defines human and non-human as other to each other; two, much of the focus on the shapeshifter has been on the oppositionality of forms, rather than on the process of the shift itself. In its very name, the shapeshifter embodies the relationality between 'shape' and 'shift'—the transition from form to process. In most analyses of the shapeshifter, the shape has been prioritized over the shift—think of how the werewolf is frequently portrayed as the spectacle of man turning into wolf, rather than through the relational processes that make man and wolf akin. We are accustomed to defining shapeshifting in terms of the shapes most familiar to us. The vampire and werewolf, given their dominance on screens and pages particularly over the past decades, are often the first shapeshifters we encounter. As such, their bodily transformations may be our most familiar referents in terms of transitioning between the human and the non-human. Foreign to us might be

the fox that forms itself into illustrious, prophetic gentlemen and women, or the puma whose growls turn into human screams by undergoing vivisection. More fantastical might be the immortal healer who can control her every cell, read DNA by tasting flesh, and rewrite her consciousness with the changing of her body. And even more far-fetched might be the goddess who takes us on her cyclical transitions between fish-tailed creator, worm in water, women living centuries apart, and self-pollinating seed.

Analyzed relationally, the shapeshifters figured in the aforementioned texts—from stories within Pu Songling's *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* and H.G. Well's *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, to Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* and Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*—may map for us the transition toward a theory of shapeshifting as a process of becoming. Taking the shape of literary affects, strange and subversive focalizations, and bifurcating plotlines, the shifts within these stories reveal the process by which one becomes other as a return to self. For instance, the protagonist of *Salt Fish Girl* shifts between reincarnations of herself as distinct characters undergoing diverging plotlines, until the memories of her other selves affectively merge with her present narration in a way that shifts the reader to a different experience of the plot. The shifts of the shapeshifter gives us ways of processing the connections between binaries, particularly our relationship to the other. I posit that the shapeshifter, by virtue of its relative undefinability and categorical trespasses, is the one figure that can uniquely give language to ways of being that may otherwise be indescribable under the language of binaries (we are in need of a *transformational* vocabulary of nonbinariness). Harkening back to the monster and the cyborg, the shapeshifter figure is employed as a spectral stand-in for other(ed) ways of being that may feel inarticulable given the binary confines of the social systems of the time. In our current time

of polarized identities and alienated selves, we are in need of figures that show us how to relate to the other-self.

Theorizing Shapeshifting

A critical discourse of the shapeshifter is indebted to Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of *nagualismo*, rooted in her narrative retelling of the tradition of the Mesoamerican shapeshifter, the *nagual/nahual*. *Naguala*, for Anzaldúa, is the subject of her borderland epistemologies, and *nagualismo* is "a decoloniality of subject formation" (Zaytoun 9). In *Shapeshifting Subjects: Gloria Anzaldúa's Naguala and Border Arte*, Kelli D. Zaytoun describes how "the *naguala* serves as a vehicle that deconstructs and decolonizes embodiment and being," one that insists on a relationality of being and a "fluidity of identity" (14). Much like Rosi Braidotti's posthumanism that conceives of the human as relationally equal to all other kinds of being, Anzaldúa's *nagualismo* aims at integrating the human into an ever-shifting, connected ontology. Grounded in Indigenous philosophies, Anzaldúa's *naguala* "deconstructs the traditional Western dualisms of mind/body, matter/nonmatter, matter/spirit, and self/other" (9). Her *naguala* is summoned to create a "counterknowledge" called "*conocimiento*," an embodied form of knowing that runs counter to Western humanism binary frameworks (15). Just as Haraway creates the cyborg to reclaim boundaries, to say "We are responsible for boundaries; we are they," Anzaldúa forms the *naguala* for the others in her borderlands. For Anzaldúa, the shapeshifter represents the shift toward a fluid, conscious relationship with all forms of others. Akin to how Halberstam identifies his monster as a "meaning machine" and the Gothic novels as "technologies that produce the monster as a remarkably mobile, permeable, and infinitely interpretable body," Anzaldúa sees her shapeshifter as an interpretative body that rewrites texts

as “acts of imaginative flights in reality and identity constructions and reconstructions” (Halberstam 21, Anzaldúa 6).

My theory defines shapeshifting as a way of creative, conscious embodying that transforms how we relate to the other as ourselves. I posit that the shapeshifter gives form to a type of system breakage, a critical failure of the binary categories that need not be. Shapeshifting occurs at the boundaries whereby ontology delimits difference, epistemology delimits the knowledge of the known, and language and science delimit the understanding of transformation.

To study the shapeshifter is to study how we may embody the potential of being otherwise. The shapeshifter is the oracle of our own strangeness, the vocabulary of our otherness. By speaking the language of the shapeshifter we are realizing our own potential to be freed from the systemic pressure to conform. This consciousness is relational, this theory is trans. The shapeshifter is symptom is strategy, is intervention is instrumentation. The shapeshifter manifests our freedom in forming ourselves. The shapeshifter is our agent of transformation. The shapeshifter returns us to self by becoming other—returns us to other by becoming self. The shapeshifter is the - that connects shape-shift. The process of becoming-shapeshifter is not to be conflicted within what we embody—but to choose *how* we shift—

Chapter One:
Shapeshifting Encounters

Seeds of Encounter

Wild Seed is a novel of repeated encounters with a different kind of difference. Octavia Butler's 1980 novel, spanning from 17th century Nigeria to 19th America, centers on the complicated relationship between two body-changing immortal beings as they attempt to change the trajectory of the human race. The protagonist Anyanwu, who critics cast as an Igbo priestess, is a three-hundred-year-old shapeshifter who has complete control over every cell of her body, a control that she uses to reshape her body's sex and physical features, mold herself into animals, control her own pregnancies, and heal herself and others. On the other hand, Doro is a thirty-seven-hundred-year-old being who, instead of dying, transfers his consciousness into another person's body, consumes their spirit, and wears their body like clothing. Anyanwu and Doro are polarities: her a healer, he a killer; she changes her own body, he changes bodies; and despite both having lived as different sexes, she firmly identifies as a woman, and he as a man. Yet, dissimilar as they are, they are also akin. Anyanwu and Doro are both ontologically differentiated from all others in their ability to change the shapes/embodiments they take, in their long lives and loneliness, and in their shared dream of creating others like them. Doro plants the seed of this dream in Anyanwu at the start of the novel: "if you come with me, I will give you children of your own kind" (24). When Anyanwu follows Doro away from her people, she sets in motion a series of confrontations wherein she resists Doro's domination, Doro holds her in his power, and neither can fully escape from the other as long as they live. With every confrontation Doro and Anyanwu each encounters something different in the other, until a hundred and a half later at the novel's end, they are forced to reconcile in what Doro emphasizes when they first

encounter each other: We are more like each other than like other people. We need not hide from each other” (11).

Butler employs race prominently in *Wild Seed* in encounters to commentate on kinships of being. From plot to scene, Butler interweaves the retellings of the Middle Passage, Igbo mythology, and Biblical allusions into a connected tapestry that speaks to how kinships are build among others. Butler positions her central characters not against whiteness, nor with whiteness as a starting point, but to instead privilege the normalization of starting from Blackness. The evolving consciousness of her protagonists, both shapeshifters that can take on the forms of different races and navigate the world as such, remains true to their identification with Blackness (Keeling). Critics have analyzed the nuances with which the central characters, one being able to alter every aspect of her body and the other being able to take bodies at will, interact with race as both socially determinant and related to their self-identification, yet something separate (Ferreira). Anyanwu and Doro represent extremes of the mind/body duality, or the naturalization of the feminine as the body and the masculine as the mind. Anyanwu and Doro’s embodiment is complicated through their sensing of the other in their encounter.

Before they even set sight on each other, Doro and Anyanwu sense each other’s presence. To the watchful Anyanwu, she senses the presence of a prowling stranger, someone who “kept himself hidden, moved toward her like smoke, but she heard him, followed him with her ears” (5). “It was something new—an impulse, a feeling, a kind of mental undertow” (Butler 4) “The feeling became sharper and finer, resolving itself into a kind of signal he would normally have expected to receive only from people he knew” (5). Spatially and sensorily, the two are aware of each other before their confrontation in the open. The two are coded as predator and prey—or rather, Doro sees himself as a hunter who “close[s] in on his quarry,” positioning Anyanwu

passively as prey (a term used throughout the rest of the novel) (5). Here, in Anyanwu's territory, Doro is the "lone intruder," and she "was an oracle," a "woman through whom a god spoke" (4-5). Thus, spatially and societally, Anyanwu has the upper hand, and she assumes so—it is then a subtle reversal of power that she recognizes that Doro as something other. It is when Doro moves into the open path, with a "sudden openness after so much stealth," that Anyanwu sees Doro's non-threatening appearance clearly. Anyanwu begins to worry. It is as though she were aware, much like Doro is, that the man that appears before her is something else than she sensed, and this mismatch between what she sensed and what she sees creates a worrisome contradiction. Unlike others (that is ordinary individuals, such as Okoye), Anyanwu and Doro knows almost instinctively to not trust their eyes. They can sense, and are willing to, in a way that others are not, partly because they are seeking to know how similar the other is to themselves in their difference.

In contrast to the shapeshifter consciousness, non-shapeshifting characters in the novel struggle to accept the otherness that Anyanwu and Doro identify with. In front of her grandson Okoye, Anyanwu reveals herself as able to change from the body of the young Black man she is in, to her old woman form, to finally her "true shape" (57). Okoye is resistant to encountering Anyanwu as who she is, and tries several times to recognize her as one of the forms she takes. As Anyanwu "aged and furrowed the flesh" to appear in the old woman form recognizable by Okoye as his grandmother, Okoye becomes frightened and attempts escape. Intervening, Anyanwu asks, "What am I that I was not before?" (55). Facing Anyanwu in her aging woman form, Okoye attempts to define her according to a dichotomy that makes sense to him: "You are a man!...Or a spirit" (55). Anyanwu responds, "I am no spirit...and should it be so difficult for a woman who can become a tortoise or a monkey to become a man?" (55). Okoye senses, yet

struggles to understand, that Anyanwu is something beyond the physical forms she took for his recognition. He is also unable to recognize Anyanwu as something like Doro, saying that Doro is “not merely different” but “something other than a man” (56). Even as Anyanwu replies that she is “something other than a woman,” Okoye insists that she is “not like him” (56). Okoye’s encounter with Anyanwu forces violence upon his thoughts about who she is, and how beings are categorized. Indeed, his response is to physically escape. Anyanwu continues to defy his recognition, remaining undefinable ontologically—Okoye struggles to understand how she can be not a man, not a spirit, but instead his grandmother, a woman who appears his age, or ‘a woman who can become a tortoise or a monkey.’ He can be said to not understand what it means to become-shapeshifter. Indeed, in the end, Okoye shakes his head and says, “I should not be here. I am only a man” (24).

“The Likes of Him”: The Shapeshifter and the Shifted Subject

A shapeshifter, standing silhouetted atop a ladder, is narratively named “a mis-shapen man” (Wells 13). This figure moves “with animal swiftness,” speaks “with a queer hoarse quality,” and shocks in his animalistic appearance in human clothing (13). Yet, the most striking, paradoxical response that English biologist Edward Prendick, narrator and human protagonist of H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, has upon his encounter with an animal-human hybrid that can pass as both human and Beast Man is one of familiarity:

I had never beheld such a repulsive and extraordinary face before, and yet—if the contradiction is credible—I experienced at the same time an odd feeling that in some way I *had* already encountered the features and gestures that now amazed me (13).

Without knowledge of the identity of this bestial shapeshifter that would be introduced as M’ling, Prendick is struck by the something “indefinable” (13) that deeply troubles him and his grasp on reality. The shapeshifter invites a particular consequence for the one who identifies it as ‘mis-shapen.’ Different from other characters of the strange or uncanny, the shapeshifter is particular in being a vehicle of transformation for the human character who attempts to interpret its shape.

Within the tradition of an account of strange tales wherein the human focalizer is a scholar or scientist chronicling the strange, the shapeshifter is typically fixed and acted upon as an object of study. Yet, within a framework that focuses on the shapeshifter’s subjectivity, the shapeshifter, as a character uniquely unclassifiable and holding particular epistemological knowledge, is centered as the source of all change and transformation within the scene of encounter, capable of rendering the human chronicler into a shifted subject. In an encounter with the shapeshifter, the human focalizer undergoes a transformative experience through coming to

terms with the shapeshifter's likeness and unlikeness to himself, and in doing so is transported to a shifted reality and becomes a shifted subject. As the shapeshifter resists easy classification, an encounter with the shapeshifter becomes a relational negotiation, based on dynamics of each party's similarity or dissimilarity to established social or natural classes. It is through this negotiation process that the human focalizer consciously or inadvertently negotiates their own humanity by mediating the similarities between animality and humanity, in that being alike a shapeshifter jeopardizes their own stake in humanity.

The shifts in reality that these negotiations cause within the encounter introduces the human focalizer to the language likeness, bringing him into an awareness that what is like me is unlike me and what is fundamentally unlike me is like me. The human character is irrevocably changed in their relationship to reality, which is externalized through physical transport to a previously unaccessed space or narrative transport beyond the plot's threshold of return. Extrapolating beyond the scene, encounters with the shapeshifter shift the characters and settings into territories of irrevocable change, such that in effect, the narrative becomes shifted around the shapeshifter, and the story itself becomes echoes of their shiftings. As a result, the narrative account is far from a study of the shapeshifter, but rather a chronicle of the aftermaths of the shifts as experienced by the human focalizer in the wake of the shapeshifter.

The shapeshifter shifts the stakes of the particular plot that is the account of the strange. The account is communicated by a narrator, usually a learned man, speaking to a narratee of similar tastes or education, describing a strange phenomena often in service of commentary on society or human nature. The preeminent Pu Songling, Qing dynasty author of some five hundred weird accounts collected in his *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, wrote not in accessible vernacular for the masses but in distinguished classical language for "his fellow

scholar-gentlemen” (xvii). His own preface communicates that his account of the strange addresses some shared underlying themes with H. G. Wells, that of the civilized society and its strange undercurrents: “Here in the civilized world, / Stranger events by far occur / Than in the Country of Cropped Hair; / Before our very eyes / Weirder tales unfold / Than in the Nation of Flying Heads” (Pu xv). Pu Songling then purports himself to act as an observer and recorder of the strange, an anthropologist-cum-historian-cum-storyteller. The strange phenomena he describes are objects of his study much like a scientist with his specimen. “Trained scientist” H. G. Wells, although the author of comparatively more accessible late Victorian science fiction, relished in the scientific method, engaged in scientific debates by publishing papers that explore the same concepts in his fiction, and selected the intellectual subgenre of an island novel for the sake of societal commentary (Wells xi). Just as Pu Songling’s focalizers are often gentlemen-scholars, Wells’s protagonist Prendick is a biologist with remarkably similar education to himself. The connection between the human focalizer and the broader narrative context heightens the significance of the observations made by the human focalizer, and suggests that when the human focalizer’s reality is shifted, the narrative itself experiences a shift.

The macro shifts caused movement of the shapeshifter across a narrative begins with the micro shift within the encounter, a shift that subverts the human focalizer’s ability to account for his reality by upending the traditional methods of chronicle and classification he relies his reality upon. The shapeshifter, more than any other science-fictional or folkloric figure, as a figure that evades easy categorization is in exact opposition to the mission of the chronicler that aims to classify and interpret the strange. Nevertheless, the chronicler attempts. Thus, the scene of encounter is transformed into a site of negotiation for how to categorize the shapeshifter according to known natural or social classes. The human characters may assert human authority,

as in the case of Prendick and his fellow scientists' insistence on the power they hold over the Beast Men, or assume the shapeshifter's subordination, as in the case of the Pu Songling tale "The Fox of Fenzhou" in which a fox spirit is identified then immediately addressed as a servant. Or, the human focalizer may be shocked when a friend reveals himself to be a shapeshifter, as in Pu Songling's "Fox as Prophet," and re-evaluates their understanding of human and non-human lives. In all three cases in the initial encounter, there exists a negotiation—notably through language—of where the shapeshifter should be placed on the social hierarchy in relation to the human character.

The shapeshifter and human characters engage in negotiation through space with appearances and through dialogue with epistemological knowledge. Language is a particular vehicle for troubling the encounter with the shapeshifter, not only because the shapeshifter and human focalizer wield epistemological knowledge against each other in their negotiations across dialogue, but because such dialogue marks the instance in which the chronicler's object of study speaks back. The shapeshifter's capacity for self-expression, especially against human scholarship of itself, is contextualized by historical sentiments around a non-human subject's capacity for language. For instance, in a series of anti-Darwinist lectures in 1861, the philologist Max Muller proclaimed "the one great barrier between the man and the brute is Language. Man speaks, and no brute has ever uttered a word. Language is our rubicon, and no brute dares cross it" (Wells xxii). Such sentiments readily inform H. G. Wells's depiction of Beast Men that have been taught by their scientist-creator to speak, with limited vocabulary and in strangling speech, though nonetheless with an English accent. Pu Songling's strange tales follow a tradition of limited dialogue, but when the shapeshifting fox spirits do speak, they exhibit a command of language indistinguishable from their human counterparts. In both bodies of work in the genre of

the account of the strange, everytime the shapeshifter, already an embodiment of unclassifiability, speaks it claims a human-like subjectivity and a right to self-knowledge. Through the shapeshifter's speech in these negotiations, it is clear that the observer's focalization of the narrative does not make him hold the most epistemological knowledge.

Within the context of an encounter, the shapeshifter's choice speech in negotiating his place reveals information that catalyzes changes in the surrounding characters and scene. When M'ling appears at the top of the stairs leading to the lower deck, Prendick's human companion immediately and "in a deliberate tone" commands M'ling that "[he has] no place here" and that "[his] place is forward" (13). M'ling haltingly responds that "they [the sailors]...won't have [him] forward" (13). Although able to pass for human, M'ling's appearance is otherworldly enough to garner discrimination and abuse at worst and suspicion and curiosity at best. As such, M'ling is physically and linguistically caught here between two human social groups, the sailors and the scientists, to which he is both classed as subordinate and from which he is both repelled. While M'ling is disempowered, his figure features a subversive role within the narrative. Precisely because M'ling is cast within the unstable position defined by the interrelation between two human groups, his very voicing of the difficulty of his position is itself a negotiation of his place among humans and a trigger for negotiation of authority between two human groups. Upon hearing M'ling's response, Montgomery reacts "menacing[ly]" and storms to confront the sailors above deck (13). As a shapeshifter figure made to pass between human groups and thus comes to embody human boundaries, M'ling's arrival in a scene followed by a verbal negotiation of his simultaneously assimilated yet apart position in human society, even for human characters to which he is already known, incites shifts in social dynamics that redefines every character's place.

If a shapeshifter character defines her own position in relation to the human focalizer, the recognition of the shapeshifter's subjectivity is negotiated on from the level of the scene to the level of the narrative. In Pu Songling's "The Fox of Fenzhou," the human protagonist Judge Zhu sees in his residence, where the narrator makes apparent in the opening line of the story where "a large number of fox-spirits" live, a young woman, "unknown to him, and of the rarest beauty" (235). Zhu is described as knowing "instinctively that she must be a fox-spirit," and although the narrator does not elaborate on how this instinct works, that her beauty is remarked upon right before the moment of recognition suggests that exceptional beauty is a clue for a non-human identity (Pu 235). It is presumed, from the narrator's lack of mention, that the fox spirit does not have knowledge of Zhu's knowing of her identity. As such, it is implied, from the narrator's emphasis on Zhu's recognition of her as a fox spirit right before his dialogue, that Zhu feels empowered to "order her to come over to him" precisely due to the knowledge differential between them. The fox spirit stops her pacing, acknowledges him "with a smile," then identifies herself as his equal: "You speak to me so harshly, sir, I am not your servant!" (235). In contrast to the aforementioned *Island* scene in which M'ling intervenes upon the human characters, the human focalizer here interrupts the shapeshifter—the narrative setup seems to empower her. The fox spirit's certain authority about her own place, again in contrast with M'ling whose place is told to him, and her assertion of equality between herself and the human focalizer seem to even the unbalance of power introduced by the knowledge differential. Yet, despite the fox spirit being treated as an equal within her relationship to Zhu, there is tension between her characterization through the eyes of the focalizer and the words of the narrator. Although the narrator describes Zhu and her as like "husband and wife," implying that the human focalizer elevates her to a human status, the narrator only refers to her as "the fox" (235). The presence of a shapeshifter

character, particularly one who is recognized for a fox spirit yet insists upon her equality to humanity, pinpoints the bias of the narrator within an overall narrative ambivalence towards her subjectivity, suggesting that shifts within a scene of encounter in the story space ripple upwards to emerge as tension in the text.

A shapeshifter character that self-discloses after an initial encounter has already established reciprocity with the human focalizer raises similar questions of narrative tensions, which are addressed with shifts towards the dynamics of likeness. In Pu Songling's "Fox as Prophet," an enigmatic, somewhat elusive, but generous old man proposes to rent a property from the focalizing human character Mr Li. The old man's "most affable" and reciprocal nature is highlighted by the narrator, as Mr Li is described to entertain the old man with "great warmth and genuine pleasure," and the old man hosts a return banquet that is so "excellent" and "lavish" that Mr Li wonders aloud to the identity of the old man, pondering whether he is "an important official living incognito" (Pu 254, 255). It is at this point that the old man reveals himself: "since they were now friends, he could tell [Mr Li] the truth: [the old man] was a fox-spirit in human form" (255). Yet, even after this point, the narrator continues to refer to the fox spirit as an old man, which is in stark contrast against the narrator's choice to refer to the female fox spirit in "Fenzhou" as 'the fox.' There are two key differences between the two tales: the fox in "Fenzhou" appears as a young woman and becomes the lover of the human character, whereas the fox in "Prophet" appears as an old man and becomes the friend of human character; the fox of "Fenzhou" is recognized as a fox spirit before disclosing her identity herself, whereas the fox in "Prophet" is not recognized until he discloses himself. It suggested that the open reciprocity of Mr Li and the old man in "Prophet," particularly the equality of friendship shared by men of similar social status as opposed to the mutual devotion but perhaps unequal status between

“husband and wife,” is key to the relationship between the non-human shapeshifter and the human. These juxtapositions suggest that dynamics of likeness, as in the similarities or mutual recognitions, between the shapeshifter and the human focalizer influence the degree to which the shapeshifter figure’s subjectivity is narratively acknowledged.

The shapeshifter transforms the site of encounter into a liminal space that in passing through, the human focalizer necessarily negotiates the shapeshifter’s likeness to himself and his own likeness to a shapeshifter, and is physically and psychologically shifted into a new narrative reality. To illustrate, Prendick’s entire encounter with M’ling takes place across the vertical expanse of a single ladder, a literal liminal space that transports Prendick from a place of security in his own reality to a space where nothing is as it seems. M’ling physically stands in the way of Prendick’s movement above deck, and in fact when turning, collides into Prendick—the shapeshifter figure here is a literal checkpoint that the protagonist must cross. In this moment of collision, M’ling’s face “flashe[s] upon” Prendick and “shocked [him] profoundly” in “some indefinable way” (Wells 13). Prendick’s arc within this scene of encounter then becomes one of trying to define the face, attempting to come to terms with the effect of the shapeshifter. While Prendick’s narration spectacularizes M’ling, describing in racialized and phrenological language the “grotesque ugliness of this black-faced creature,” within the framework of the shapeshifter Prendick is the one whose place in nature, and stake in humanity, feels threatened. Spatially, Prendick moves up the ladder past M’ling—the human protagonist moves across the embodiment of liminality that is the shapeshifter figure—and in casting a return gaze towards M’ling Prendick is at once shifted. In the moment of the shift, Prendick “experience[s] at the same time an odd feeling that in some way [he] *had* already encountered exactly the features and gestures that now amazed [him],” and is made to mediate between the likenesses of humanity

and animality, and what makes something that seems in between both so instinctively familiar to himself (much like how the narrator of “The Fox of Fenzhou” pinpoints that Mr. Zhu “instinctively” recognizes the shapeshifter) (Pu 235, Wells 13). The chronicler of the strange is now without language to classify the shapeshifter, and in losing that, he fails to prescribe his own reality. The chronicler has now become a shifted subject, a human focalizer subjected to the power of the shapeshifter figure’s language of likeness.

As crossings manifest, the shapeshifter figure is a vehicle for the human focalizer to cross over the threshold and onto the shore of irrevocable change. In “The Fox of Fenzhou,” the fox spirit reveals her prophet powers by warning Zhu of an ensuing promotion followed by an impending loss, and Zhu subsequently receives news of his mother’s death and “planned to return to his family home in the company of the fox” to “observe the three-year mourning period” (Pu 235). She accompanies Zhu to the bank of the river, then levels at him: “Surely you know that a fox cannot cross the river” (237). He does not, and the narratee might question the common language between the two lovers as “devoted to one another as husband and wife” if such an important logistic has been summarily overlooked. In a different version of events, the fox spirit presumably can wait the three years until Zhu’s return, and if that were the case, the narrative might then emphasize the common ground of devotion, constancy of love, and the shapeshifter’s sacrifice rather than the power of its shifting. In this sequence of events, the fox spirit pleads with the River God “especially for [Zhu’s] sake” and returns with a pardon to accompany Zhu across the river for ten days only (237). In an initial reading, the narrator seems to demonstrate that the river here, much like the rubicon that Victorian scientists insist to separate human from beast, may be temporarily crossed but still summarily remain the definitive boundary between human and non-human relations. Yet, the concluding sentences of the short

tale invite a reading within the framework of shapeshifter subjectivity: “And so they crossed the river together. Ten days later, she made her final farewell and departed” (237). Having propelled the human focalizer onto the shore of a new stage of life, the shapeshifter somehow takes her leave and returns to her side of the shore. This moment of crossing is remarkably alike the moment of Prendick passing M’ling on the ladder: the human focalizer is physically crossed into a space of new reality, while the shapeshifter figure subversively remains on the site of the shift. The shapeshifter figure does not merely cross but embodies the rubicon, and it is in actuality the human focalizer who is crossed by the shapeshifter across the rubicon and becomes a shifted subject.

The shifts in reality engendered by revelatory epistemological knowledge presents a sort of crossing that reframes the encounters across the entire narrative. In “Fox as Prophet,” human focalizer Mr Li introduces the old man fox spirit to local gentry, “all of whom he received with utmost civility” apart from the local County Magistrate. When questioned by Mr Li, the fox spirit discloses (255):

You do not know this, but that Magistrate of yours was a mule in a previous life. He may seem a very distinguished gentleman, but really he is a person of shameless greed. I may not be human myself, but I consider it beneath my dignity to associate with the likes of him (257)

In imparting the epistemological knowledge of relating through likeness instead of the dichotomy of the other and the self or spectacle and scholar, the fox spirit here shifts the human focalizer into a new form of relation to his reality and to the fox spirit. In articulating his unlikeness to the mule Magistrate, the fox spirit is explaining a relational difference and system of judgment that is not based on the boundary between humanity and animality, or even straightforward appearances, for in old man form, the fox-spirit too ‘seem [the] very distinguished gentleman’ he accuses the County Magistrate of only pretending to be. Although

the fox spirit's words hint at prescribing a hierarchy, as his conditional statement that he 'may not be human' appear to elevate the human, yet he clearly operates on a separate non-human centric relational scale as he relies on knowledge that no ordinary human would have access to in judgment. Furthermore, even while implying a higher status for humanity, the fox spirit knows he has always retained the greater prophetic insight and epistemological knowledge in the encounter with the human focalizer. What the fox spirit illuminates for his shifted subject is a system of relation based on likeness and unlikeness, wherein the central question is: what is like me and not like me, both in terms of appearances and actions? This revelation shifts the human focalizer onto a new relational territory between them and transforms the meaning of their past encounter and conversations. What the fox spirit seems to say: you are unlike me though I am unlike him—then, the shifted subject might wonder, does this mean that he and the fox spirit are then alike?

We might then wonder what likeness might or must a potential shifted subject possess in relation to the shapeshifter in order to experience the shifts? Every encounter between the shapeshifter and the human focalizer has experienced a moment of mutuality, a crucial instance of negotiation of the terms of recognition. The human chronicler of the strange is forced to confront the shapeshifter not as a spectacle but as subject, and in that moment he is transformed. His shift of role within the narrative is rendered onto the story space through physical and psychological transport across thresholds of no return and social catalysts for character relations. As such, the chronicler's encounter with the shapeshifter incites a co-optation of the narrative from within, wherein the language of uncrossable difference is subverted to become one of likeness. Far from any odd phenomena in the tradition of the strange accounts, the appearance of the shapeshifter is a way to warp character and plot, incite reversals in position, and shift into

new recognitions of reality. Within the framework of shapeshifter subjectivity, we are invited to disidentify with the human observer and instead observe the shapes of narrative reality for signs of the shapeshifter's shifting. We are invited to become shifted subjects ourselves and to access the narrative as channel.

Chapter Two:
Shapeshifting Language

In the previous chapter, we came into ourselves as shifted subjects. In this chapter, we move closer to the shapeshifter, coming to experience the body of the shapeshifter through narrative. In *Salt Fish Girl*, the narrative body is the body of the shapeshifter. Our entrance into the narrative is through a shapeshifting invitation from the shapeshifter protagonist, and in the end the shapeshifters shapeshift out of the narrative beyond our reach. As such, we experience the plot of the novel as less so tracking the action of the shapeshifter, but as the movement of the shapeshifter itself. Positioning ourselves within the framework of shapeshifter subjectivity and reading through the lens of the shifted subject, we can see the novel's structural shifts—the bifurcations, merging, recursions, emergences, becomings—as shapeshifting itself. Through this shapeshifting focalization, we start to experience the shapeshifter's embodiment. In doing so, we can consider how the shapeshifter comes into its being, comes to embody and extend through relationalities, and bring ourselves ever closer to shapeshifting.

Salt Fish Girl opens with the act of shapeshifting, from formlessness to movement to language to dynamics of likeness to embodied relations. Shapeshifting begins as a coming into consciousness, coming into form. Prior to shapeshifting, all was formless and without definition—uncategorized, un-self-knowing, non-relational:

The materials of life still lay dormant, not yet understanding their profound relationship to one another. There was no order, nothing had a clear relationship to anything else. The land was not the land, the sea not the sea, the air not the air, the sky not the sky. The mountains were not yet mountains, the clouds not the clouds. (Lai 1)

Before this description, the shapeshifter, Nu Wa, a figure from Chinese mythology that created humans, speaks as a disembodied narrator addressing a similarly disembodied narratee, intimating that she “was lonely in a way the most shunned of you have never known loneliness” (1). This intimation, contextualized within the non-relationality of the setting, appears

paradoxical. It is as if, in speaking to the reader, Nu Wa, the creator that she is, seems to have in her loneliness brought the reader into being. Her speech shifts further and further away from a traditional first-person narration as the first change occurs within the scene, the first shifting of shapes:

But wait. Here comes the sound of a river, water rushing in to fill the gap. Here comes the river. Husssssssh. Shhhhhh. (1)

Notably, up until the point of this movement, the narration is in past tense, and the switch to present tense here implies the present, presumably where the narrator is speaking from, brings the narratee to the narrator's present. The first change brings with it presence. The river is movement and flow of water, simultaneously formless yet shaped by its motion—the river shapeshifts. And, as the only form in the present tense and the only source of sound, the river can be read to embody speech. 'Husssssssh. Shhhhhh.' is the first instance of language, the sound of the rushing water that is in itself the onomatopoeia for silence. Onomatopoeia is a form of linguistic embodiment, as the voice takes on the (socially understood) sound of something else. Because 'the sound of the river' is the same as the onomatopoeia for silence, the river speaks, or rather shapeshifts into speech—in effect, the shapeshifter shifts and speaks as the river.

The shapeshifter's onomatopoeic embodiment as river then shifts into bodily act. This entrance of the biological body can paradoxically be described as disembodied, as it is unattached and unidentified with a subject in the sentence: "Finger pressed vertically against lips, didn't I tell you?" (1). In this question enters the relation between the shapeshifter and the shifted subject—who is the one that is being hushed, whose finger against whose lips? Indeed, in using the same act to embody both the focalizing narrator, the shapeshifter, and narratee, the shapeshifter's addressee, the experience of the reader becomes the embodiment of the

shapeshifter. The act of focalization itself becomes an act of shapeshifting. After the shapeshifter and addressee are narratively embodied, the shapeshifter becomes bodily legible: “Of course I have lips, a woman’s lips, a woman’s mouth already muttering secrets under my breath” (1-2). It is significant that the shapeshifter’s body is assigned lips first, given the relationship between the shapeshifter and speech. Specifically, ‘woman’s lips’ speaks to the significance of being able to be read as a woman, though Nu Wa the shapeshifter here does not identify herself as a woman, only with woman’s body parts. Her ‘muttering secrets’ establishes distance between the herself shapeshifter and her shifted subject, and how in becoming gendered and socially legible the shapeshifter also begins her withholding of epistemological knowledge.

The shapeshifter continues to manifest the embodiment of the addressee. Nu Wa invokes her addressee’s action and motivation, assigning the “eye” of the reader to a predatory, fetishistic, and objectifying gaze that is laid upon her, “slid[ing] over breasts and belly” (2). “You” gradually undresses Nu Wa as a woman until—suddenly, “Forget modesty”—she narratively reveals her “tail, a thick cord of muscle undulating, silver slippery in the early morning light” (2). In an instant, the shapeshifter reconfigures her legibility and relationship to the reader by casting off the perceived ‘modesty’ of an objectified woman and aligning herself with the non-human. At the same time, in describing the addressee’s action, the shapeshifter controls the reader’s gaze—after all, shapeshifting manifested focalization. The shapeshifter identifies, as in gives identity to, the ‘eye’ of the addressee: “I know that eye, the eye that registers fear first, then the desire to consume” (2). After describing how the reader imagines her flesh in soup, the shapeshifter again reconfigures her relationship to her addressee by joking, “Worried you, eh?” (2). The dynamic established through these addresses not only reinforce the shapeshifter’s control over her narrative focalization, but implies her awareness of the power

differential. In addressing us, the shapeshifter establishes how her embodiment is the reader's experience.

The shapeshifter then returns to describing the river through the "form and motion" of her own mermaid, half-woman/half-snake body: "Curve and slither, form and motion we both understand" (2). Here, not only is form a motion ('curve' here can be both noun and verb), but being the shapeshifter and being the river is given the same attribute. Furthermore, the statement that 'we both understand' further reinforces the idea that the narrative body—the focalized experience of the reader—is the same as the body of the shapeshifter. In making the shapeshifter's own description of her own action indistinguishable from her depiction of her addressee's action, the narratee effectively becomes embodied as the narrator. Prior to the river, the shapeshifter is disembodied, yet the river is not described as not knowing it is a river, implying a sense of self-knowledge that suggests shapeshifter subjectivity. It is shapeshifting that embodies in narrative form the shapeshifter. Thus, the shapeshifting is the focalization that creates the reader's embodied experience, the way that the reader perceives and experiences the events of the novel. Lastly, the shapeshifter reframes the narrative body: "Nevermind, I was telling you about the river" (2). The shapeshifter transitions into the storyscape, a format much more familiar as a first-person narrative. It is this significant distinction, the act of shapeshifting into, that reifies the story as the body of the shapeshifter.

Structurally, the narrative bifurcates into two histories, shifting between two primary character embodiments of Nu Wa that gradually intertwine into a singular subjectivity. While one embodiment of Nu Wa is positioned in eighteenth century China, a second bifurcation of Nu Wa follows her as Miranda Ching in a near-future Pacific Northwest in the 2040s. There, the Pacific Economic Union (formerly Canada, the U.S., and China) is a desolate wasteland ravaged by

climate change, stratified into capitalist company-controlled cities sustained by a clone labour force and struggling to fend off contagion that sprang from genetic engineering run amok. Miranda is born with a durian smell, fistulas that drip salt water, scales that grow in water then drop off, and inexplicable trails of memories from Nu Wa's time in the eighteenth century. Nu Wa takes on a human form, born into a village in South China where she falls in love with a salt fish merchant's daughter, the titular Salt Fish Girl. The two run away to Canton, where Nu Wa is seduced by a white woman to journey to The Island of Mist and Forgetfulness, a symbolic North American city where Nu Wa gives up her language in order to assimilate. In another strain, Miranda's journey witnesses her birth in Serendipity (formerly Vancouver) and her youth in the Unregulated Zone, the devastated land that remains not under company control. Miranda meets the 21st century reincarnation of Salt Fish Girl, a clone who escaped her factory, renamed herself Evie Xin, and formed a sisterhood collective with other escaped clones trying to topple the companies. Miranda navigates her increasing entanglement in Evie and her sisters' resistance and her own implication within capitalist institutions. Both Miranda and Evie are shapeshifters, and Salt Fish Girl/Evie is implied to be the other likeness that Nu Wa glimpses as she reflects on herself after choosing to become human. Their reunion sparks Miranda's resistance against capitalist forces, the two escape into the wilderness and, in a spiralic ending Miranda/Nu Wa gives birth to her daughter, implied to be her own reincarnated embodiment.

The shapeshifter's embodiments are encoded with the histories of racialization, objectification, assimilation, diasporization. The shapeshifter's body, in its ability to narratively construct itself while retaining subjectivity, is an embodied counter-history. Such a conception of Salt Fish Girl is in line with authorial intent, as Larissa Lai conceives of bodies, hers and that of her work, in the contexts of colonial and white supremacist histories. In pieces titled "Political

Animals and the Body of History” and “Future Asians”, Lai reflects on “strategies” that “we diasporized types [can] make a homespace for ourselves given all the disjunctures and discontinuities of our histories, and for that matter, the co-temporalities of some of them” (Political Animals 149). Her answer is in engaging with “the consciously artificial narrative construction of history,” that is “a history that is not factual, that is not for the ‘historical record,’ but that is experienced and written on the body” (Lai, Political Animals 153, Future Asians 173). Although Lai does not see her practice as shapeshifting, I think with her reflections alongside her fiction to figure shapeshifting because in treatment of history as a narrative body, she seems to be writing about a practice of conscious embodiment that grounds my definition of shapeshifting:

I don't think this practice originates so much with naivete as with a burning desire for that past; that it should have form, that it should have a body. Sometimes I feel our very survival in this country depends on the articulation of this form, the construction and affirmation of this body. (Lai, Political Animals 150)

Central to this theory of shapeshifting is the ‘affirmation’ that we can ‘consciously’ reshape, not merely how our bodies extend into space, not merely how we relate to our bodies, but how we are in our bodies. Shapeshifting is ‘an articulation of this form,’ that by ‘articulating’ through our bodies and giving ‘form’ to silenced subjects we can engage in strategies of spacemaking.

The analogy of language and its constraints help define the descriptions from which I theorize shapeshifting. Specifically, language has been historically employed as an analogy for biology as a phenomenon, most enduring as an analogy for species ⁷. As embodiment is a biological phenomenon, and I approach shapeshifting to theorize on embodiment, language can

⁷ For instance, see Taub, Liba. “Evolutionary Ideas and ‘Empirical’ Methods: The Analogy between Language and Species in Works by Lyell and Schleicher.” *The British Journal for the History of Science*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1993, pp. 171–93. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4027096>.

become a lens through which embodiment is read. This reading of embodiment and biology feature in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*, in which the central shapeshifter character Anyanwu has to "read" the shape she is to become before shapeshifting (Butler 86). In preparation for her physical transformation, Anyanwu first ingests a sample of the animal's body whose shape she seeks: "the flesh of the fish told her all she needed to know about the creature's physical structure—all she needed to know to take its shape and live as it did" (85). Although it is not referred to such in the text, this description of the 'flesh of the fish' as being encoded with all information of its biology suggests that what Anyanwu describes as "the creature [telling] her its story thousands of times" is DNA, the biological code of an animal (85). When she ingests raw flesh, Anyanwu is able to read, through an internal scanning of her own body, a 'story' of what the flesh "is" (86). The emphasis on raw (as opposed to cooked) flesh pinpoints an original form that remains untampered with, untransformed—a body before its entry into language. Raw flesh is figured as a true embodied interiority, a way for "the creature [to tell Anyanwu] its story thousands of times," as opposed to a translated experience (85). As cooking alters chemical structure, cooked meat becomes a distorted, translated or recoded story. Anyanwu describes this distinction by comparing her "flesh-messages," which "can only tell [her] what it is," to books that Doro "read[s] to her from," which allows for "misunderstand[ing]" as the "other men" who "made them" can "lie or make mistakes" (). In other words, Anyanwu sees the raw 'flesh-messages' as the body and cooked meat as language and books. The body, in contrast, cannot lie. To shapeshift, Anyanwu receives as original what it is to be other. This embodying of other as self is utterly unmediated. Language, on the other hand, serves as mediator. Language, though embodied, is internalized and externalized in an exchange. Language is embodied and deeply interiorized, mediating the self as thoughts and mediating relation to others as translation

of thoughts. In contrast, in shapeshifting, Anyanwu's ingestion of 'flesh-messages' is an embodied understanding—using her body to understand other bodies/understanding other bodies through her body. A knowing as embodying. A knowing other as knowing self.

Embodied knowing is not necessarily embodied being. Even after understanding the dolphin's 'story,' Anyanwu still observes a distinction between how she knew the dolphin to be and how Anyanwu is as dolphin: "But dolphin hearing was superior to anything she had created in herself (). In other words, Anyanwu embodies herself as dolphin, not the dolphin. Anyanwu could not conceive of herself as dolphin until she became one. Shapeshifting offers the possibility of being otherwise, a way of being self that cannot be truly conceived of by the current self—shapeshifting creates the potentiality in becoming self as other.

Shapeshifting simultaneous holds both other and self in embodiment, and there is a negotiation of the way of being carried out through language. One of the first observations that Anyanwu makes as she adjusts to being dolphin a way of hearing that she "had never imagined," a way of hearing that is speaking: "She could make sounds and they would come back to her as echoes bearing with them the story of all that lay before her (Butler 89). Anyanwu's sense of self as human and sense of self as dolphin echo between each other, as though she is speaking and hearing herself more and more into dolphinness. Indeed, the chatter of dolphins started to "sound more human now—more like speech, like a foreign speech" (90). Through language, the more Anyanwu comes to see herself as dolphin, the more she comes to see dolphins as "not animals" but human (90). Her embodied consciousness holds both ways of being. She is conscious of this simultaneity, and the barrier of language, even as comes into her sense of self as embodied as dolphin: "This was best body she had ever shaped for herself. If only dolphin speech came as easily as dolphin movement" (89). Language becomes problematic for embodiment. In not being

able to be through language, Anyanwu understands and communicates through her body, finding that a male dolphin's "touch was his touch—not quite like that of any of the others as they were not quite like each other" (23). This dynamic of likenesses is a mutual recognition through embodiment. Shapeshifting allows for a way of relation through conscious embodying.

In that shapeshifting allows for relation through conscious embodying, the shapeshifter continuously confronts and transforms through what it means to embody language. Language continues to shape the conditions of shapeshifting. In *Salt Fish Girl*, Nu Wa is seduced by the spectral figure of a white woman in the streets of Canton and follows her to her hometown the City of Hope of Forgetfulness, a North American city in the image of the American Dream. As an immediate result of her migration, Nu Wa's confrontations with foreignness—that is, the foreignness of the new country and its language that defines her as foreign—heightens and transforms her embodied experience of language. In learning the foreign name of the woman, Nu Wa sees her as "no-longer-foreign," even as Nu Wa "roll[s] the syllables of [the 'no-longer-foreign woman's] name over [her] tongue" (Lai 126). [How is this internalizing?] In learning and internalizing the name of the woman. Because Nu Wa and the woman occupy oppositional identities—as they move between their two 'hometowns,' in order for one to be foreign, the other has to belong—in the naming the woman as 'no-longer-foreign,' Nu Wa is seeing herself as foreign. Nu Wa looks at herself through the identity of the other. Thus, in defining the woman, Nu Wa defines herself. She internalizes her own foreignness as an unmarked as a silence in her speech, something that is not named within her interior but is still externally manifest (indeed, her refusal to internally remark upon her own foreignness that makes her more foreign). In moving through the assimilatory gesture of 'rolling the syllables' of the no-longer-foreign woman's name with her tongue, as though swallowing her own

foreignness. In rendering her otherness through recognizing someone else as non-other, Nu Wa is consciously marking her own body. She practices the name, marking herself again and again. The white woman replies with, “All right. Don’t wear [my name] out” (126). This line takes on different connotations, creating the image of a name as something that is worn, language as clothing or skin that the body is dressed in. Taken literally ‘all right’ (rather than ‘alright’) also seems evaluative, suggesting that the taking on of identity as social dressing by way of naming, is a test of belonging. In embodying this foreignness that is interiorized through external dressing, Nu Wa’s language becomes the site of her shapeshifting.

Language is literally internalized, fed to the body in the form of a drink, triggering Nu Wa’s shapeshifting. As Nu Wa drinks, English “slip[s] down [her] throat,” causing her “breathing [to become] deep and cold,” her “cheeks [to] flush” and her “head [to] spin” (126). The body’s symptoms are that of sickness or drunkenness, suggesting an altered state of consciousness. In internalizing the drink, the external substance of English literally reshapes the structure of Nu Wa’s body from the inside out. ‘With each sip of the drink,’ English replaces Nu Wa’s mother tongue such that she “lo[ses] grasp of the old” language she was living in (126). Nu Wa continues to drink the entire “tall glass” until her “bladder swelled,” such that she goes to the bathroom to “pee” out her Chinese (126):

As the hot liquid rushed out from between my legs, I felt my old language gushing away from me, liquid, yellow and irretrievable. I did not feel sad. I felt light, and terribly giddy.

I pulled the flush cord and watched it swirl away. (126)

As a result of this flushing away of Chinese, Nu Wa starts to hear English differently. The no-longer-foreign woman’s words become “sharp and clear,” sounding “brand new to [Nu Wa’s] ears, and also deeply meaningful because of their freshness” (127). As sees Nu Wa drink in

language, rework it within her body, and then pees out another language. This external-internalization process is in itself a process of transition. Nu Wa's conscious embodiment ingests something to relieve another. In this deeply and consciously embodied act, the body acts not only as a container for language but a processor of language. If shapeshifting can be seen as process—the process, as we see with Anyanwu, of becoming a self that is aware of its own becoming—then Nu Wa, in being conscious of her internal reconfiguration by English and having that reconfiguration shape her sensorial reception of external stimuli (i.e. her hearing), is shapeshifting. Nu Wa consciously embodies this reconfiguration. As such, embodiment in shapeshifting is process. What is remarkable here is that the body transforms the language as it becomes transformed by language. The body alchemizes. Once something enters the body, it never leaves the same, and the body is never the same. What shapeshifting shows here is not just how the body is inscribed by language, but the body's very ability/capacity to transform language itself.

As negotiation between external influence, the internalization of exteriority and the externalization of interiority, shapeshifting indexes a complicated agency. When Nu Wa returns to drink another glass, she implies that there might have been **an awareness within her** that “doubted the healthfulness of the drink,” an awareness that she “ignored” (127). Is it Nu Wa or is it the drink—is it trigger or choice? Does she continue to drink because she is already ‘drunk’ on English? Consider how the drink “tasted odd—bitter and herbal at the start” then Nu Wa's reception of the drink changes as it becomes internalized: “but then it slipped down my throat sweetly and made my cheeks flush and my head spin” (126). In the moment of the language-leaving, Nu Wa does “not feel sad,” even “light, and terribly giddy” the way that someone drunk might describe their experience, and it is in this state of mind that she “pull[s] the

flush cord and watch[es her Cantonese] swirl away” (126). Is her assimilatory transformation a product of her conscious choice to replace Chinese with English, or is her consciousness completely altered by foreignness? One perspective would be to read the drink as a poison that infects Nu Wa and controls her from within, another would be to interpret the drink as the means by which she renounces her old way of being. At stake here is the complexity of Nu Wa’s agency vis a vis shapeshifting. In shapeshifting, Nu Wa’s deliberate participation in her own change, yet the degree to which her continued participation is precipitated by the changes her body is going through. Language is consciously embodied as a negotiation, a shifting re-rendering of her relationship to language itself, to her own tongue and being. Her shapeshifting is a negotiation of foreignness, of embodying foreignness to transform what is foreign to her sense of self. Shapeshifting negotiates between the self and the strange, and in doing so transforms both.

Shapeshifting is the negotiation of relations. After moving through echelons of American society, eventually betrayed by the white woman and landing in jail, Nu Wa undergoes another moment of shapeshifting that leaves her remorseful, disillusioned from American assimilation, and reawakens within her a desire to return home. Nu Wa has an embodied dream of the Salt Fish Girl, in which they together catch “a fish the size of a human being” (143). In eating still raw flesh of the fish, Nu Wa recognizes herself as also the fish while simultaneously being herself who catches the fish. As she bites into the fish’s flesh, her tongue recognizes another the taste of itself:

It [the fish] tasted like my own tongue. Its human taste shocked and horrified me. The realization that I had swallowed some before noting the taste made me sick to my stomach. I leaned over, retching and spitting. A gold coin tumbled out of my mouth and rolled with a clink onto the rocks and into the river. (Lai 144)

The literal internalization of her own tongue through ingestion of her embodiment as a stranger fish is a form of estranged yet viscerally true self-recognition. This is the antidote to the assimilation that Nu Wa once fully embraced—she instead feels disgust at recognizing that form of herself. The gold coin is both a symbol of Nu Wa's connection to Salt Fish Girl, who gave it to Nu Wa to buy the Salt Fish Girl medicine, and internalized capitalist exchange. Nu Wa literally bought into the American dream, exchanging her connection to home, the conditions of her return, and her responsibility to her partner for an escape from the hardship in her Canton life. Because while it is the white woman who first buys Nu Wa the drink through which she is reshaped, Nu Wa is forced to relinquish her the gold coin in exchange for a map to find her way home from the foreign land. Nu Wa can be seen as paying off her Forgetfulness (also the name of the City), by exchanging coin, her last connection to home, for having bought into assimilation. It is this gold coin that she retches up when she disembodies and discharges the narrative of assimilation. This disembodiment completes Nu Wa's shapeshifting in this case. In contrast to her prior shapeshifting, which is an internalization that transforms her toward the shape of a narrative of assimilation, this second shapeshifting is reshaping of self towards a return to who we was. This reshaping as return is only accomplished through an ingestion of her own body, such that she can take in herself and to reshape herself. Nu Wa does this by ingesting the tongue, the muscle that embodies language so thoroughly that they are synonymous (e.g. mother tongue). The tongue, a muscle that embodies shapeshifting, is the body's facilitator of internalization, what is taken in, and externalization, what is given up. Through the literalization of the tongue as a metaphor for consumption and regurgitation, shapeshifting can be seen as a negotiation of what one takes in to shape oneself as, as well as the converse. Illustrated through how Nu Wa shapeshifts to recognize herself through her tongue, shapeshifting as a relationship of recognition

of ourselves. The distinction between the stranger and the self is not one of binaries, but of spectrums. The particular shapeshifting I am theorizing involves a process of knowing ourselves as both stranger and self, an ability to receive the self as one receives a stranger without guise, and to receive the stranger as one receives oneself. Shapeshifting is to see inside and outside our bodies at once, to consciously embody to become.

Although we usually see shapeshifting as capable of returning the shapeshifter to a familiar form, the internal transformations that are undergone by both Nu Wa and Anyanwu suggest that shapeshifting can be irrevocable. Although Nu Wa appears to have renounced her assimilation in both a bodily and philosophical manner, her shift back is only partial; it is revealed.... Nu Wa, cursed to never be able to speak Cantonese, returns to the Salt Fish Girl, who has become an old woman while Nu Wa remained unaged during her time in Forgetfulness. Nu Wa still understands Cantonese perfectly, though her perfect English is like silence to the Salt Fish Girl. Through the language barrier, they recognize each other's positions. The Salt Fish Girl does not forgive: "I haven't forgotten how you abandoned me...I haven't forgotten who you left me for either. And now you only speak her language and have forgotten ours" (Lai 172). Notably, in using the word 'ours,' Salt Fish Girl inscribes onto Nu Wa a connection to Chinese, one that she has forgotten but is seen as nonetheless unerasable—a mother tongue she can never truly disembody, even as it is silenced. At the same time, language as used by the Salt Fish Girl here is not only that of home but also of love—in using 'our,' Salt Fish Girl is saying that Nu Wa has forgotten the language once shared between the two of them. The language that Nu Wa is displaced from is one of relation to self and relation to the external recognition of self, a relation with a partner who once saw the self and who once shared space with the self. It is a language of

living and experiencing together. In shapeshifting toward her former way of being, Nu Wa has come to see herself and how she relates to Salt Fish Girl differently:

How easily we abandon those who have suffered the same persecutions as we have. How quickly we grow impatient with their inability to transcend the conditions of our lives. I had taken the easy way out. She knew my shame and she didn't forgive me. (Lai 172)

Yet, in coming back into herself, she has ironically made herself foreign to who she was, to her home and her language. In fact, within the framework of recognition, Nu Wa had been so fundamentally altered that when she tasted her own tongue in the form of fish flesh, it was only a tongue 'like' hers. Nu Wa's first instance of shapeshifting may be seen as an attempt to transcend the 'conditions of [her] life' —yet her shapeshifting does not produce transcendence of circumstance. Instead, Nu Wa finds that she is altered by her own alienation. Shapeshifting fundamentally alters. Nu Wa finds herself irrevocably changed by the shapes she had been, and can only change from what she has become. Every shape is lived experience that becomes embodied, that becomes other ways of living—shapeshifting is this becoming.

My definition of shapeshifting is a relational and anticipatory one that seeks to potentialize the way we are in our bodies. Shapeshifting is consciously transformative embodying that crosses boundaries or becomes alterities.

The section after, I'm working with ideas of the body under discipline and biopower, and what that means for shapeshifting embodiment:

In *Salt Fish Girl*, the biopower that disciplines the body of the individual and the population is both totalitarian and totalizing. Bodies are made docile at every turn, population is

managed under biopower, and the diseased disorder is sanitized and cast out. Any life in the Pacific Economic Union is regulated. In theorizing through Foucault resistance to biopower, Adorno describes how biopolitics regulates bios: “We know that biopolitics is, in fact, a politics that centers on the **management of the passage from the zero degree of life, what the Greeks called zoe, to bios, a life which possesses form**” (107). Under such ‘zero degree’ conditions, shapeshifting can become both a strategy of survival and subversion. While capitalist corporations seize the means, products, and discipline of life, in the forms of creating clones as labour forces, instituting norms upon their citizens, and genetically modifying food sources, the shapeshifter retains subjectivity by become life forms that are unsanitized, disorderly, unwritten (not readable in official history), uncoded, cyclical, spiralic, formless, embodied yet disappeared, assimilated yet autonomous. Adorno theorizes a particular kind of death as resistance to biopower:

This reappropriation of death would have two moments. First, death ought to correspond to life as bios: just as to a biological life there corresponds a biological death, so to a formed life should correspond a formed death. Second, when death is understood in this way, it must also be able to give some kind of non- productivity back to the body, to make the body useless as a body, to annihilate it, to preclude its introduction in the economic cycle of biopolitics as a living body, and thus— and above all— as a dead body. (Adorno 110)

In reincarnation, Nu Wa escapes having being killed in “biological death” by shifting into a “formed death” by way of reflecting into the water (Adorno 110). The shapeshifter, embodying both disorder and non-human organic and inorganic material, can become zoe to remain out of reach of biopower. Miranda, for instance, although in some ways appear assimilated, cannot have

her durian scent removed and her shifts in memory become more vivid and intimate—that Miranda’s interiority and internal organization cannot be excised or sanitized articulates the potent power of a relation to zoe as shapeshifting.

The shapeshifter is the ultimate disordered body. Not only because discipline seeks to control, categorize, and programme the body down to the minute detail, which the shapeshifter in its subjectivity can be withheld from, but also because the shapeshifter’s body embodies the collective form of disorder—the plague—that forms the very opposition to and thus inspires the purpose of discipline. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes of discipline as “a political dream” that is “the reverse” of the plague (197). The plague here takes literal form in *Salt Fish Girl* as the “dreaming disease, or the drowning disease,” of which the afflicted radiate the “foul odours” of some non-human or inorganic element (zoe) paired with acquiring a flood of inexorable historical memories or “terrible dreams usually with historical content” (Lai 100). Much like the lepers that Foucault describes to be excluded from society, those afflicted with the dreaming disease are outcasted. Serendipity is “the utopia of the perfectly governed city” that is also the “plague stricken town” that Foucault describes to define the project of disciplinary power:

The leper and his separation; the plague and its segmentations. The first is marked; the second analysed and distributed. The exile of the leper and the arrest of the plague do not bring with them the same political dream. The first is that of a pure community, the second that of a disciplined society. Two ways of exercising power over men, of controlling their relations, of separating out their dangerous mixtures. The plague-stricken town, traversed throughout with hierarchy, surveillance, observation, writing; the town immobilized by the functioning of an extensive power that bears in a

distinct way over all individual bodies—this is the utopia of the perfectly governed city. The plague (envisaged as a possibility at least) is the trial in the course of which one may define ideally the exercise of disciplinary power. In order to make rights and laws function according to pure theory, the jurists place themselves in imagination in the state of nature in order to see perfect disciplines functioning, rulers dreamt of the state of plague. Underlying disciplinary projects the image of the plague stands for all forms of confusion and disorder; just as the image of the leper, cut off from all human contact, underlies projects of exclusion. (198)

The shapeshifter, Miranda in her unruly durian stench, self-growing scales, and reincarnated memories, exists in a paradoxical yet near symbiotic relationship with Serendipity. Much as how Serendipity potentializes itself by taking on the plague as project, the shapeshifter can potentialize itself in shifting through Serendipity.

Virtual reality affords another material, discursive, and affective layer to Serendipity, one that directly uses the body as a site of heterotopic reality. Citizens have access to a technology called the Business Suit, a bodysuit which allows the wearer to enter into the “Real World”—an exact version of the physical world that the wearer interacts within and moves through as though it were a virtual world. Notably, few scholars have deeply attended to the virtualized space and body in *Salt Fish Girl*, often only going so far as to identify the Real World as a virtual reality technology that extends the entrenched techno-totalitarianism. However, an interpretation, based on how Miranda’s friend takes care to explain that his children’s Swimming Suits carries the “bonus” that “no one can see you” and how Miranda’s father uses his Business Suit to interact with store owners in the Unregulated Zone, can pinpoint the Real World as an overlay of the real world (Lai, *Salt Fish Girl* 65). Foucault’s heterotopia is a useful description of the Real World in

relation to the physical environment of Serendipity. For Foucault, the mirror serves as the grounding definition of heterotopia:

[I]t makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.
(Foucault, *Of Other Spaces* 4)

Indeed, the Real World is at once a mirror of reality, as the physical world appears as it is in the virtual one, as well as a “placeless place,” as it is not so much a space as another layer of reality is entered by wearing a Suit (4). The Suits are the ‘virtual point’ through which an individual passes through to the heterotopic Real World. In this sense, the Real World can almost be seen as enclosed within the Suit, and it is the body whose act of wearing that gives the individual entry. Rather than conceiving of the Real World as a virtual landscape that the body moves through, the Real World can instead be thought of as a form of virtual embodiment. One does not so much enter as embody this virtual reality. The Real World *is* the virtualization of the body.

The virtualization of the body is also its docilization. Through the body’s act of passage into the Real World, discipline literally works itself into Serendipity’s heterotopic reality and further subjects the docile body by regulating access to this reality:

Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. (7)

The Business Suit, “a large black suit made of some shiny synthetic material, elastic and tight-fitting,” must be “stepped into” as though crossing a doorway, and “zipped up” such that

the suit's mask "obliterates" the wearer's own face (Lai, *Salt Fish Girl* 25-26). Miranda's father, a tax collector who uses the Business Suit to "go to the Office in the evenings," conforms his body to the Suit, taking care to adjust every part of his body so it is covered for his movements to be traceable and conditionable (25). In what Foucault calls discipline's "instrumental coding of the body" (*Discipline and Punish* 153), the Business Suit provides "pieces of every part of the body" (Lai, *Salt Fish Girl* 25), so as to regulate the relations of the body down to its "minutest operations" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 156). Every gesture, perception, movement can then be disciplined by the Suit. Every body that enters the Real World is encoded through the disciplinary ritual that is putting on the Suit. Thus, every body in the Real World is a docile body.

Taken together, virtual reality in *Salt Fish Girl* is a way of dressing the body through discipline in a form of docile embodiment. Discipline, in the form of the Real World, acts on and through the body—much like a computer programming of the body. Indeed, Foucault sees discipline as "a 'programme'; it assures the elaboration of the act itself; it controls its development and its stages from the inside" (*Discipline and Punish* 152). I locate in the experience of docile virtual embodiment a site of shapeshifting to figure shapeshifting as a form of body-scripting. Specifically, it is useful to see shapeshifting as a recoding or reprogramming of the body's relations. First, the shapeshifter is attuned to external and internal coding: "It felt the same on the inside as it did on the outside. For some reason, this surprised me" (Lai, *Salt Fish Girl* 66). Miranda's surprise provides a key for our observation of the process of shapeshifting. Here, Miranda gains an understanding of how the Suit, much like how racialization can become so embedded as to be inextricable from identity, is an exterior coding that is encoded such a way that prevents access to interiority, to the self-knowing that precipitates and grounds shapeshifting. This way of seeing the Suit, combined with Miranda's body is already it itself a

layer of spatiality wherein her shapeshifting consciousness stretches to how Nu Wa embodies, sets up how Miranda's body cannot be rendered docile even when she goes through the disciplinary ritual of the Suit. Indeed, the Suit is ill fitting, and Miranda immediately notices how the Real World's "colours weren't quite right" (66). Rather than being overwritten by Real World programming, Miranda shapeshifts:

My eyes felt blurry and wet, as though water were seeping into the mask. There was a bit of electronic fizzle, which felt like salt water in the eyes. I blinked to clear them. When I opened them again I was crouching on the floor in a wet basement...At the far end of the room...[with] a black eye and many great, bleeding welts across his back...whimpering like a dog...was my father. (Lai 66)

The children's Swimming Suits, notably, are "emotionally guided" and Miranda's friend reveals that "[m]ostly all [he] sees is flashes of things" (65). Miranda's 'emotionally guided' virtual shifting is not only encoded through a breaking of the conformity of the Suit, but related to spatialities. For Miranda, the Suit became a spatial affect that she shifts through. She shapeshifts into water, immaterial and therefore unencodable in the way that bios can be constricted. And then, between one blink and the next—an important detail that pinpoints a conscious maneuvering—she reconfigures her embodiment, shapeshifting through the spatialities of her body along her relation to her father. Rather than be overwritten and rendered docile by the Suit, demonstrated by how Ian is only shown 'flashes of things,' Miranda overwrites the Suit. Shapeshifting scripts the program that seeks to 'elaborat[e]' itself over the body.

In this sense, shapeshifting can be a transformative, creative embodying—as opposed to using the body—that is a way of being and becoming. Shapeshifting follows Foucault's directive to "not only defend ourselves, but affirm ourselves, and affirm ourselves not only as identities,

but as creative forces” (Foucault in Revel 124). The shapeshifting that not only survives but subverts discipline, that resists and reprograms biopower, is one of creating alterities through relationalities. This shapeshifting is a way of being, embodying, and becoming that affirms its extensions between zoe and bios to shift spaces into alterities. This shapeshifting is one of “the common” that Judith Revel theorizes in deconstructing biopolitics:

Where life falls prey to procedures of management and control, exploitation and captivity, it can also affirm that which no power (*pouvoir*) will ever possess: its own capacity (*puissance*) of creation. This is life as a capacity of subjectivization, the working out of this long and differential becoming of singular differences, and thus also, as we have seen, the constantly renewed construction of the common as the powerful (*puissant*) interweaving of differences. (122-123)

Evie and her sisters’ revolutionary seeding of a new society through themselves and biopower durians (as in, fertility durians are breed to produce life that can be disciplined) is a prime example. So too is Nu Wa/Miranda and Evie shapeshifting together to give birth—shapeshifting here literally creates life and augments the self: where power administers life, life, for its part, innovates; where power subjects life, life resists by introducing a simultaneously ontological and political strategy of resistance: a creation, an augmentation of being” (Revel 123). Nu Wa introduces her own ontology, embodying as a way of being, and as the last line of *Salt Fish Girl*—“until next time”—implies, her shapeshifting becomes and becomes (Lai 269).

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