

1-1-2017

# Shapeshifting and Sexuality: A Critical Autoethnography of a Selkie

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SHAPESHIFTING AND SEXUALITY: A CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A

SELKIE

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A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

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June 2017

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Title: SHAPESHIFTING AND SEXUALITY: A CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY  
OF A SELKIE

Advisor: Bernadette Marie Calafell

Degree Date: June 2017

### **Abstract**

Shapeshifting lore has provided a rich and evocative way to explore human experiences across many different cultures. This author utilizes the mythology of selkies to unpack the perspective of a white queer woman who is dealing with issues of racial privilege, heteronormativity, and patriarchal oppression. Utilizing performative writing and autoethnographic method, the author creates an argument for the integration of intersectional practices within the work of queer theorists, as well as for resistance against assimilation.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

I was about fifteen years old when I realized that a lot of people are afraid of the ocean. I had mentioned swimming at the beach to a friend of mine and they gave me the oddest look. “Why would you want to go in the water?” Others nearby chimed in with their agreements. The ocean is dirty, there are fish that bite you, riptides, it’s cold, you could drown.

I was perplexed.

Since I can remember, I have always felt the most at home by the water. I can smell the ocean long before I see it, and that first breath when you catch a whiff of salt and seaweed always makes me feel like I’ve been living on half-breaths since I was last there.

It’s understandable that I feel at home next to the ocean; I lived in a small city by the bay during my childhood. I woke up to the sound of sea lions barking and raced waves on the paths that always overflowed at high tide. I could play for hours in the mud at the shoreline, catching crabs and hunting for treasures. I played that I was a sea creature whenever I went swimming; practicing swimming like a seal instead of a person, skimming along the bottom for as long as I could and shooting up for a quick breath before rolling my body down into another dive.

When I was very young, I learned about creatures called selkies: women who are also seals. A selkie can choose to shed its skin to spend time on dry land, or they can jump right back in and swim away into the ocean, playing with other seals and catching fish. They have the intelligence of women but also the instincts of seals. They are at home in the ocean, in the wild cold and darkness, but also love to shed their skin and dance in the sunshine.

*Oh, I thought, That's me.*

This project is an exploration of the shapeshifter narrative and the ways it can be utilized to examine and unpack the perspective of a queer white woman under the scrutiny of heteronormativity and white femininity. Through the reinterpretation of the selkie as a queer figure, specifically a closeted one, this thesis will push back against a heterosexist culture which disciplines individuals who do not conform to the norms of gender and sexuality. By placing in conversation my story, or autoethnography, with the story of the selkie, I will demonstrate that queer women have experienced similar forms of oppression. The story of the selkie is frequently told in a way that romanticizes rape by turning a story of a man controlling the sexuality of a woman into a love story. By calling out the violence inherent to this story, my performative autoethnography will show how such violence is perpetuated daily against queer women.

Additionally, drawing on work on white femininity, as outlined by Moon, McIntosh and Hobson, and other critical whiteness scholars (DiAngelo; Ahmed), adds a new lens to the current scholarship on shapeshifters, which has predominately stemmed from scholars of color who have written about shapeshifting and monsters (Anzaldúa;

Calafell). My queerness transforms me into the Other; making me a shapeshifter like Anzaldúa or Calafell. However, despite my identification with shapeshifters, I have never been treated like a monster, or made to fear my own heart. This piece is heavily inspired by the shapeshifting invoked within Anzaldúa's and Calafell's work, which uses shapeshifting as a tool to explain the feeling of Otherness that comes from being a queer woman of color in a culture that welcomes neither of those identities. Anzaldúa and Calafell use the image of the shapeshifter to illustrate their treatment by society; they are made inhuman – or monstrous. Although I too have been Othered, I do not believe I can honestly claim “monster.” My Otherness has been treated as strange, or even attractive in the most fetishistic sense, but I have never been made into a monster in the same way that women of color have been treated. In this way, my work differs from the shapechanging narratives of women of color. My use of this narrative is in identification with the hybrid nature of queerness, and in no way do I wish to write over the pain of being made into a monster that, despite being made to feel Other, I have never experienced.

Bringing together a queer woman's narrative of shapeshifting with the lens of critical whiteness will allow me to explore the selkie myth as a metaphor for being closeted, but also as an interpretation of the ways in which white women are disciplined to be complicit in their own oppression and expected to actively enforce the racist rules of a society that privileges whiteness. Whiteness as a whole tends to privilege the mind over the body, labeling cerebral processes as “masculine” and therefore, logical, unbiased, and superior. In contrast, femininity is associated with the natural body, which carries connotations, such as lack of restraint, emotionality, and excess (Conquergood).

Expectations and performances of whiteness create a stifling environment for a shapeshifter's body, as these expectations act as forces that remove my "skin" rendering me unable to exist as a whole being. With this thesis I present an alternate performance which "desacralizes the cherished assumptions of logical positivism" (Conquergood 17), and lends a more critical and reflexive voice to the academic and personal spaces I swim in.

Selkie mythology largely stems from oral tradition. One account from a fisherman, recorded in 1884 explains the oral tradition as a binding tradition; thus, to not believe the stories passed down through generations is to disrespect one's fathers and mothers (Kennedy 355). The fisherman recalled the stories he was told about selkies. His narrative was very brief, and indicated that he believed the story to be common knowledge: "Selkies, ye ken of course, so I need hardly tell you that" (355). Since the story of the selkie is passed down through oral tradition there are a few variations, but there are enough common themes to piece the legend together. In his version, the selkie only comes ashore every seven years, and only for a very short while. The seven years rule is not always mentioned: sometimes the story is that selkies can come ashore during the full moon, or others do not offer any specific time constraints. I grew up watching *The Secret of Roan Inish*, wherein the selkie comes ashore merely to rest in the sun for a while.

In the selkie legend, coming ashore can be dangerous, because "should anyone discover the skin of that selkie while it is in its human form, the person so doing becomes at once, and for ever, the master of that seal, that is, of that person, or soul" (356). By



stealing the skin of a selkie woman, a man strips her of agency and gains control over every aspect of her life. Her captor is always a man, which reinforces the heteronormativity in the story. She is not allowed relationships with other women, and is forced into marriage with a man even if marriage is not her desire. Once the selkie is mastered in this way, most legends describe her as an exemplary wife, who comes to love her husband/captor and bear children with him. The story clearly demonstrates approval of the way her husband has “domesticated” her, by having children with her and turning her into a good wife. Eventually, she finds her skin again (in some variations it is given to her by one of her children) and returns to the sea, sometimes taking her children, but most often leaving them behind. With this act, she rejects the role of motherhood, which is considered the pinnacle achievement of womanhood under a heteronormative culture which “channels these women into marriage and motherhood in the service of men” (Yep 19). Despite her obvious desire to escape, the selkie story is told as a romance, bittersweet in its ending, but with love apparent between the man and his strange bride. This framing of the story is just another way in which the selkie is constrained by the roles she is expected to perform.

I, fortunately, still have my skin, but the idea of being a seal has enchanted me from day one. The idea of having a wild creature inside you is typically a terrifying thought, but for me it was a wonderful notion. Seals are playful and joyful and so was I. Contemporary representations of selkies may be found in the films such as, *The Secret of Roan Inish*, *Song of the Sea*, *Ondine*, and an ironically titled short story, *Selkie Stories are for Losers*. Typically depicted as incredibly attractive women, selkies may also be

men, as shown by McNeil and Chien-Eriksen, but such representations are much less frequent.

I was a strong selkie girl, but it's the small moments that change the shape of your life. Just a couple sentences can be the catalyst for a huge change.

"Dad's flying out for an interview in Denver. He'll be home in a few days."

Then,

"He got the job."

And suddenly the house is flooded with boxes and friends to help pack all my treasures away, while I wander aimlessly back and forth in the driveway. My box of shoreline treasures "got lost" somewhere along the way, and I'm forced to understand that I will be going somewhere far away, with none of my friends, and nothing familiar.

Memory is a funny, unreliable thing. Before that moment, I don't remember ever truly being sad about anything at all. I know that I cried many times, but nothing that couldn't be mended in a few hours at most with a hug from my sister, or the distraction of a new toy or book. But at twelve years old, I entered puberty, coming into a whole new range of emotions which were much less predictable than the tides, but just as powerful. My physical transition away from the ocean was accompanied by a storm of emotions that felt just as painful as having my skin dragged away from me. Nielson makes the argument that in most young or monsters experiencing puberty, the trigger that turns them into something other than human is sexual experience. In the case of *Ginger Snaps*, Ginger's transformation into a werewolf is linked heavily to menstruation, as her hunger becomes as sexual hunger. Puberty also caused me to shapeshift, but in my case I was

desperately trying to shift into a more “acceptable” form, terrified that someone would find out I was an imposter and expose me for the liar I was.

Although I wasn’t chained to a husband, there was a distinct difference in the ways I was supposed to behave. Grow up. All of a sudden the way I acted was strange, and everyone around me seemed to know a secret code that I frantically scrambled to decipher. I shouldn’t run everywhere, I shouldn’t wear skirts to climb things, I shouldn’t climb things at all and I should definitely wear skirts, but not too short. Or too long. I should always get good grades, but good heavens, why was I reading so much? My friends made books into dirty words and seemed truly baffled at every instance I acted “weird,” while I desperately tried to figure out what I was doing wrong.

At this point, I had already had the word “gay” explained to me, but with no nuances or ways to apply it to my world. “Gay” was a thing that other people were, and that was that. “Gay” wasn’t about love, or desire at that point. However, I had a strong sense that I was doing something all wrong. Things that interested all my friends had absolutely no appeal to me, so in an effort to stop breaking all these secret rules I pretended as best I could. Yes, I think that boy in homeroom is “hot.” Without any idea of what my friends even meant when they began declaring they had a “crush” on this or that boy who seemed no different from any other boy I had ever met.

One of the struggles of a selkie is passing as a human. Her habits and diet are strange, as she prefers to spend her time solitary, always by the shoreline instead of in the company of her husband. She craves independence from the dominating male figure in her life, and struggles with the conflict between being a wife or being true to her nature.

Similarly, I struggled with passing as a straight girl, long before I even began to have a sense of what sexuality was. I didn't know what was wrong with me, but I knew that something was wrong. Ahmed describes this sense of queer discomfort as an "acute awareness of the surface of one's body" (425); not necessarily a physical sense, but feeling the social boundaries that your body fails to completely inhabit. For me, it was a feeling of losing a game with indecipherable rules that no one else seemed to be playing.

Drawing on the white socialization that taught me to be a good white girl I fell back on the guise of politeness (Moon). Sexuality was a conversation for sleepover whispers and glances over the shoulder; it wasn't the proper thing for "young ladies" to discuss. I never vocalized my discomfort, because I did not want to seem like I was causing trouble, and I closed my ears to the subject because I knew it was wrong of me to be curious. Being a selkie girl means having to hide, because people are only interested in the part of you that looks and acts like everyone else. I will always be uncomfortable acting the part of a straight woman, but neither have I been able to comfortably squeeze myself into any other label. Finding comfort in the inbetweenness of my identity has been crucial, and seems to solidify my status as a shapeshifter – someone who is neither this, nor that.

The selkie, a woman/seal hybrid, provides a unique frame for my experiences as a young woman living in the closet and drowning under the guise of heterosexuality. Humanity has always turned to myth to capture feelings and experiences that are complicated or frightening. For instance, Moreman and Calafell (2008) show how the story of La Llorona can be traced back to issues that stem from colonialism and

citizenship. Myth, to me is especially important because it is uncertain – no two stories are the same, and each retelling means something new to every new listener. By using the selkie story to enhance my own, I express the intangible nature of my own identity, and the difficulty I, and by extension, other young queers, experience in firmly grasping our own natures.

Having introduced the myth of the selkie/shapeshifter figure and the theories I intend to explore through that lens, the layout of the rest of this thesis will be as follows: moving from the legend to explore my method further, I will explain the significance of using an autoethnographic, performative writing approach in more detail. Drawing on the works of Fox, Pollock, and other scholars who focus on performance within their research, I will discuss the importance of making this thesis into a piece of work that is not only theoretical but also performative and evocative. In a straight, white, male oriented academic environment, I argue that performative writing methods can be utilized to subvert the power imbalances within the academy and to validate physical and emotional knowledge as important.

Next I will be discussing more in depth the theories of queerness that I intend to highlight in this thesis, as well as the theories of shapeshifting as laid out by Calafell and Anzaldúa. When writing about a queer topic, I always find it important to reorient the reader with my definition of the term and the way it will be applied, since it is such a fluid subject, with many various definitions. Giving an overview of previous scholarship on shapeshifting will provide citational relevance to the scholars who have worked so hard on

the topic, as well as ground the piece so that the differences that come from adding in critical whiteness better shine through.

After a solid grounding in theory, I will put those methods and ideas together with my own autoethnography. This will be an in-depth exploration of aspects of my own life, coming to terms with being a queer woman, and contrasted with elements of the selkie story. Finally, I will offer my own conclusions and discuss ways in which shapeshifter rhetoric could be utilized in future study by other marginalized communities.

## **Chapter Two: Performative Writing and Autoethnography**

Since the center point of my thesis is the story of the selkie as it relates to my experiences coming to terms with what it means to be a queer woman, it is only natural that my writing should take the form of storytelling. Consequently, I have found an autoethnographic and performative writing style to be the best fit for the work I want to accomplish. Della Pollock describes performative method and writing as “after turning itself inside-out, writing turns again only to discover the pleasure and power of turning, of making not sense or meaning per-se but making writing perform” (75). Under Pollock’s understanding, the writing itself is a shapeshifting element, which is used in “shaping, shifting, testing language” (75). Exploring the capacity of language to create spaces and characters within a narrative is integral to the process of my own transformation. By utilizing performance writing I can sculpt my selkie self and give her a space to exist. Like Anzaldúa, “I change myself, I change the world” (92). Performative writing means that the author is a character, who can be transformed by their own words, making the writing an important tool for a shapeshifter. Giving my stories a form with my words is just as important as drawing connections like a traditional academic. I want them to be real. When you read them, I want you to be transported emotionally into the moment, and to be with me as I experience the moments on the page. Performative

writing can transform the reader so that they briefly embody the character and act in tandem with the script in a “joint production of meaning” (Pollock 80).

I find every excuse not to tell my stories. It feels so much like stripping naked and going up on stage somewhere to let people peer at all my flaws, up-close and in person. But if I don't, I feel the shame anyway, because then I am a liar who can pretend like this isn't at all personal. I have to get personal, but it's painful, in the way that ripping off a scab might be painful, and simultaneously satisfying. Similarly, Anzaldúa writes, “That's what writing is for me, an endless cycle of making it worse, making it better, but always making meaning out of the experience, whatever it may be” (95). Sometimes I type with my eyes shut, trusting my fingers to know where the letters are, and hoping that when I open my eyes, I will have transcribed all that I'm feeling to the page. Pollock write about the evocative nature of performative writing that makes this easier than it would be otherwise, but it is still a challenge to craft a piece that captures the emotions of an experience.

The selkie is an important figure in my story, and I hope that in the telling, I can draw from her. Her story is painful, melancholic, and lonely. It is also violent. Stealing the skin from a woman/seal's back and dragging her out of her body and into a different world is a staggering violation. Performing her story with/as my own will allow my thesis to “bring the reader into contact with ‘other-worlds’” (Pollock 80) – worlds of emotion and memory which a typical analysis of the story would not be able to evoke. As Pollock further argues, performative writing is designed to push at the boundaries of what can be



spoken and defined; good performance brings to light feelings for which we might not have adequate words, and good performative writing can do the same.

Pelias offers additional support for the performative writing method by outlining several necessary elements of performative writing as scholarship. For this method to move past a “cinema style” reproduction of events the author must use their experience to connect to the “human experience,” and construct a meaningful story. This is a key aspect of the method, since “human experience does not reduce to numbers, to arguments, to abstractions” (418), so the author must build a world within their story that welcomes the reader and evokes their experience.

Pelias makes the important point that an author using performative writing methods is not necessarily arguing to “win” the discussion. This method is framed by the belief that the world is filled with “multiple realities” (418), all of which are meaningful. The purpose of performative writing is not to elevate one reality over the other, but to provide a window into the author’s reality. In this way, performative writing “promotes new modes of thought” (Fox, 6) by challenging the assumption that academic knowledge must reach an answer that is “fixed” or “correct.” As Pelias and Fox show, performative writing exists to evoke a certain experience, which promotes reflexive engagement and understanding on the part of the reader.

Fox also describes performative writing as a method which “focuses on the personal but remains self-reflexive” (6), which is one of the elements that keeps the method from becoming too self-absorbed. Reflexivity is discussed very thoroughly by

McIntosh and Hobson not only as a theoretical buzzword but as praxis. By employing reflexivity throughout this thesis, I can examine the complexities of my own position within the narrative; the ways in which my body both has and does not have power in the same moment.

Additionally, through performative methodologies, I can use my experience to disrupt the “master narrative” (Corey 250). Corey describes the master narrative as “an artillery of moral truth” (250) to illustrate the overwhelming barrage of messages we receive which tell us what is “acceptable” and what is morally suspicious. These messages create and protect our society which privileges a white, male, straight perspective as “universal” and neutral (DiAngelo). Performative writing looks at the master narrative through a critical eye, and unpacks the significance of certain stories being considered neutral. Writing with a performance centered approach can poignantly express the effects that hierarchies of perspectives have on individuals who don’t share the same experiences. Personal narrative is positioned to be a counterpoint to the dominant story. Personal narrative makes it possible for queer storytellers to challenge, subvert, and openly resist the culture that reinforces the narrative they are supposed to fall in line with (Corey). By using performative writing methodologies, these narratives offer connection and courage to individuals who have similar experiences. In this case, the selkie’s story is typically told through the master narrative as a romance that sustains oppressive gender roles and hierarchies. Creating a counterpoint that uses performative writing, I can flip the perspective of the story: a man kidnaps an otherworldly creature,

forces her into marriage, sex, and children, and when she is given the opportunity to escape she runs from him without a backwards glance.

When told through the master narrative, expected to see the story of the selkie as a love story. The man and the selkie love each other very much; after all, she goes with him. After all, she raises a family with him. It is only her animalistic side that resists him. Given the tie between women and “natural” knowledge vs. “academic” knowledge which is more often classified as masculine (Conquergood), it is interesting that the selkie’s connection to nature is what resists her husband. This is crucial, because “instinctive” knowledges can be considered subjugated knowledge and treated dismissively (Collins). Collins explains that within Western academia scholars are expected to decontextualize themselves from their research. Emotions, ethics, and values are “deemed inappropriate in the research process” (274). These rules privilege a post-positivist perspective of research which silences subjectivity and researcher positionality. Collins argues that asking black women to distance themselves from the emotional aspect of their work is asking them to “devalue our emotional life” – and not to be authorities on their own experiences (274).

By making the selkie’s instinctual resistance to her husband out to be irrational, the story falls in line with Western modes of thought, which trivializes instinctual or emotional knowledge, which is implied to be the domain of women and people of color. The tragedy of the story is that she gives into her nature and separates herself from her husband. We are meant to feel for the man, who loses the love of his life in a single blow,

and expected to accept that the selkie woman loved her husband with the rational, human side of her mind. The master narrative takes the consent of a kidnapped woman for granted because we are told that her man “loves” her.

By intertwining the selkie story with my narrative, I can subvert the master narrative by telling the story from the selkie’s perspective. Through that lens, I can then shed light onto my experiences of enforced heterosexuality and heteronormativity combined with the expectations of white femininity as violent. Performing a story that resists these expectations sheds light on them, showing them for what they are: stories. Why should those stories be the ones we have to tell and retell over and over again? Making my narrative into a performance makes it plain that the master narrative is not unmovable; it is merely a different story. My story is only one story set against this hegemonic stream of words and ideas, but I can still offer it as an alternate narrative. As Corey writes, “Each queer has a little story, but in the spirit of postmodernism, a little difference becomes a lot of discourse” (250).

I have focused on performative writing as a method, but I also want to incorporate autoethnography and even autoarcheology as utilized by Ragan Fox in his piece “Tales of a Fighting Bobcat.” Within his piece, Fox draws upon artifacts from his childhood to represent evidence of institutional discipline. These artifacts are significant in that they strengthen the narrative by grounding the reader in the story. We don’t have to imagine what his school looks like, he’s provided a map (128). We can literally walk through the story with him, living it in the same space he experienced it. We see the words

condemning him exactly as they appeared on the page, written by his teacher's hand.

Every artifact Fox gives us makes the setting of his scenes that much more detailed and genuine.

The artifacts displayed by Fox add to the story of his body being disciplined in relation to his gay identity during his high school years. They also allow us to feel his fear of being discovered, from his vehement denial of being gay to his "failed escape," which was cut short because he did not want to correct anyone who assumed he was a girl. Fox argues that even though his experience is not universal "The artifacts do, however, say something important and heuristically provocative about the culture from which they were taken" ("Tales" 125). Fox further states that, piece by piece, differing narratives and artifacts can help assemble a more complete picture of the culture from which they were produced. In this case, his artifacts help describe a culture of homophobia and discipline. My piece, which also has a focus in personal history, may benefit from similar artifacts.

"Tales" also includes a section for "artifacts of affirmation" (Fox 134). These illustrate the benefits Fox experienced from coming into his own as a performer and from finding a support network of individuals who, like him, were socially outcast in different ways. Fox uses these artifacts to build a counternarrative against the institutional narrative that he was simply not trying hard enough to fit in.

Adams and Holman Jones define autoethnography as "sharing politicized, practical, and cultural stories that resonate with others and motivating these others to

share theirs; bearing witness, together, to possibilities wrought in telling” (111). By sharing my “queer little story” I am making it that much easier for others queers in similar situations to find a resource and consider sharing their stories as well.

Autoethnography is personal, but ties into a culture as well. My story of struggling with and coming to terms with my queerness is uniquely my own, but it is also the same story that many other queers face in critical ways. Fear, uncertainty, confusion, pain; these are underlying themes in the narrative of the closet.

Spry understands autoethnography as “a space of intense personal and cultural risk” (47) as well as “a space of profound comfort” (47). Effective autoethnography draws on the moments in the author’s life that are fraught with conflict and carry larger social implications regarding stigma and oppression (Spry 51). Stories that relate that level of conflict are, by their nature, stories that carry pain with them. When an author makes themselves vulnerable through autoethnographic work, it can be similar to disinfecting a wound. The process is painful, since it involves a close look at one’s own self. The comforting nature of this method comes from the catharsis of pushing out or birthing a story, as well as from the connections one can make from that experience. Spry discusses the people who approach her after hearing one of her autoethnographies, who have been deeply moved by it, either due to similar personal experiences, or because the story allowed them to experience her perspective. As a scholar, I am inspired to utilize autoethnography as a method due to the emotional connections I have felt when reading

pieces written by other scholars. Working within a method which fosters connections and coalitions allows us to broaden the field by allowing for an intersectional viewpoint.

Autoethnography is messy. You can't stick a needle into your soul and funnel it out onto the page, so the process of writing is always a game of hide and seek, hunting down that intangible something that you feel so deeply but can't quite put into words (Anzaldúa; Adams and Holman Jones). But part of the process is accepting the thing you can't say; the places where word fail and you have to rely on the empathy of others to fill in the blanks with corresponding emotion. I don't need to make sure my reader knows 100% what it's like to experience my story as Sophie, but if my writing is successful they should be able to catch a glimpse of the feelings I can't quite grasp. Meaning making in autoethnography is "coperformative" (Spry 53), where we make sense of the world through the interactions of our bodies within social situations and with specific individuals. Following Spry's definition, autoethnography depends on the reader to co-construct meaning with the author. This method allows each reader to engage with the work in different ways based on their own perspectives.

Spry also argues for autoethnography to be ethical. Utilizing this method requires the author to be aware of "how our choices have conflictual effects upon ourselves and those around us" (120). For instance, she uses an experience that highlights the way that white individuals engage in racist acts that are normalized to the point that they don't even consider the impact of those actions. The experience she shared was of a conversation with her boyfriend at the time, in which he became aggressive at the idea

that she had slept with a black man. In unpacking her reaction of shame at his words, she is able to question which social norms caused that to be her first feeling, and how this attitude is perpetuated through conversations, such as the one she recounted. This episode allows readers to understand that the personal is political, and that conversations, such as the one she experienced, with her boyfriend are common pieces of the master narrative, defined by Corey as “the ongoing ideology passed from generation through generation by way of the stories we tell” (250).

Spry’s example also highlights one of the crucial aspects of autoethnography, which is being reflexive about one’s own failures (McIntosh and Hobson). In her piece, she admits that her first reaction to her boyfriend’s disgust is shame “for misusing my racial status” (Spry 122). Ellis and Bochner write that the self-reflection piece of autoethnography is extremely difficult, especially “confronting things about yourself that are less than flattering” (738). This echoes McIntosh and Hobson’s call for reflexive engagement, which requires scholars to not only critique social structures, but to find and acknowledge the places in which they have failed to challenge oppressive ideologies, and may have acted to uphold them. In committing to ethically utilizing autoethnography, I must be honest about my own failures as a white queer woman and use that knowledge to do better in the future.

Another ethical dilemma that authors must seriously consider when using autoethnography as a method is the issue of representing people you know in your writing. Ellis and Bochner describe this issue alongside the issue of memory; you are



unlikely to have recorded documentation of the kind of stories typically told in autoethnography since “you may be too caught up in living it” (751). However, they argue that one can still write the emotional truth of the scene without having the details 100% correct. The accurate reproduction of a memory is a tricky task, though. Adams and Holman Jones warn us that we must take note of “norms that influence storytelling; understanding, to the best of our ability, how we frame ourselves and others, particularly how we make ourselves look good and just while making others look bad and unruly” (112). I want to make it clear that while I am reproducing events as accurately as I can remember, my own emotional reactions towards those events has shaped my memory of them.

Despite the ethical challenges faced by an author who uses autoethnography as a method, it is still a valuable resource for individuals who struggle with the systemic violence of institution such as academia. If a person who struggles with the master narrative encounters a piece that is resistant to that narrative, it can lend them strength to tell their own story. After all, according to Corey “the little narratives sell the truth” (252). In the case of a wider audience, Corey argues that the master narrative can be made less credible from a single subversive narrative. In terms of another person suffering under the master narrative, a subversive narrative is a lifeline. Calafell writes about one of her mentors, Corey, and how “he encouraged me to tell my story; to form my own relationship with performance” (432). In turn, her work has inspired me, and made me feel safe to tell my own story. When I question the value of my story, I

remember that it was a line of “little queer stories” that encouraged me to pursue the academic path I am currently on.

A performative autoethnography/archeology method also makes it possible for me to finish my narrative without necessarily wrapping up all my unanswered questions neatly into a bow. Questions of identity and one’s place within the systems of power reproduced by society are never definitively answered. As Pollock suggested, performative writing can be contradictory. Stories don’t need a traditional “happy ending.” They can just exist as a testament to the broken and oppressive narratives that continue to claim new victims. Performative writing is never simply finished; “It is always a path/state to something else” (Anzaldúa 95). Using this method is a fitting choice to write about struggles with identity, which are rarely clear-cut.

### **Chapter Three: Queerness, White Femininity, and Intersectionality**

“You’ve shut the door again

to escape the darkness

only it’s pitch black in that closet” (Anzaldúa, 193).

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick makes a point to clarify her terminology before proceeding with her argument. She argues that since the “volatile, fractured, dangerous relations of visibility and articulation around homosexual possibility” (18) have such high stakes, the possibility of being misunderstood is highly salient and potentially disastrous. Any readers thus far will have noticed that I have used “queer” most often, but have on occasion also talked about “LGBT” groups instead. Since “queer” is a contested term which has been reclaimed for some individuals and not others, I have chosen to refer to activist and community spaces as LGBT unless they themselves have labeled themselves otherwise. Slagle speaks about the distinction between both designations, writing that LGBT activism and theory work best “for those who are willing (or able) to assimilate into the mainstream” (317). In contrast, “queer” designates a commitment to challenging normative politics in any form, and welcoming difference. Queer activists and scholars challenge oppressive politics from a critical perspective that believes difference in sexuality and other aspects of identity should be celebrated. Identity is not universal, and is constantly being restructured, so the goal of

queer theory is to create space for individuals who do not “fit in” with mainstream views to be celebrated, “not to simply be granted the right to participate in the system” (Slagle 318).

“Queer” is a term which is a bit more complicated, but which I personally identify the most with. My approach to sexuality is very non-normative, which fits better with the definitions of “queer” set forth by both Slagle, who argues that queer theory more effectively resists assimilation and acknowledges and celebrates difference, and Yep, whose definition of “queer” is an identity that challenges normativity as a whole, not just as it relates to sexuality (Yep 36). By committing to a non-normative approach, my work can more effectively highlight the experience of the selkie, as a non-normative creature resisting pressure to “fit in.” Rather than accepting the norms that have been imposed upon her, the selkie can be seen as resisting assimilation and eventually returning to her natural form, which can be seen as a celebration of her difference (Slagle), rather than a continued attempt to change herself for the sake of acceptance. The selkie represents queer individuals who are unable to fall in line with heteronormative ideologies; they cannot transform themselves into “acceptable” gay and lesbian individuals any more than the selkie can transform herself into a “normal” human woman.

Although I prefer the use of the term “queer,” I have been admonished for using it because it used to be a homophobic slur and has only been reclaimed in recent years (Yep). This strikes me as ironic because I have never heard a term for what I am that hasn’t been used as an insult or diagnosis. In high school “gay” was one of the most

derogatory terms my peers threw around, despite the fact that it is seen as the “acceptable” label for LGBT community members, despite the term not adequately encompassing everything they might feel. No matter what word I choose to use, it will be used against me at some point because heterosexual society wants me to be abject: “The queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe’s fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore sub-human, in-human, non-human” (Anzaldúa, 40). Heterosexual society will never be happy with how I label myself unless I acquiesce and redefine myself as “straight.” Instead, I choose to “disidentify,” like Muñoz, with the harmful connotations of the term “queer” and “hold on to this object and invest it with new life” (12). There is power in this word, which I felt immediately upon first hearing it.

Sedgwick refers to the state of being in the closet as “a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts” (3). In this way, she argues that not divulging one’s identity is a performative act that must be examined just as seriously as any act which requires speech. Any queer story that touches on the closet will likely agree that being in the closet is a performance which is constant, and which fills the performer with anxiety at every misstep. At any moment you might be found out and Othered. And so, we perform “straight,” we “push the unacceptable parts into the shadows” (Anzaldúa, 42). But the fear of discovery is a constant burning ball of nerves at the back of our ribcages.

Fox offers an example of this type of self-policing in his *Auto-Archaeology of Homosexuality* by stating that “Any false step could send me back to animal/irrational”

(247). In his case, a failure to perform “straight” would have led to institutionalization; for other closeted queers, failure is a strong motivator, because we have all heard of friends who came out and were disowned or abused by their families. Anzaldúa tells us that for a woman of color, being queer is “the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture” (41). She describes the fear and tension that comes from having to pick sides between two integral aspects of her identity, and the feeling that she is unable to fill either role because of her feelings for the other. This internal struggle is why many queers of color do not find solace in mainstream LGBT communities, which tend to focus strongly on issues surrounding sexuality while ignoring racial experiences that might change the dynamic of the “queer experience” (Cohen).

When discussing activism within the queer community, Cohen remarks upon the exclusionary behavior of many of its members, noting that: “the process of ignoring or at least downplaying queers’ varying relationships to power is evident not only in the writing of queer activists, but also in the political actions pursued by queer organizations” (447). She argues that queer activism cannot truly challenge power structures without embracing intersectional and coalitional work. By downplaying the importance of intersectional identities, LGBT activism no longer carries a sense of urgency, and can no longer mobilize as easily for radical social change. Muñoz similarly argues that white queer theorists tend to only discuss race within “a contained reading of an artist of color that does not factor questions of race into the entirety of their project” (10). In this case, a

theorist or activist would “allow” work created by people of color into their analysis, but would stop short at any theorizing that would call their ideological purity into question.

Because of this tendency for white LGBT individuals to prioritize sexuality over other power relations, the queer community has also become a place in need of a wake-up call, despite the radical potential in the name. For people of color who do not feel adequately represented by “queer,” Johnson coined a term: “quare.” “Quare” comes from a vernacular pronunciation of “queer” and offers a nuanced strategy to “critique stable notions of identity and, at the same time, to locate racialized and class knowledges” (3). Quare theory resists the assimilating tendencies of queer politics by recentering racial and cultural knowledges while retaining the open, inclusive nature of queerness, as well as its possibility to create new understanding of different scholarship.

Johnson also deploys quare theory to examine “homeplace,” which, while remaining an important place for healing and reaffirmation for people of color, can also be a site that reproduces oppression. He gives the example of a black church “which remains for some gays and lesbians, a sustaining site of spiritual affirmation, comfort, and artistic outlet” (19), but which must also be held accountable for any instances of homophobia. In this way quare is used as a tool to disidentify with all of the oppressive attitudes that can be found in a religious space, while still allowing oneself to experience the healing process that can be found there. As a white queer girl, “quare” is not a theory that was designed for me; however, including it in my discussion allows me the tools to

approach “queer” with a critical eye, working to halt the behaviors that make queer voices of color unwelcome.

Anzaldúa describes being queer as “the coming together of opposite qualities within” (41), and I feel the truth in that. I’m not straight, and not gay, not anything that has a simple definition. Johnson says that many queer scholars describe the term as “playful” (3), bringing queerness into conversations that might not seem queer on the surface and playing with what ideas come to light from that mix. Similarly, my “selkie self” is playful and joyful; she is my queer identification, comfortable in any element and responding to her desires the moment they happen. It is not natural for a selkie to hide what it is unless its skin is stolen. My “skin” is stolen by the racial and sexual expectations ascribed upon my body. If I perform straight, I allow others to cut away a piece of me. I rationalize that it is sometimes necessary to do this, to hide from people who would hurt me, but it is always a violence to myself, and feels like a betrayal to those who cannot hide. I hear Calafell’s call: “Why didn’t these Others or ‘allies’ speak?” (29), and I know that my silence might be the easiest action to protect myself from harm, but that it does nothing for my fellow Others.

By labeling the shapeshifter “queer,” I am drawing on prior works by Anzaldúa and Calafell who have used the shapeshifter narrative to position themselves as queer women of color. By focusing their writing on bodily transformation, their work highlights materiality of queerness. Intellectual and academic writing does not often translate to the language of bodies. As Conquergood argues, “the dominant way of knowing in the



academy is that of empirical observation and critical analysis from a distanced perspective” (33). Knowledge that exists outside of cerebral sources is often ignored. These knowledges are devalued by an academy that gets its prejudices from a white, patriarchal, heterosexist culture. Performance, then, is queer knowledge. It belongs to people of color, to women, and to any marginalized group that historically has been denied access to higher education. It is connected to the theory in the flesh coined by Moraga and Anzaldúa. Although Conquergood is quick to remind us that performance is not inherently liberating (58), the application of performance can easily be used to challenge the elitism of the academy, and its origins in oppressive actions and beliefs.

The training that white children undergo to dismiss embodied knowledges is a crucial step in teaching them how to reinforce the racial hierarchy they are taught. In my case, this training taught me how to be a “Proper White Woman,” or as Moon refers to it: “producing ‘good’ white girls” (179). Moon discusses how white girls, from a very young age, are taught to be “proper,” which entails a level of submissiveness to white male authority, as well as a knowledge of where they stand within racial hierarchy (180). The focus on hierarchy is particularly efficient because it makes white women complicit in the oppression of others. It is our job to lend support to white men, and discourage conversation that could lead to uncomfortable challenges to the status quo. The rules of “politeness” that white women follow are often used to justify ignoring moments of racism within their families or their own behavior.

Coming to terms with my queer identity meant both listening to and embracing the knowledge I carry within my own body, and also coming to terms with the ways in which white culture had damaged my ability to understand racism. This can be entirely attributed to the intersectional definition of queerness that I have come to embrace. I encountered the works of Gloria Anzaldúa and bell hooks for the first time in an undergraduate Gender Studies class. It was illuminating. One of those moments when a window opens up in your mind and you think “oh, of course, how could I have missed this before?” *In Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks laid out the challenges she experienced as a professor teaching about both issues of gender and race: “confronting one another across difference means that we must change ideas about how we learn; rather than fearing difference we have to find ways to use it as a catalyst for new thinking, for growth” (113). This is not a requirement exclusive to educators and students of color, it is also a requirement for me.

By falling back on white politeness whenever issues of race are discussed, white students such as myself are creating a culture of ignorance. Claiming that we are just being polite removes us from the responsibility of learning, and places all responsibility for “troublemaking” on people of color who try to transform the space into a truly inclusive environment. (Moon, 192). By writing on this subject, I am trying to confront racism within white society without falling into the act that Moon describe as “disembodiment,” wherein a white individual can only talk about racism and racist acts in terms of a disembodied “them” who commits such acts. I have committed many of the

acts described by Moon to silence discussions on racism, due to my upbringing as a “good” white girl. Any knowledge that I have acquired to the contrary has been due to the extraordinary effort of scholars of color who have generously shared their work with me.

It is vital for me as a queer girl to continue to challenge my own trained biases, because my definition of queerness is intersectional. Anzaldúa conceived of a place she called the Borderlands; a place that is not only physical, but felt in your heart. “created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition” (25). This place encompasses not only her experiences as a Chicana, but also as a queer woman. I can identify as one, but not the other, so while I take comfort in the borderlands I also must work to exist in it without encroaching on the space of others. Although I cannot relate to her racial experiences, the borderlands has always appealed to me as a queer woman. I do not wish to appropriate the term for my white identity, but to talk about queerness in relation to myth and to leave out Anzaldúa’s work would be an incredible theft. Anzaldúa speaks about queer people as being seen as “neither one nor the other but a strange doubling, a deviation of nature that horrified” (41). My own experience also draws on similar themes of inbetweenness; society deems it important to sort people into one category or the other, and as a queer woman, such separation is inherently violent.

We are all, in this culture, expected to assimilate into straight, white, cisgender, male, heterosexual, able bodies: the supposed “natural” state (Butler), but many of us

cannot or do not want to do so. In this refusal to accept the terms of society, there is a possibility for disidentification. In a culture where people of color and queer people (sometimes both at the same time) are constantly reminded that they should not exist, disidentification is to take that space of discomfort and transform it into a place to live and be safe, if only for a moment. One can take comfort in their communities while casting off the expectations that one feel shamed or broken for their queerness. (Muñoz). That is what being queer means to me: taking an identity that is meant to shame me, Other me, and silence me, and embracing it, transforming it into something powerful. “You want to stare at me? Judge me? Go ahead. I will be the thing you hate and I will loudly love every second of it.”

When I talk about “performing the closet,” many of the strategies used to train me into silence are remarkably similar to the strategies used to train me to reinforce race barriers. In both instances, my silence is positively reinforced; I remain silent about my feelings for other girls and I am a proper young lady. I remain silent when race is discussed and I am a “good white girl” (Moon, 182). By claiming “queer” I am announcing that neither of those identities is acceptable to me. My selkie nature compels me to transform myself into the creature that a heteronormative, white society cannot abide.

Calafell uses the shapeshifter narrative to describe how women of color are often constructed as monstrous, specifically focusing on the werewolf archetype and the ways it can be used to frame the experiences of women of color in academia. Her work calls

out the treatment she and other shapeshifters receive, even at the hands of “allies.” She states that “my shapeshifting is permitted only under certain restrictions” (19) to illustrate that while academic spaces want to give off the illusion of inclusivity, they are still terrified of the changes that the Other will bring. They impose the frame of monstrosity to control her and discipline her into an acceptable, nonthreatening colleague, while at the same time reaping the benefits of her Otherness. Calafell’s monstrosity makes her “scary,” with a werewolf’s agenda to “infect” students with critical theories that challenge the status quo (23).

My relationship with shapeshifting is similar in terms of discipline: the desire from others to share in the “mystique” of the Other without truly allowing them to thrive is similar to the way some folks treated me when I came out. “No, I will not be your token ‘gay friend.’” But in other ways it is glaringly different. No one is frightened by my shapeshifting. I present a challenge to heterosexuality, certainly, but it does not prompt fear. Anger, yes. But I am still a white woman; therefore, I am not entirely framed as monstrous. Selkies are not monsters. They are Others, of course; something to be captured and tamed, but not feared. But like many monsters, such as vampires and werewolves, they are queer.

While I draw on Calafell’s model to understand how society views shapeshifters, I also understand that my experience of shapeshifting is different from hers. White femininity is a deeply insidious construct, because it both constrains me and places me at an advantage. I am given the opportunity to be treated – not as an equal, but certainly not

as a monster. In exchange, I was trained out of rebellion at a very young age. I was taught “civility,” and “fragility.” I learned that I must be a quiet enforcer of white masculinity’s rules (Moon). In this way, my selkie self was tamed. For me, shapeshifting is as liberating as it is threatening to the rest of society.

For Anzaldúa, shapeshifting was a way to embrace the “undesirable” aspects of her identity without fear. Shapeshifting is not easy; she describes it as a discomfort, being unable to look her inner self full in the face. Once she “crosses” into a new state, she cannot pretend to be the same person who fits into those various social roles she is expected to play. It is uncomfortable because it forces change, but necessary because it allows her to embrace her genuine nature. As she completes her transformation on the page she affirms: “I am never alone. That which abides: my vigilance, my thousand sleepless serpent eye blinking in the night, forever open. And I am not afraid” (73). For me, shapeshifting is also a way to tackle my fear of being Othered. Claiming queerness and declaring my position as a critical, intersectional member of society is my way of reclaiming my selkie skin. When a selkie finds her skin, she is reunited with the parts of her nature that her society forced her to smother; she is free to exist as a whole being once again, and she returns to her home, never to return. Labeling myself “queer” means that I must never allow myself to perform silence again, because to do so would be to deny my own self.

## **Chapter Four: A Selkie's Story**

“A girl...is she all right?”

On a day in late April, 1992, my sister was born and I got stuck. Twin births do not usually have much waiting time between the first and the second, but I shied away from the open air for a little over two hours before I finally emerged. I loved hearing about my birth when I was a child. How I swam around my mother's body until I was sideways. How doctors had to grab me and turn me. And how I immediately dispelled concerns about fluid in my lungs with a loud, dissatisfied wail. This strange, dry world was not for me.

My reluctance to be born has always struck me as funny, and I tell this story to show that my love of liquid environments started long before I can remember. Moraga writes about the theory in the flesh, using the example of her lesbian identity: “[I] had felt it in my bones, had ached with the knowledge” (29). Similarly, the way my whole body experiences a melancholic pull when I stand by the ocean relies on knowledge that comes from my flesh. That longing to enter a different world was present in my body and my heart even when I was a child and had not given much thought to why those feelings might have occurred. My family lived close to the San Francisco bay, and I loved walking down to the water and looking for sharks, seals, seashells, and small bits of glass, worn into soft edges by the waves and the sand. My morning wakeup call was the

echoing barks of sea lions and a symphony of shrieking seagulls. Not pleasant sounds to most ears, but in me those sounds are intimately familiar, and always manage to soothe me. Similarly, the scent of drying seaweed and mud at low tide does not tend to make one tilt their head back and breathe deep, but whenever I breathe anywhere else I feel like my lungs are missing something.

As a child I spent plenty of time indoors too. I practically lived in the library, and the books I loved to read the most were old books of fairy tales. I read about mermaids, and tried to practice swimming without moving my legs. I read about swan women, and changelings, and selkies. Selkies were my favorite, because I liked that something could be an animal and a lady at the same time. Something about her refusal to commit to any one shape, even for the pleasure of her husband, resonated with. I had not yet given any thought towards my own identity, but later in life I would begin to exhibit that same type of refusal. I would not confine myself to a pre-scripted identity simply for the pleasure



*Figure 1*

and comfort of others. The selkie was a familiar companion who represented my struggles with heteronormativity and white femininity well before I became conscious of either. The selkie quickly became one of my favorite myths, and I often pretended I had a seal body while I swam. I didn't like to swim on the surface of the water, instead I would dive down as far as I could go and challenge myself to hold my breath until I couldn't stand it anymore. When I got a little



bit older, I joined a swim team: The Seals. Figure 1 shows one of the ribbons I earned during my time as a Seal, and represents an affirmation of my selkie identity. While swimming on the team I was able to recapture the sense of belonging I felt whenever I entered the water.

Joining that team reinforced my connection with seal imagery. I have never felt stronger or more in touch with my body than I did when I swam for them. It was one of the first things I gave up when my family left the seaside. I remember my friends looking horrified that I would dare to wear such a skintight swimsuit in public, subtly policing my body and my sexuality so that I would appear in more “appropriate” garb. Similar to how the female werewolf begins her transformation into a monster at the onset of menstruation, with her new sexual agency highlighted as the thing which brings the monster into being (Nielson), the “stealing” of my selkie skin (via policing of my body, sexuality, and behavior) began when I underwent puberty. When the curve of my chest began to show, my swimsuit-clad body went from neutral to indecent. Like the werewolf figure, my sexual agency became a source of anxiety as friends, family, and strangers set guidelines to ensure my transformation into a morally upstanding heterosexual white woman.

Moreman and Calafell describe how figures from myths “give insight into not only the economic, political, and social issues affecting a generation, but also the psychic issues as well” (314). Their analysis of La Llorona is that her story is representative of U.S. Southwestern Chicana/o culture. Both authors grew up hearing La Llorona stories

told, and share the story as an artifact which mirrors the issues faced by that community. I feel a similar connection to the selkie. Even though the story was not widely spread within my community, the figure of the selkie was present in my mind quite a bit as a child. As I grew up from a queer child into a queer woman, I find power in the idea of a creature which is characterized by its contradictions. Anzaldúa writes that “there is something compelling...about having an entry into both worlds” (41), echoing my attraction to the selkie as a creature that has access to both animal and human worlds. Anzaldúa goes on to argue that being born of contradiction is not an affliction, but that individuals who experience it are made to suffer by our culture’s fixation on a binary model that requires them to choose one or the other. Additionally, as a white woman who is continuously working towards a scholarship of reflexive engagement (McIntosh and Hobson), I find similarities between the capture and “taming” of the selkie woman and the socialization that white women undergo to perform as the “good white girl” (Moon).

“I won’t come to your birthday party unless you promise you won’t wear something like that.”

I stared at this girl in confusion. The outfit in question seemed unremarkable to me: a loose t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants. The perfect recreational outfit, in case I found something that needed climbing. I protested that I liked my clothes, they were comfortable, they covered all of me, and I had never had to worry about clothes before. Why now?

“It doesn’t matter, they’re terrible. Come to the mall with me.”

I went. She came to my party.

I spent plenty of time at that girl's house, watching with a bemused sort of fascination as she cut up just-bought clothing and sewed her skirts so they would be shorter when she wore them. She also trained me in the mysterious art form of makeup application. This was all done in the hopes that some hoped-for boyfriend would appear. I was a very poor student, and her frustration at my inability to understand was obvious at times. I just didn't see what the fuss was all about, because none of the boys we spent time with were remotely attractive to me.

When discussing cultural norms of heterosexuality, Ahmed remarks that they "shape bodies and lives" (423), which was certainly true in my case. The repetition that I needed to dress a certain way to get boys to like me was enough to physically change me, and I began to try to have crushes on different boys. It was a process where I picked out a boy who was relatively inoffensive and usually nice to me and tried to think about him as much as possible so I would start to like him. When a selkie's skin is stolen, she takes the shape of a regular woman, and enters the control of the man who has stolen it. When my form was changed, I did not answer to any one man, but to the patriarchal norms that required me to look and feel a certain way. Through repetition, I became better at presenting acceptable femininity and admiring boys. Femininity even became comfortable for me, but I never could shake my sense of unease with men. This unease was a bodily knowledge (Collins) which warned me against the violence that my queer consciousness would experience if I sought a relationship with them.

Although I did not understand it at the time, obsessively focusing on men in the hopes that I might change my feelings for them was an act of self-violence. Yep writes, “Heteronormativity is so powerful that its regulation and enforcement are carried out by the individuals themselves through socially endorsed and culturally accepted forms of soul murder” (22). The overwhelming message I was receiving was that I had to want to be with men to be normal, and I tried so hard to shape my thoughts in that direction that today I can’t even tell if the attraction I do feel for certain men is genuine, or just a habit that I forced myself into through fear and shame.

Butler argues that since same-sex desire requires, from society, both a renunciation of “both the desire and the object” (81), this process internalizes those rejections to create melancholia. This self-criticism is an expression of pain:

Precisely because that object is lost, even though the relationship remains ambivalent and unresolved, the object is ‘brought inside’ the ego where the quarrel magically resumes as an interior dialogue between two parts of the psyche. (83)

Because my impulse was to pretend away any desires that did not align with the expectation that I practice heterosexuality, I was internalizing a sense of self-rejection and opening the door for melancholy. Like Muñoz, I reject Freud’s pathological definition of melancholia, which Muñoz describes as “a mourning that does not know when to stop” (64). Instead, Muñoz argues that melancholia and mourning are integral to queer life, as a way to process all the “catastrophes” (74) that queer individuals face by living in a heteronormative and homophobic world. This redefinition is important, because it moves away from pathologizing queer feelings and gives us the space to work

through the pain we are facing. Even now I am in mourning for the person I could have been if I had not had to experience the contempt felt by society toward queer bodies.

Ahmed refers to the perception of negative attitudes towards queerness in society as a kind of “social skin” (425), which encompasses both the emotional and physical impact of such negative feelings. If I am cold or scared, my skin will ripple; if I am in a place where I know my queerness is unwanted, my “social skin” shivers in a similar way. It is an emotional sense, but it feels very physical. Faced with this sense of disapproval, my behavior has changed over time, sometimes without any verbal reinforcement. I thought I knew my family and friends, but it was impossible to reassure myself that they would not react poorly if I were to come out.

I worried about every action I took, and frequently berated myself for not performing up to standard. A rumor circulated that I was in love with one of my female friends. I was. I wasn't acting convincingly. At this point, I wasn't even sure what I was, but I knew I was failing at the role of “straight girl.” But, despite my attraction to girls, I didn't think that I could be gay. For a while I rolled the word “bisexual” around in my head, but even though that was the term I used when I first came out, it didn't seem to fit either. It seemed so cut-and-dry, no ambiguity allowed.

We had parked next to the playground near my house and walked in circles around the grassy area, talking about nothing in particular. It was getting dark, my parents would be expecting me home soon, and I still hadn't said what I needed to say.

Although the air was a little chilly, I could feel my skin burning as I suggested we sit for a while on a nearby park bench.

“I think I’m bisexual. I don’t know. I know I’m not straight.” I let the words come out before I could stop them. I was shaking, but I had to let him know, right? Wouldn’t I be dating him under false pretenses if I didn’t say this?

I could tell from the sudden silence that this might have been a bad plan. I could practically hear his thoughts; he was panicked that I might be gay.

“No, it’s okay” his tone was overly reassuring, like he was trying to convince himself as well as me, “you’re straight now, because you’re dating me.”

I could feel my heart sinking. This was not how our conversation was supposed to go. Instead of giving me understanding, this man was removing my agency to name myself, much like the selkie’s husband stole away her skin, and thus her ability to decide her own shape. I took a breath to defend the validity of my identity, but all I could get out was a squeak:

“It doesn’t work like that.”

He shrugged, and patted my shoulder in what I assumed to be a comforting manner. His hand was heavy, pushing me further and further into the ground where I could bury my feelings and be a good girlfriend.

What I wanted was for him to understand who I was, but instead I felt as though my identity had been ripped away from me. At the time, I didn’t even fully understand what that identity was, but I knew that I did not want it dismissed like that. As Sedgwick

argues, coming out is a performative act; I had accepted that I was having feelings for other girls, but that was the first time I had claimed that identity with anyone else, and instead of acceptance I was met with thinly veiled disgust and a desperate attempt to erase my disclosure. In Yep's discussion of heteronormativity, he notices that many of the identities available to women relate back to heterosexual relationships; by "reassuring" me that I was straight due to my relationship with him, this man was steering me back toward one of those socially prescribed identities.

Later in the year, that same boy invited me to prom and I accepted. This is one of my biggest failures, as not only was he clearly unwilling to accept that I was not straight, but had at this point openly proved himself to be racist as well. McIntosh and Hobson say that when you have failed people you care about "our bodies know when we have failed them" (10). This was certainly the case for me: I felt revulsion, rather than attraction when we held hands, and whenever he kissed me I quite literally had to suppress the urge to gag. Just like the selkie's instinctive knowledge that being confined to life on land



*Figure 2*

turmoil, and it all came to a head on prom night.

would be unbearable, my instincts were all screaming at me that being with this man was unnatural, and violated my sense of myself as a queer woman. I have never had such a physical reaction to my emotional

I include figure 2 because I found it very significant, looking back, that every single photograph of us as a couple included about a foot of space between us, and without fail our backs are turned from each other. At the end of the dance, we spent the night together, and I experienced one of my most miserable sicknesses I can remember. I woke up in the middle of the night, literally unable to breathe, both from incredible pressure in my sinuses and from his arm slung around my neck. My throat felt like it was on fire and every muscle in my body was leaden. Unwilling to wake anyone up and inconvenience them with my discomfort, I moved to lean against the wall by the staircase and sat, hunched over, muffling any noise, for hours while I listened to him snore.

Collins discusses two forms of knowing that women are more likely to possess: knowledge of the body, and knowledge that transcends the body (277). This knowledge of “nature” is also present in the selkie’s body. My failure was that even in the face of overwhelming evidence that staying with this man was wrong, I still elected to remain in that relationship for several more weeks. My experience gave me direct, verbal knowledge that he was a racist who was intolerant of my sexuality, as well as a deep, sick, physical sensation that I recognize now as the knowledge of my body that I was putting myself in a situation that was unequivocally bad for me. However, all of my social training on how to occupy space as a white woman taught me that I had to make excuses for “my man,” and “take on and reproduce” (Moon 180) his white male gaze.

One of the identities women are allowed to occupy under the institution of heterosexuality is “wife.” Once a selkie goes to live in the human world, the story tells us



that she becomes as perfect wife for the man who stole her skin. The idea that a selkie can be a good wife lines up with Yep's argument that such terms "create expectations and experiences and regulate women's behavioral choices" (30). By becoming a "good wife," the selkie lady must follow a set of predetermined rules of heterosexuality and femininity that do not allow room for difference. The story doesn't talk about the pain of having a piece of yourself stolen away, and the confusion she must have experienced, learning how to act the part of a normal human. Sedgwick recounts the consistent pressure placed on queer individual to remain closeted "the deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption means that, like Wendy in *Peter Pan*, people find new walls springing up around them even as they drowse" (68).

Following that line of thinking, one can see the insidious shape of compulsory heterosexuality; even if a queer person decides to "come out," that act must be repeated over and over with every person they meet, and still does not negate the heterosexist assumptions of strangers and larger institutions. Even though I consider myself "out" at this point, faced with such an overwhelming pressure to conform, I often find myself questioning whether I really want to fight back at any given instance. When this happens, I feel the iron grip of heteronormativity upon my selkie skin, and with every failure it is tugged away from me.

The selkie's story ends with the recovery of her skin. Either she stumbles upon it one day, or her child comes to her wondering why her father is hiding a "leather coat," but whoever discovers it, the outcome is the same. Immediately she puts it on and dives

into the sea. This is typically told as a regrettable occurrence, as in some variations she leaves behind her children, and in every variation, her husband is stricken with grief upon losing his “perfect wife.” I always read it as hopeful, however, since the selkie woman is freed from a relationship she clearly didn’t want and recovers her agency. She no longer has to change her body to fill a role given to her by someone else. As someone who struggles with the expectation that I “pass” successfully as straight, this is something to daydream about. With one action, she was able to escape everything that forced her into being something other than what she truly was. I know that I cannot seek the same kind of ending as the selkie girl. For one thing, the closet is a pervasive force in our society; even after coming out, a queer person can expect to have their experience shaped by the rules of a heteronormative institution (Segwick). The type of freedom the selkie woman experiences at the end of her tale is unattainable if you intend to interact with society in any way.

Additionally, while the idea of simply up and leaving is very appealing, it is indicative of my white upbringing that I find it so tempting. White women in particular utilize a wide variety of evasive tactics when confronted about difficult topics. Escaping into the sea never to return is a bit more dramatic than fleeing a room when asked to be accountable for instances of racial tension, but the effect is the same. If one is successful in removing oneself from uncomfortable situations, that is a privileged act which leave no space for consideration towards individuals who cannot so easily remove themselves from narratives of oppression. DiAngelo writes that when race is mentioned in a

discussion “common white responses include anger, withdrawal, emotional incapacitation, guilt, argumentation, and cognitive dissonance” (55). White people are taught from a young age to avoid and resist genuine conversations about race and racism, because bringing attention to race is not “polite” (Moon), but the end result of that behavior is that they are insulated from any requirements to think reflexively about their own position of power. Additionally, the “quality” of a space when judged by white eyes is often “measured via the absence of people of color” (DiAngelo 57), which implies that a white body “escaping” from a painful environment is moving into a space that only white bodies are welcome and allowed to inhabit. After all, people of color are unable to escape discomfort in this way.

I leave my narrative without a conclusive end because I do not believe I can ethically achieve the ending provided by the selkie’s story. The ending of my narrative must be consequential (Fox, Pollock) in providing new perspective for me to explore my place in society. By denying the ending laid out by the selkie story, I offer up a mode of thought which explores an intersectional foundation for me to understand how to participate in critical work as a white queer woman without resorting to exclusionary tactics. On top of this, a complete escape from oppressive structures is impossible. For every person I do not specifically come out to as queer, my agency to define myself is limited, because the default assumption is that I am straight. I still feel the impact of the violence I was encouraged to inflict upon my soul (Yep), and it is likely that I will always struggle with fear or self-loathing when I reflect on my sexuality. Because I have support

from other queer individuals I can resist these negative feelings, but in a way they have been branded onto my soul by the inescapable weight of a heteronormative culture.

So the question is: how does one rewrite the selkie story for the modern queer girl? “Once upon a time, the selkie woman was not alone with her pain.” She saw other shapeshifters arguing that they shouldn’t have to pretend to be one thing or another, and she even worked up the nerve to talk to a few of them. Like many young queers, my first experience with a large community was when I attended Pridefest with some friends. It was disgustingly hot and I was red and sweaty and surrounded by drunk people, which is not my typical idea of a fun time, but somehow I was still overjoyed. I found a group of strangers and danced for as long as I could stand the heat, then my new friends and I ran to a water fountain and poured water down our bodies and collapsed on the lawn.

There are so few moments in my life when I have allowed myself to be present in a moment without worrying about how I might be read by strangers, so I will always have a soft spot in my heart for Pride. However, part of rewriting the selkie narrative is being reflexive about the ways I can briefly “escape” that are not accessible to others. It was very difficult to accept that a space which brought me so much comfort was a site of pain and exclusion for others, but when a close friend confided to me that she was uncomfortable at Pride because of transphobic attitudes in the LGB community, I began to notice an underrepresentation of other bodies. In current years I have stepped back from Pride, and have found that in its place I have built up relationships that are based on mutual love and a commitment to coalitional, intersectional justice (Cohen). These

relationships allow me to “escape” heteronormativity when I am with them, and reclaim my agency without leaving anyone behind.

## **Chapter Five: Concluding Thoughts and Future Potential**

In this chapter I am wrapping up my interpretation of my autoethnography and reflecting on ways in which other marginalized identities could make use of the shapeshifter narrative; thus, adding their own embodied knowledge to the scholarship. My first chapter was intended to give my readers some context as to what selkie mythology typically sounds like as well as why I chose to tell my narrative through that lens. The mythology of the selkie captures the melancholy I have experienced as a queer woman, as well as the racial expectations I have been taught to follow, primarily related to politeness and avoidance of topics that would challenge the racial hierarchy (Moon; DiAngelo). In addition, the selkie story is a good reflection of the violence experienced by queer women in a heteronormative society which refuses to allow individuals to consider relationship options that do not follow strict guidelines of heterosexuality, and create a great deal of inner turmoil (Yep).

Chapter Two explored the effectiveness of performative writing and autoethnography as methods for this thesis. I outlined the benefits of these methods by highlighting the potential of performative writing to be evocative; to draw the reader into one's own experience in a way that makes it impossible to ignore the emotional and embodied knowledge of the author (Fox "Skinny Bones," Pollock). I also argued for the power of performative writing so that authors, "particularly marginalized academicians,

may display creative control of their respective subjectivities” (Fox “Skinny Bones” 6). This chapter also highlighted the benefits of autoethnography as a method which can be placed in counterpoint to the “master narrative,” or the hegemonic expectations of society (Corey 250).

Next I outlined my approach to queer theory and centered it in the current work on shapeshifting. I draw my definition of “queer” from scholars such as who focus their efforts on rejecting oppression in all forms. Cohen argues that LGBT activism often falls into the trap of focusing entirely on sexuality, which has the effect of sweeping issues unique to disabled queers, or queers of color, under the rug. Cohen’s call for coalitional queer activism resonates with me, as does the work of Anzaldúa, whose borderlands theory encompasses every being who has felt themselves on the outskirts of “acceptable” society, unable to fit in with any of the options presented. Frequently, I have been shown that the work of queer women of color is the work that is most able to encompass my understanding of the word “queer.” By elevating those theories within my work, I aim to add my voice to theirs, not intruding upon their scholarship, but holding myself and other white scholars accountable for shifting our scholarship to include intersectional knowledges.

As stated in Chapter Three, shapeshifting rhetoric has been used by female scholars of color to verbalize the ways in which they are treated as an Other by white, patriarchal society (Anzaldúa, Calafell). In my autoethnography piece, I have shown that shapeshifting rhetoric can also apply to my experiences as a queer white woman; as a

queer woman, my agency is stolen from me, similar to the theft of a selkie's skin, and as a white woman I am expected to play the role of the "good white girl" (Moon), and fall in line with the racial hierarchies that white women are taught to uphold. As a white queer woman, my responsibility is to free myself from those expectations, but, unlike the selkie who flees from the human world once she finds her skin, I must reflect on the ways in which removing myself from a troubling situation reinforces my white privilege.

DiAngelo notes that one of the ways white fragility manifests itself is for white individuals to disengage from a situation rather than hold themselves accountable for their actions. I believe this is most common in white women, who are also taught to avoid conflict through a variety of tactics that redirect the conversation (Moon 185). This is one of the ways in which I hope my story diverges from the selkie's story; I cannot allow myself to run from unpleasant situations, even if doing so would be the most comfortable option.

My use of the shapeshifting narrative differed from current scholarship based on the cultural context behind my story. For me, my shapeshifter identity carried a current of longing and melancholy. The institutional violence I experienced did not transform me into a creature as in the case of Calafell's werewolf story or Anzaldúa's Coatlicue state, but rather constricted me and required my body to physically assimilate with heterosexuality (Ahmed), and in turn repeat and reinforce the hierarchy of race and sexuality onto others (DiAngelo). In my model, the shapeshifted form represents the "natural" state of my being before it was corrupted by a heterosexist, racist, and



patriarchal society. This is a reversal of previous work which described the shapeshifter as something that was created by those same pressures, as well as the violence ascribed on their racialized bodies. For queer scholars of color such as Calafell and Anzaldúa, the monster is something that is awakened by the treatment they receive at the hands of a white institution.

My narratives within Chapter Four are where I make use of all the theory before me and apply it to my own story. I argue that like Calafell and Anzaldúa, my body is transformed by a restrictive culture, and I engage the idea of shapeshifting as a way to free myself from heteronormative expectations, as well as from the expectations that I behave with loyalty to my white identity. By showcasing moments in which these expectations were enforced upon my body, I hope to share those moments intimately with my readers; from the outside, each moment I dwell on seems like a minor incident, so with my storytelling I attempt to recreate the internal devastation that each moment caused.

As Fox mentions in “Tales of a Fighting Bobcat,” small moments can create a level of internal turmoil and self-judgement that would seem entirely out of proportion if one did not consider the abject fear that is experienced by individuals who fail to perform “straight” correctly. In addition, my connection to the selkie story is strongly influenced by my identity as a white woman. I have noted before that the creature I am connected with in my story is different from Calafell’s werewolf, or Anzaldúa’s Coatlicue. This is due to the white enculturation that I experienced at a young age from friends and family

(Moon). My body is trained for silence and compliance, much like the selkie's body is shaped by the husband forced upon her; the selkie cannot be her genuine self because of the expectation that she be a "good wife," and I have felt similar pressure to perform the "good white girl" (Moon 184).

By arguing that the shapeshifting narrative is a queer narrative, I create opportunity for others to use this narrative in ways I cannot. A transgender narrative through the lens of the shapeshifter would be incredibly powerful. As Johnson argues, most gender studies scholarship conforms to a gender and sex binary (136), even while critiquing issues of gender essentialism through a woman-focused feminist lens. In her book, *Gender Trouble*, Butler critiques this view, saying "if the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender" (9), but her work continues to focus on binaries of sex as well. If nothing else, this proves that the two-sex model of humanity that we in a Western society subscribe to is a hard to escape as it is troubling.

I am a cisgender woman, so for me to write such a piece would be unreflexive and inaccurate, however I believe that a transgender perspective can offer something new and interesting to the idea of shapeshifting. One of the most common and bigoted reactions to transgender individuals, particularly trans women is that they have to "pass" as cisgender to be acceptable, and even when passing, society's focus on the biological formation of one's genitals "construct trans\*- identities as fake and validate cissexists' "gender as 'real' or 'natural'" (Johnson 138). In extension, this rejection of trans identities creates

the narrative that trans individuals (again, trans women in particular) are using their image to “trick” and “prey” upon “innocent” cisgender people. For trans individuals, the shapeshifter narrative could be constructed as a retort to that type of sexual essentialism. There is a way to use shapeshifter language to validate the very real changes that transgender individuals go through, both physically and mentally.

On the flip side, shapeshifter narrative could also be utilized by transgender individuals in a similar way to Calafell’s work, where a monster is created by the exclusionary and fearful way she is treated by her peers within the institution. She recounts being used to make places seem more diverse while actually being forced to follow the rules of an institution which privileged white, straight, and/or male bodies above her own. In a similar vein, transgender writer could utilize this style of writing to unpack the ways in which transgender issues are often sidelined, even within the LGBTQ community.

As Cohen mentions, there is a style of “mainstream” LGBTQ activism which pushes an assimilationist viewpoint. Oftentimes the rhetorical acts which are held up as the gold standard are works which “come dangerously close to a single oppression model” (447), by which she means they focus too much on sexuality without truly considering the different social identities they inhabit which might also cause oppression and division within the community. Cohen argues that because of this inability to take an intersectional approach, the activism of white, male, able-bodied, middle-class LGBT individuals often excludes the work of queers of color. Both Cohen and Johnson have

pointed out that trans women of color are especially likely to be overshadowed, even within queer activist circles.

Trans knowledge is a type of embodied knowledge which has not adequately been explored, in part because the topic still makes many people uncomfortable, even in “progressive” activist spaces. Stryker argues that “‘Trans-’ is troublesome for both LGBT communities and feminism, but the kind of knowledge that emerges from this linkage is precisely the kind of knowledge that we desperately need in the larger social arena” (66), which gets at the heart of the issue which is that neither feminist or LGBT communities have made space in their worldviews for the existence of transgender bodies.

“Transgender” is the only term in the LGBT acronym which does not relate to sexuality, but rather to one’s interpretation of their own bodies. This makes it easy for the LGB part of the community to sideline transgender issues in favor of their own: same-sex marriage, for instance, was considered the end-all victory for LGBT issues, but problems such as the rising emergence of “bathroom bills” have not gained nearly as much traction. In addition, trans women are often excluded from “women only” spaces, both within the LGBT community and feminist spaces.

Stryker discusses this as one of the major failings of second-wave feminism, which focuses too strongly on biological sex, and considers individuals who are transgender or open to trans issues to be either “duped or duplicitous, fools or enemies to be pitied or scorned” (63). This is especially frustrating because of feminists’ ability to recognize and critique gender essentialism, but their inability to recognize that they are

perpetuating the same form of essentialist stereotypes based on the configuration of one's body. Feminist rhetoric is very quick to shut down the notion that women are expected to dress and act a certain way because that is the "natural" role of their gender, but they argue that transgender individuals are not who they say they are because of the "natural" role of their biology. It is deeply saddening to see feminists rehash one of the arguments used against them in order to exclude a group they exert social power over.

If this is the case, then it follows that both LGBT communities and feminist groups need a transgender perspective to disrupt their understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality in only binary terms. It is vital for the growth of both movements to consider their reasoning for reducing the human body to two separate identities (male and female) when the scientific reality is that human bodies negotiate a "complex amalgamation of gland secretions and reproductive organs, chromosomes and genes, morphological characteristics and physiognomic features" (Stryker 62). There is a wide variety of difference that can be found between bodies that is not as simply categorized as our Western model of science can account for. A transgender perspective could be the catalyst that would allow us to challenge this binary, which does harm to the ways we all perceive ourselves and each other.

With all of these arguments in mind, one can clearly see the benefit of utilizing the shapeshifter narrative to explore different marginalized identities, particularly in areas that have not previously been written about. Shapeshifting allows author to explore emotional issues while acknowledging the physical knowledge our bodies provide us

with. During moments of oppression or fear, shapeshifting can also be used in an uplifting manner to highlight the aspects of one's identity that give them strength. Exploring this narrative can also give scholars an intersectional framework which allows for knowledge of their coalitions via their own emotional reaction to any piece shared with them. There is much to explore within the theory of shapeshifting.

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