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More than just a myth: how shapeshifter rhetoric relates to ESL students 2019

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More Than Just a Myth: How Shapeshifter
Rhetoric Relates to ESL Students

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Introduction

The academic analysis surrounding the shapeshifter, or shapeshifter mythologies has, so

far, been related to modern issues of violence, militarization, feminism, gender studies, or studies

simply focusing on the compilation of shapeshifter myths themselves. This essay will map out the current discussion surrounding shapeshifter mythology to illustrate that it has often fallen into two forms of analysis: that of an anthropological or sociological analysis, where shapeshifter myths were analyzed as a method for understanding different cultures and their development, and that of a poststructural analysis, where shapeshifter myths are analyzed as a means of deconstructing binaries such as good/bad and male/female. There have been extensive studies compiling and analyzing Native, Inuit, First People, and Tribal folklore and their instances of shapeshifter myth from countries, nations, and geographic locations all around the world. From the Russian witch Baba Yaga to the Djinns of the Middle East, shapeshifter myths reside everywhere. Shapeshifters have the ability to shift form and, as such, they also have the ability to shift across cultures. Throughout this essay, I will analyze two specific shapeshifter figures: the Russian witch Baba Yaga and the Norse god Loki Odinson. My main objective is to study the way the rhetoric surrounding these shapeshifters presents them as occupying a space of cultural in-betweenness, as well as transcending cultural boundaries, and to draw comparisons to the rhetoric used in relation to the ascribed identities of L2 and multicultural students. While the link between the language surrounding specific shapeshifter figures may not apparently seem to connect to the language surrounding ESL students, parallels can be drawn. It isn't that ESL students are viewed as supernatural beings who can change physical form, but rather that they are often believed to have the capability to shift themselves in other ways: from an excelling student in their own language and culture to an equally ideal student in the English language and culture. I am not attempting to argue that ESL students don't have this ability, but rather that English educators' general expectations that the immediate cultural shifting from an ESL student's own culture to the American/English-speaking culture is detrimental to the success of ESL students. In that respect, the rhetoric surrounding mythological shapeshifter figures is very

similar to the identity surrounding ESL students in an English-language writing-intensive classroom, where they, like shapeshifters, are expected to immediately take on the shape of their surroundings. The main issue here, I'm arguing, is that they are being asked to do so without the adequate mentorship or preparation to allow them to fulfill such a goal.

The inspiration for this project has come from two separate but equally influential areas in my life. Growing up, I was a child immersed in a world of fantasy, fairytales, and folklore. My mother used to read me fairy tales and folklore before bedtime that would send my overactive imagination reeling. I remember dressing up at my grandmother's, using scarves, pearls, and jackets; anything I could grab from her special stash she'd lay out for me, and letting my imagination run wild as I fought off pixies in the pantry or ghouls in the attic. And, of course, there was the *Harry Potter* series, by J.K. Rowling, which my mother and I would read together in our own sort of book club, and which gave me my first imaginative inklings of poltergeists, phoenixes, hippogriffs, and animagi. As I got older, my father would hand me fantasy novels that he had perused in the 80's, such as *The Wizard's First Rule* by Terry Goodkind, or *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. I'd walk through high school, holding 800 page books, and getting strange looks from other students who hated reading. With such an early and long-standing education in the world of myth and fantasy, is it any wonder I should want to delve into the depths of myth further, through academia? Part of my insatiable curiosity and fascination for the world of myth is that, as I got older and furthered my academic studies, I began to see how ubiquitous the world of myth is. People from all different countries, cultures, and geographic locations have their own myths. We've all, each and every one of us, heard a myth about shapeshifters: about tricksters, about witches, about gods and goddesses. It's something that unites us, from the farthest reaches of earth and time, and will continue to unite us in the future. There is something in myth, and something in the shapeshifter myth in particular, that has the ability to transcend cultural and

temporal boundaries. These myths are just as relevant to us now as they were to our ancestors, and throughout this essay I will seek to understand what gives them this resonant quality; what is there in the rhetoric surrounding these myths that has allowed them to endure for so long.

The other influential part of my life that has helped to inspire this project lies in the diversity of the different learners I've been exposed to. I remember sitting in an eighth grade social studies classroom as the teacher placed a test in front of us, telling us our answers would help us understand which type of learner we were. There were different types of learners? I remember thinking. So I took the test and got visual, auditory, and kinesthetic split evenly three ways. I had always done well in school, had never had to study more than five minutes before a test, and now I knew why. It took me several years to figure out how much of an advantage I'd been given over other learners, especially in a school system that primarily caters to visual and auditory learners.[1] My brother, who is six years younger than me, struggled in school for the longest time. He was amazingly intellectual, he could take anything mechanical apart and put it back together, or make something even more complex and sophisticated with ease. When we'd play with legos as children, I'd always faithfully follow the instructions, while he'd throw them over his shoulder and build something magnificently original. It took us several years to sort out that he was a kinesthetic learner. He learned best by doing, by using his hands. He excelled in shop class, working with technology, and working with cars, but he hated sitting in a classroom staring at a whiteboard for hours and often got in trouble for not sitting still. Seeing my brother's struggles in the education system was a huge point of development for me. Anyone as clearly

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[1] While I'm aware that work has been done by Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, and Bjork in their article "Learning Styles: Concepts and Evidence" where they have attempted to prove a lack of evidence to support the existence of different learning styles, I find their conclusions invalid. They interpreted the ability of some learners to receive information through more than one style as a lack of evidence, rather than understanding that some learners can have equal abilities in more than one learning style (as I do). Others, however, learn most successfully through one particular learning style, such as kinesthetic learners, and it is these students that I refer to here.

gifted as he was should have no issues excelling in school, but there it was: a rift in the system, an area where hands-on learners were left to the wayside in lieu of (what is generally thought to be) a larger percentage of learners.

This early understanding of different learners fostered a curiosity in me for those who didn't fit into society's carefully laid-out blueprint. As I became a Consultant in the SUNY Cortland Writing Center, I came into contact with many different ESL and L2 learners whose frustration echoed much of what I'd experienced with my brother growing up: they were incredibly intelligent and able, yet extremely frustrated by their inability to be successful alongside Native-English speakers. As I spoke to more of them and worked with them through issues of grammar, structure, organization, and verb usage, I watched as they would exclaim, "Why hasn't anyone explained this to me?" or "It's so much easier when you put it like that." They described to me, during their visits, that they had no apparent way to bridge the gap between their culture and English-language higher education. Many of them had to be top students in their own country in order to come and study in the American education system, and yet they were given "E" on their papers again and again, with comments telling them their main point was muddied by an inaccurate use of the language. "Your point is difficult to understand through grammar mistakes," some professors would comment, or "Your claim gets lost in your use of language." From my interactions with those ESL students, I understood that not a single professor who wrote those comments had actual suggestions for helping them overcome the language barrier. The inspiration for this project has arisen from the need to understand the rift in ESL and multicultural learning, through an understanding of shapeshifter rhetoric. After working with and listening to L2 students in a writing-intensive setting, I have learned that their frustration arises from the problematic identities others are ascribing onto them. ESL students often have the role of cultural "shapeshifter" projected onto them, along with the belief that they

can (and should) excel in the English language as readily and easily as Native-English speakers, without any outside preparation to enable them to do so. This act of educators ascribing an impossible role onto ESL students has been detrimental to their education and I will seek to demonstrate the language surrounding shapeshifters and ESL students as proof of this connection later in this paper. Firstly, however, it would be useful to lay out some groundwork.

There have been several discussions surrounding the shapeshifter myth in the course of its academic research and discovery. Scholars have asked questions such as, are shapeshifters shrouded in moral ambiguity? Are there specific associations they tend to have that present them in a positive light? Associations that present them in a negative light? Are shapeshifters ambiguously gendered? Is male-associated rhetoric used to describe female shapeshifters? Female-associated rhetoric to describe male shapeshifters? What sort of people are represented as being shapeshifters in shapeshifter myths? Were they leaders? Followers? Mischievous? What did this say about the culture telling these myths as a whole? Although these questions represent many different aspects of the shapeshifter myth, most of them can be sorted into two schools of thought: that of an anthropological/sociological strain, and that of a deconstructionist one. For the purposes of this essay, these schools will be referred to as: Shapeshifter as an Anthropological Clue and Shapeshifter as a Deconstructor of Binaries.

Shapeshifter as an Anthropological Clue

There has been an overwhelming amount of anthropological research about shapeshifters devoted to unearthing information about past and current cultures. Most of these studies have been anthropological in nature and have focused on the major beliefs of a given culture and composing a painting of the culture in question; what mattered most to the people within it, who they prayed to, what they prayed for, their struggles, their climate, and which inexplicable events

they were using myth to try to understand.[2] One such example can be found in Skye Alexander's analysis of the Middle Eastern Djinn. The original myth that inspired the Americanized "genie," the Djinn is an intelligent creature who possesses supernatural powers, but is inferior to angels (Alexander 163). Djinn are also known for their abilities to possess, plague, or infect humans, as well as their ability to shapeshift into either human or animal form, or to make themselves invisible (Alexander 164). Alexander's analysis of the Djinn provides a tool for understanding Middle Eastern belief systems: through her studies she discovered the Djinn is still a very real and popular belief in Middle Eastern culture (Alexander 169). Many attribute issues of mental illness to the willful actions of a mischievous Djinn to this day (Alexander 170). Numerous unexplainable events throughout the histories of different cultures have meaningfully contributed to specific mythologies. In the case of the Djinn, Middle Eastern culture has viewed them as a mischievous, sometimes malevolent spirit, accountable for controlling or wreaking havoc on its victim's mental state. Although, while viewed as dangerous, Djinns aren't the most deadly shapeshifter figure anthropologists have analyzed.

In her book *Global Legends and Lore: Vampires and Werewolves Around the World*, Adelaide Bennett undertakes an analysis of vampires and werewolves that is both multi and cross-cultural; she investigates the bloodthirsty monsters of Europe, Asia's blood-drinking creatures, Africa's living dead, Australia's blood suckers, and the Americas' bloody beasts (Bennett 2). She notes that, while each of these myths may have its own specific variances and has arisen through different origins in various cultures, there is a unifying nature in humanity's

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[2] While noting these examples is useful, it is also important to keep the information from these studies connected to the contexts in which they exist within that specific culture. When we (as non-Natives of the cultures we are studying) remove that context, we run the risk of misappropriating that culture for our own understanding. Throughout this piece, I've sought to provide the context for these myths as fully and correctly as possible, but in the case of anthropological studies, I am more interested in studying the aspects of the mythologies anthropologists have studied rather than proving them correct or false. I state this caveat, however, in the hopes that these studies will not be taken as unquestionably correct, but as evidence of the ascribed identities and conclusions scholars have used to describe different cultures through the shapeshifter myth.

fascination with blood, life, and death. Rebecca Stefoff explores similar themes in her book *Vampires, Zombies, and Shape-shifters* where she traces many common, modern day understandings of mythological creatures and studies how these are overwhelmingly disparate from the myth's origins. She illustrates the metamorphosis of the vampire, zombie and shapeshifter myths, giving a historical and cultural background to illustrate how the myths have endured, been added to, taken away from, tweaked, and influenced across the centuries. One particular example she gives is the evolution of the vampire[3], a myth that began with undead humans who gained power and strength by weakening others and taking their blood (Stefoff 15). Stefoff gives a distinct example in the beliefs of the Romans and Greeks: "The Ancient Greeks and Romans thought that a flying, vampire like creature called a *strige* or *strix* sucked the blood from babies,[4]" (Stefoff 15). Almost every anthropological analysis cited throughout this essay attributes the myths from different cultures as a means of explaining the inexplicable. Seemingly strong and healthy babies shouldn't simply pass away in the middle of the night; it's too harsh, too cruel, too unnatural. An anthropological study would claim that people turned away from the natural as a means of explaining their loss and instead turned to the supernatural.

Such an explanation is not an uncommon one in evaluating earlier cultures who lived in treacherous conditions, particularly those with harsh climates. One such account is given by Neil Christopher in his book *The Hidden: A Compendium of Arctic Giants, Dwarves, Gnomes, Trolls, Faeries, and Other Fantastic Beings from Inuit Oral History*. Rather than focusing upon the conventional myths of werewolves and vampires, Christopher traces the Northern Canadian Inuit myths of shapeshifters, ogresses, trolls, and demons of the Canadian Arctic. Christopher provides a chronicle of the dark connotations and underlying themes of negative myths, exploring how the

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[3] Which for the purposes of this essay, I will argue is a shapeshifter, as vampires are modernly believed to be able to change into the form of a bat, or to turn into winged creatures, etc.
[4] This belief may have helped explain sudden, unexpected infant deaths.

Native peoples of Northern Canada interacted with their harsh climate and weather conditions and how that harsh relationship inspired so many dark mythological explanations for natural, and seemingly supernatural, phenomena (Christopher 31). Through his work, shapeshifters are portrayed in an especially negative light, as demonic tricksters who will lead travellers or wanderers astray (Christopher 35). They are perhaps one of the most negative because of their constant imperceptibility: they can take on a myriad of forms and are therefore able to escape detection and punishment, giving them free reign in their treatment of humans (Christopher 35). Such a portrayal of shapeshifter myth demonstrates a specific correlation between the harshness of climate and the harshness of shapeshifter myth, or rather, the level of malevolence shapeshifters were believed to have. Such reasoning is common: as nature seemingly became more fickle, harsh, and demonic, so did its inhabitants and representatives. Alexandra Lazar gives another account of this correlation for the Inuit people in her article "Inuit Mythology." Throughout her piece, Lazar traces stories about the origins of myths believed and created by the Native peoples of Northern Canada, Alaska, Greenland, and the northern part of Siberia. She, like Christopher, attributes the creation of these Native myths to the incredibly harsh climates suffered and experienced by the Inuit people, as well as their necessarily close relationship with nature (Lazar 1). Lazar's analysis unites the Native peoples' necessity to understand the natural world with their belief that animals had supernatural powers and could speak and understand human languages (Lazar 1). She also cites one of the most popular shapeshifter myths of the Inuit people, that of the "*Ijiraat*, shapeshifters that can change into any arctic animal but cannot disguise their red eyes," (Lazar 2). Such a portrayal is clearly a negative one and is read as exemplifying the harshness of the Inuit peoples' daily lives. The shapeshifter myth was, therefore, often used as a means with which to bridge a rift in understanding. If an inexplicable

event occurred within a culture, myth was used as a way of filling in the rifts of what was unknown.

This use of the shapeshifter myth is also being used in modern times as a bridge to fill in the gaps of knowledge and understanding in ESL learning. These "rifts" take on many forms, but primarily manifest themselves in the different expectations for ESL education experienced by ESL educators and ESL students. In their article "Mismatched Expectations among Developmental ESL Students in Higher Education," Myra M. Goldschmidt and Thomas Seifried discuss the challenges faced by students who came to the United States as children or adolescents and whose parents are first generation immigrants. Throughout their article, they discuss the unreasonable expectations faced by these students as they strive to achieve higher education, but are not adequately prepared to be successful by the current education system within the U.S: "These inconsistencies result in tremendous "gaps in understanding" (Harklau, 1998) among college educators and the students themselves," (Goldschmidt and Seifreid 28). Not only are these ESL students unprepared for the challenges they'll face in higher education, but they are unaware they are unprepared, which illustrates yet another failing on the part of the American education system. According to Goldschmidt and Seifreid: "This misunderstanding about what is expected from students in higher

education is largely responsible for the confusion, frustration and, sometimes, failure that Generation 1.5[5] faces during their freshman year," (28). This is due largely to ESL students' unmet needs in regard to their understanding of American culture, context, the function and form of language, and the context and inner workings of American higher education systems

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[5] It is important to note that since Goldschmidt and Seifried have published their article, other scholars have published work pointing out the ways in which labeling ESL students as "Generation 1.5" can be particularly problematic. While Goldschmidt and Seifried's use of the term "Generation 1.5" is under valid scrutiny, the findings of their research are still meaningful in that they promote a greater understanding of the challenges faced by ESL students in their pursuit of an American education.

(Goldschmidt and Seifreid 28). While Goldschmidt and Seifreid's study only focuses upon "Generation 1.5" ESL students, the conclusions of their research can be applied to ESL exchange students as well. In both cases, these students are being asked to shift from their Native culture to an entirely different culture without any substantial academic preparation to allow them to do so. Why? In many cases, it's clear that educators simply don't consider the enormity of learning another culture, along with its nuances, implicit factors, and complexities. The belief in the ubiquity of the English language is another stumbling block. As the English language is so widely taught, it can create the illusion to educators that ESL students are well versed in Native English-speaking cultures, rather than realizing that learning the language isn't the same as learning the culture, and can be impossible without truly immersing oneself within that culture. According to a study conducted by Rula L. Diab, explained in her article "Teachers' and Students' Beliefs About Responding to ESL Writing: A Case Study:" "the two students in this study revealed several interesting beliefs about ESL writing such as the influence of their Native language on learning how to write in English and the importance of practice and effort as opposed to talent or innate ability," (40). ESL students will therefore succeed if they are provided with substantial means of practicing and learning, rather than being expected to perform well as a result of "talent and innate ability." Just as shapeshifter myths have been created to explain unknown experiences around the world, we too are creating an ascribed identity of "shapeshifter" and forcing it onto ESL students, rather than trying to truly know and understand their experiences and expectations in higher education. We, unlike many cultures around the world who use myth as a means of explanation for the unknown, don't have any valid excuses for not knowing the complexities of the ESL student's experiences. We have only to ask and listen. If we as educators properly support and prepare ESL students for the demands of American higher education, *then* ESL students will have the ability to act as cultural

shapeshifters, because we have helped prepare them to do so. If we can only imagine the possibilities their medial perspective could afford, then perhaps we could understand that empowering ESL students in such a way will not only greatly impact their futures, but our entire country and culture.

Shapeshifter as a Deconstructor of Binaries

Although shapeshifters have been studied for anthropological purposes far longer than they've been studied as the deconstructors of binaries, there has been a significant body of scholarship surrounding shapeshifters and their deconstruction of binaries within the last two decades. Other scholarship surrounding shapeshifter myths such as the trickster archetype and its occupation of an intermediary space, while perhaps not using the term deconstruction, have been prevalent for the last four or five decades. Both have served to ask and answer many important questions arising as a result of of how shapeshifters function within myth. Do shapeshifters change their allegiance? Are they objectively helpful or malicious, or do they occupy both spaces simultaneously? How are shapeshifters gendered? Do they fail to occupy a particular gendered space? Can they transcend from one form of gender to another as easily as they shift form into animals? These are many of the questions explored in the scholarship surrounding shapeshifters' relationships with binaries. One piece to explore the deconstruction of the gender binary in particular is the book *The Concept of the Goddess* by editors Sandra Billington and Miranda Green. Breaking away from stereotypical subsections of "shapeshifter," Billington and Green explore pieces containing mythological analyses that feature exclusively female shapeshifters in the form of goddesses across different cultures. They explore the origins, functions, historical bases, and cults of goddesses throughout many different cultures, including Celtic, Roman, Norse, Caucasian, and Japanese traditions. One particular chapter within their book, written by Catharina Raudvere, is devoted to specifically tracing the goddess' ability to shapeshift and the

goddesses are described synonymously with witches, witches also being described as "he," or "him," (Raudvere 46). Within this chapter, Raudvere points out instances within Scandinavian mythology that illustrate female agency as being interchangeable with male agency, such as when their shapeshifting abilities were used for their own personal gain (Raudvere 47). Although female shapeshifters were often seen as using their abilities for "greed, envy, depravity, corruption, and unrequited love," other male shapeshifters were also associated with greed and self-serving motives, such as the Norse gods Odin and Loki (Raudvere 47). From Raudvere's description of male and female shapeshifters, it is clear that the Scandinavian people didn't explicitly view male and female shapeshifters as occupying the same space. However, there are many instances of transcendence and slippage, such as when Raudvere states that female shapeshifters were associated with witches and witchcraft, but then gave instances where witches were referred to as "he," (Raudvere 46). Such examples of obscurity are one of the main forms in which the deconstructing capabilities of shapeshifters takes place. The act they performed, of transcending social and cultural boundaries, was often not one that was consciously realized or engaged with by the people who believed in shapeshifter myths. This slippage is still extremely prevalent, however, in the different tellings and recordings of shapeshifter characters.

Such ambiguity in relation to shapeshifter mythology is not unusual and has even been related to concepts of the modern era. In her article "The Militarized Shape-Shifter: Authorized Violence and Military Connections as an Antidote to Monstrosity," Karalyne Lowery describes the moral confusion associated with shapeshifters in the context of militarization. She specifically investigates how shapeshifters associated with acts of militarization are viewed positively when committing the same acts of monstrosity for which they are frequently viewed as evil (Lowery 197). In her article, Lowery traces instances in modern and popular culture where a shapeshifter's beast-ness and harmfulness were negotiated down to a lesser degree through a tie

to military force (Lowery 197). Lowery argues that, when placed into a militarized context, shapeshifters capable of doing horrific things are viewed in a positive light, as protectors, warriors, and heroes (Lowery 198). She traces the origins of American trust and confidence in its military and how this trust has worked with other social and cultural forces to produce an ideal militarized shapeshifter figure (Lowery 198). Lowery's article is significant in that it provides a study of what she deems "military romance" in its connection to the shapeshifter myth and illustrates the role associations can play in whether shapeshifters are viewed as good, evil or somewhere in between (Lowery 197). This representation paints the shapeshifting identity as similar to that of a chameleon: it is attributed with the ability to take on the shape of its surroundings rather than having an intrinsic shape or identity itself.

In the instance of ESL students, their surroundings are not allegiances to good or evil, nor allegiances to masculine or feminine spaces, but rather a surrounding of Native-English speakers and writers. Like the shapeshifters depicted above, ESL students' intrinsic identity, which includes their nationality, interests, intellectual background, and previous education among other aspects, is completely ignored by educators in favor of the chameleon-like identity projected onto them. According to Dianbing Chen and Xinxiao Yang in *Improving Active Classroom Participation of ESL Students: Applying Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategies*, previous research has shown that ESL students are "not interested in instructions that ignore or isolate their home culture or targeted language culture," (Chen and Yang 79). Chen and Yang's article details a study they undertook in which they applied "culturally responsive" techniques in teaching ESL students, which were "more likely to increase students' involvement in communication and enhance their communication skills," (Chen and Yang 79). Their study exemplifies the importance of educators' acknowledgment of ESL students' intrinsic identity,

and the damage that can be done when that identity is ignored in lieu of their new ascribed role as an English learner in an English classroom.

Similarly, in their article "International ESL Graduate Student Perceptions of Online Learning in the Context of Second Language Acquisition and Culturally Responsive Facilitation," Tan, Nabb, Aagard, and Kim relay findings from their study in which they discovered Online Learning tends to be far less culturally-responsive and helpful to ESL students (13). According to their study, ESL students felt that online learning hindered their abilities to pick up on the non-verbal forms of communication that are often so helpful in aiding them to learn the English language and its cultural American context (Tan et al. 13). Online classes also tend to be taught at a much faster pace than face-to-face learning and offer no room for culturally-responsive teaching techniques, as the teachers learn so much less about their students, fail to teach the context of the English language in American culture, and are unable to teach their material in a way that makes sense in the different cultural contexts of different students. Michelle A. Johnson and Debbie Chang also illustrate the importance of culturally-responsible learning in the ESL classroom in their article "Balancing Act: Addressing Culture and Gender in ESL Classrooms," not only as a means of making the classroom inclusive for ESL students, but also as a superior form of learning and instruction (20). According to their article, success in learning the English language is greatly dependent upon ESL students learning the culture and context behind the use of specific English words or phrases (Johnson and Chang 20). There are many other studies that acknowledge the importance of culturally-inclusive learning, such as Joan Johnson and Linda Owen's article "Reaching a Culturally Diverse Immigrant Population of Adult English Language Learners," where Johnson and Owen seek to provide "instructional strategies can be used to incorporate adult students' cultures and cultural identities in a second language learning environment," (23). Melinda Porto's "Culturally Responsive L2 Education:

An Awareness-Raising Proposal" is also significant in its analysis of the impact ESL students' cultural backgrounds have on language learning. Throughout her proposal, Porto explores "the importance of global economic, social, historical, and cultural factors in language learning and teaching" and stipulates that educators must heighten their awareness of the cultural factors ESL students face in their pursuit of an American higher education (45). Sharroky Hollie has even published a short pamphlet on how teachers can create more culturally-responsive classrooms for ESL students in *ESL Magazine*, as a means of raising awareness of the importance of incorporating cultural diversity in ESL classrooms (26). All of these studies and publications are extremely important, as they account for the individual identities of ESL students and acknowledge the work it takes to gain the ability to shift between cultures, rather than immediately ascribing the role of cultural shapeshifter onto them.

Shapeshifter myths are a useful tool in understanding the potential and ascribed identities of ESL students because shapeshifters can be studied and read as occupying liminal spaces. Whether it's that space between good and evil, masculine and feminine, male and female, Black and White, or weak and strong, shapeshifters occupy the cracks in between; a space that is not a space; the divide that unites. A study of specific shapeshifter figures is necessary to better illuminate this space of mystery and darkness, and for the purpose of better exploring its fog-ridden depths, two different shapeshifter figures will be analyzed. Whilst tracing the adventures, interpretations, and rhetoric surrounding these figures from around the globe, one can begin to understand the role the shapeshifter myth as a whole has played as a means of personifying ambiguity. This ambiguity has likewise been applied to ESL students by educators' imposition of cultural shapeshifter onto them. ESL students, like shapeshifters, have the ability to transcend different cultures and occupy a transitional space, *when they are adequately prepared to do so.* Both of the following shapeshifter figures functions differently on a specific level in each of its

respective cultures, but meaningful similarities can be drawn to illustrate how each has functioned as protectors of spaces of cultural in-betweenness, and how ESL students are often depicted similarly. This similarity illustrates the potential ESL students have as members of more than one culture, but is also useful in demonstrating the impossibility of their ascribed role as cultural shapeshifter, when they are not given the tools to successfully fill that role. Both shapeshifter figures illustrate the meaningful exchanges and outcomes that can occur when shapeshifting is supported, taught, and passed on, and are helpful in presenting a way forward in ESL higher education, both for ESL students and instructors.

An Analysis of Specific Shapeshifter Figures

1. *Baba Yaga*

Baba Yaga is the famous witch who has haunted Russian folklore as both friend and foe for centuries. Olga Grandinaru's analysis of Baba Yaga in her essay *Myth and Rationale in Russian Popular Fairy Tales* focuses upon mythology surrounding the supernatural figure, known for living in a moving house that walked on chicken legs, baking people in her oven, and who, as a mistress of death, had the shape-shifting ability to turn part of herself into a snake (Gradinaru 318). Granidaru's piece focuses upon how specific demonic traits in Baba Yaga demonstrate pre-Christian traditions and long-held beliefs of the Slavic people and explores the beliefs, customs, and understandings of the death cult in particular (Gradinaru 316). According to Gradinaru: "this colorful character has its origins in the archetype of a totemic animal that brought about prolific hunting for the Slavic pre-Christian society, being the master of the entire woodland and a holdover of the popular demonology," (Gradinaru 316). Gradinaru's piece is fascinating in that it takes the supernatural shapeshifting figure of Baba Yaga and analyzes her from a multiplicity of cultural, social, and historical perspectives. She traces Baba Yaga's origin and presents the harsh surrounding climate and the Russian culture surrounding death and the

occult as a means of understanding her role for the Russian people (Gradinaru 316). After Christianity became widespread throughout Russia, Gradinaru claims that Baba Yaga came to represent folkloric tradition and even came to be known as a helpful figure in some of the tales she was featured in (Gradinaru 316). It is noteworthy that the Russian folklore featuring Baba Yaga became far more sympathetic to her character after the rise of Christianity in Russia; that she represents the space in between ascribed forms of civility and savagery that goes from frightening to friendly after the Russian people are told to change their belief system. The intermediary space that she occupies doesn't change; she's still represented as out in the woods, in her own cottage, living apart from the rest of the world. It isn't the space she's associated with that changes, but rather the context surrounding her space of occupation that metamorphosizes. The people of Russia begin to view her as an ally against a common enemy telling them they have to be a certain kind of "civilized" and that involves embracing someone else's religion. Thus, her space of wild sovereignty becomes less frightening and more welcoming by comparison.

The duality between evil sorceress and helpful immortal is one that is recognized by many scholars well-versed in Russian folklore. In his foreword "Unfathomable Baba Yagas" for the book *Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East in Russian Fairy Tales,* Jack Zipes refers to Yaga as "...not just a dangerous witch but also a maternal benefactress…" (VII). In their article "Identifying Impressions of Baba Yaga: Navigating the Uses of Attachment and Wonder on Soviet and American Television*,*" Megan Armknecht, Jill Terry Rudy, and Sibelan Forrester state that "People identify [Baba Yaga] as an intriguing, ambiguous, dangerous, and memorable figure," (62). They cite her character as being so ambiguous it can change from tale to tale: "She can be a child-eating ogress in one tale, and in the next she can possess the knowledge of immortality or help the protagonist find his missing bride," (Armknecht, et al. 63). What is it

about Baba Yaga that leads to the enduring complexity of her character? Even after the influx of Christianity in Russia, the ambiguity surrounding Baba Yaga and her morality remains prevalent in modern times, culture, and literature. Is her dualistic character serving to deconstruct the binary between good and evil? Is she actively fighting gender roles and creating a new definition of what it means to be feminine? Maternal? Womanly? Or perhaps, as Armknecht, Rudy and Forrester explore in their article, Baba Yaga is performing a sort of tough love: "Facing Baba Yaga gives the protagonists the ability not only to survive but also to thrive back in the land of Rus' as they gain a greater understanding of themselves and the world around them," (67). This reading of Baba Yaga's behavior leads one to the conclusion that she's serving as a sort of rough mentor in a Russian bildungsroman tale, where she forces protagonists into states of self-assurance, knowledge and expertise as a means of survival. According to this reading, she is objectively helping Protagonists to grow and succeed, and is therefore greatly improving their lives as well as their social trajectory. In bringing protagonists into the shifting world of the supernatural, Baba Yaga is in turn fostering characters in *their* abilities to be shapeshifters: to alter their lives and shift beyond the structured place in society in which they initially believed they were stuck. Even as she puts characters through her infamous "tests," Yaga is ultimately acting to benefit them, and giving characters the tools he or she will need in order to become a better, more whole, more successful person (Armknecht, et al. 67). In this way, Baba Yaga is an enduring guardian of an in-between space; she acts as a protector and mentor for the Russian people, and in order to do so, she must engage them in a series of tests that allow them to move beyond social and cultural boundaries to see not just what they are *allowed* to do, but what they *can* do. In her capacity as a shapeshifter, and a mentor for other shapeshifters, Baba Yaga not only transcends multiple social and cultural boundaries herself, but encourages others to do so through her tales.

Baba Yaga's most meaningful and significant attribute is not her ability to shapeshift, but her ability to teach others how to do so successfully. All ESL educators should strive to be Baba Yagas in their classrooms. As English-language educators, we are in a position to help bridge the gap ESL and L2 students face upon transitioning from one culture into another. We see the potential ESL students exhibit and are in ideal positions to help multicultural students grow into their roles as cultural shapeshifters. However, it is essential that we properly prepare these students and give them the tools to be successful shapeshifters without simply expecting immediate success. For instance, it is imperative that college-level educators stop making the assumption that ESL students have been adequately prepared for an English higher education in high school. According to Ilene Z. Rubenstein in her article "Education Expectations: How they Differ Around the World: Implications for Teaching ESL College Students," the cultural contexts and standards of education vary so much around the world that students can experience a culture shock in their introduction to the ways of English language education in addition to any issues they face in understanding the language itself (439). Rubenstein states: "Given the variances that exist in educational standards, it is important to recognize that not every student who has completed high school/secondary school possesses the level of literacy and language facility necessary for college work in their own language, let alone English," (439). Keeping cultural differences in mind, college educators must be willing to teach ESL students the intricacies of American culture and the cultural contexts in which American students use the English language, while remaining mindful of the cultural context to which ESL students are accustomed.

Not all ESL studies recognize the importance of cultural acknowledgment and responsibility, however. There are several studies that continue to encourage the mis-projection of identities onto ESL students, such as that conducted by Halimatussaadiah Iksan and Halim

Huzaina Abdul in "The Effect of E-Feedback via Wikis on ESL Students' L2 Writing Anxiety Level." Throughout their article, Iksan and Abdul detail how they've studied the anxiety levels of ESL students when faced with E-feedback versus face-to-face (1). Although Iksan and Abdul were successful in identifying that ESL students faced less anxiety receiving e-feedback than that of face-to-face (Iksan and Abdul 1), one can't help questioning whether it's the content of that feedback that is more deserving of an analysis. If ESL students are receiving feedback like the comments I've relayed (above) from my work in SUNY Cortland's writing center, then the way in which those comments are relayed carries little bearing on the future success of the student. To recall those comments, if a student is given an "E" and told that their use of language is "muddying" their main argument but not given any instruction as to how to proceed, they are having an identity ascribed onto them, one that includes the expectation of their immediate shift into a Native-English speaker. I've spoken to many ESL students who felt they were falsely believed to have a greater grasp of the English language and its cultural context than they truly did, especially if they began their studies in American education as a child. One student received some extra speech help for a year or so before being told they were "fine" and no longer receiving any extra help. This student told me she would have greatly appreciated more help throughout her elementary and high school education and that its removal has prevented her from fully grasping the context and nuances of the English language into her college education.

The significance of re-evaluating the disparity between ESL student and educators' expectations is further exemplified in a study conducted by Nagaletchimee Annamalai, where the "patterns of interactions among ESL students during their online interactions to complete their narrative essays" were studied (Annamalai 1). Annamalai states that "these interactions were only focused on aspect related to sentence fluency and word choice. Interactions related to organization and ideas were minimal," (Annamalai 1). Whereas Annamalai interpreted the

findings as implying "that the presence of a teacher is pertinent for students to construct knowledge in a more meaningful way in the virtual classrooms," her study could also be viewed as a means of identifying what ESL students feel they're equally lacking in English-speaking classrooms: namely interactions "related to sentence fluency and word choice." When ESL students are focusing mainly upon sentence fluency and word choice, the logical implication is that they require as much instruction in those areas as they do in "organization and ideas." Their tendency to utilize their peers as resources to aid them in these areas doesn't arise from their inability to discuss those organization and idea issues without a teacher present, but rather that an educational bridge must be formed to give students the opportunity to learn higher-education level English so that they may fluently discuss their organization and ideas.

A similar misreading of the needs of ESL students is communicated in Shakarami, Hajhashemi, and Caltabiano's article "Compensation Still Matters: Language Learning Strategies in Third Millennium ESL Learners," where they state that "Students should not be 'spoon-fed' by teachers, and should be trained to feel responsible for their own learning and to explore the new language they learn. Therefore, this study takes 'learning' and 'ways to learn learning' as its main theme and wishes to replace this system for 'teaching language,' (237). According to Shakarami, Hajhashemi, and Caltabiano, the current generation of ESL learners are "Net-Geners" and are therefore sufficiently able to self-direct their learning of the English language and choose what material is most pertinent to them in their learning (236). While it is important to take what ESL students actually find helpful into account when teaching them the English language, it seems rather counterproductive to expect ESL learners to simply direct themselves in the learning of an entire language, culture, and cultural context. Their study findings, however, were that "Net-Gener language learners have embraced new technology and have found ways to cope with its facilities and compensate for its limitations," implying that it is ESL learners' jobs

to compensate for the flaws in an online learning environment and that they must be "self-directed" in finding solutions to a culturally-exclusive learning environment that isn't doing anything to promote successful learning for *them* (Shakarami et al. 247). The very nature of Shakarami, Hajhashemi, and Caltabiano's study assumes that ESL students are responsible for knowing exactly what they need to learn, how they will best learn that material, and how they can get those tools of learning, in a "self-directed" manner that doesn't involve "spoon-feeding." What they fail to understand is that ESL students are coming from an entirely different culture with its own logic, ways of learning, and context. If educators simply assume ESL learners know enough about the English language's cultural context, without providing that information to them, and helping them to discover that context, we are already expecting them to learn at an extreme disadvantage. Instead we must, like Baba Yaga, understand that ESL students will have several trials to undergo on their path to successful shapeshifting, and we must be present to help and support them through those trials so that they can successfully occupy their space of cultural in-betweenness.

       2. *Loki Odinson*

The Norse god, Loki, whose character is given some depth in John Haywood's *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings,* is a fascinating character in that he has served as a figure of both deconstruction of gender, and deconstruction of morality. Often depicted as Thor's counterpart, Loki is described in ways that privilege intellect, strategy and scheming, while Thor is the personification of masculine brute strength (Haywood 26). Whereas Thor could use his hammer and brawn to solve most issues and protect the Nordic people from the malevolent giants on the earth, Loki was noted for his underhanded way of out-strategizing his opponents (Haywood 26). From such descriptions it is clear that Thor serves as the representation of stereotypical masculine strength, while Loki represents the forms of strength which are often

represented by women and the feminine. This is a fascinating representation, as Thor is simply a "straightforward, reliable god," whereas Loki was noted for his shapeshifting capabilities, and therefore, his abilities to transcend social and cultural norms and boundaries (Haywood 26). This dichotomous representation of the two gods also held true for the issue of morality, for the binary of good and evil. Whereas Thor was unambiguously portrayed as "straightforward" and helpful to the human race, Loki was "a cunning, witty mischief-maker, whose schemes were always getting the gods and himself into trouble. Though he was not an unambiguously evil figure like Satan, Loki was capable of great wickedness and treachery," (Haywood 26). Haywood goes on to say that the Nordic people even believed Loki's "scheming" would someday be responsible for the ending of the world, an event they deemed "Ragnarok," (Haywood 26). The idea that not Satan, but an ambiguously moral shapeshifting god should be the Viking's largest and most feared threat to the ending of their world does carry some weight. What is it about Loki that makes him so dangerous? Perhaps it is his distinct ability to shift, to transcend, to flit across social and cultural boundaries. Perhaps his identity is so ambiguously informed and fluently shiftable that the Nordic people felt they could not discern where his allegiances lay.

Haywood is not the only scholar to analyze Loki's character as an ambiguous trickster. In his article "Cunning Intelligence in Norse Myth: Loki, Óðinn, and the Limits of Sovereignty," Kevin J. Wanner refers to Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* in its description of Loki and refers to him as "cunning, prone to trickery, resourceful, and duplicitous," (215). He also points out that scholars have had various ambivalent associations with Loki: "scholars' interpretations...have varied enormously—he has been seen as everything from an elemental spirit of fire, water, or air to a trickster or culture-hero, to a chthonic demon of death, to, most infamously, a spider—many have viewed the trait of cunning as fundamental to his character, (Wanner 217). The multiplicity of Loki's character, like Baba Yaga's, is significant: that he is not unambiguously evil like Satan,

but is foreseen as spurring the Norse apocalypse, and that he has been seen and interpreted both as a demon of death and as a culture-hero is indicative of his function in between ascribed roles and identities. In her article "The Function of Loki in Snorri Sturluson's Edda," Stefanie Von Schnurbein states: "Hardly a monograph, article, or encyclopedic entry does not begin with the reference to Loki as a staggeringly complex, confusing, and ambivalent figure who has been the catalyst for countless unresolved scholarly controversies" (109). Throughout her article, Von Schnurbein analyzes Loki as a shifter between binaries, looking closely at "Loki's enigmatic positioning between disparate categories-giants and gods, men and women, man and beast," (Von Schnurbein 110). He is often attributed with the ability to shift into women, beasts, and as having giant-parentage (Wanner 216). Loki therefore shifts not only between differing states of morality, but differing states of physicality as well. The multiplicity of Loki's representations make any form of character analysis elusive at best. He is not meant to be read as a concrete cultural hero, nor is he meant to be read as a simplistic "demon of death."

Fascinatingly, the one trait that remains inherent in all of Loki's manifestations is his ability to be ambiguous, and his proclivity for "cunning," as Wanner evidenced in his quote from above[6]. It therefore seems only natural to argue that the ambivalent scholarship surrounding Loki and his differing functions within Norse Mythology is somewhat irrelevant to the overall point, and that it is those very *differing representations* that are most noteworthy in determining his function. Loki is not meant to be easily read, understood, or distinguishable. He isn't meant to cling to either one binary or another, but to have a foot simultaneously in both; to represent a gray area. His role in both modern and historic times has been to represent the kind of space that lends itself to "cunning" intelligence rather than brawn, to promote social and cultural shifting through the occupation of spaces that are generally only open to good *or* bad, male *or* female,

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[6] From page 217 of his article "Cunning Intelligence in Norse Myth: Loki, Óðinn, and the Limits of Sovereignty."

human *or* supernatural being. Loki has provided, and continues to provide, a figure of exploration in which social and cultural boundaries can be tested, pushed back upon, and complicated. His character, and the complexity associated with him, opens up possibilities and provides a bridge between conflicting spaces of concreteness. As an "outsider" with giant-lineage, Loki can be read as racially different from his godly counterparts and his cunning, strategic intelligence serves as a means of mobility from racially "othered" to generally ambiguous, which comes with its own power and agency. Loki's ability to act as an elusive, ever-shifting character allows him to try on many different roles that would otherwise be closed off to him, either due to his gender, race, physique or personality. He is not built with the same physique and powers of strength as Thor, but his agency is just as great as Thor's to the point of even surpassing it; while Thor is predictable, Loki is not, and that unpredictability and fear of the unknowable is what makes his figure so volatile and dangerous in Norse myth. The only true danger, as a literary scholar, is to read Loki's unreadability as preventing the true nature of his character from being known, rather than acknowledging that his unreadability *is* his character.

Loki's agency stems from his ability to successfully maneuver transitional spaces. In this way, he provides an example of the potentiality of ESL students, if their unique liminal perspective is acknowledged and supported the way it should be by educators. ESL students have the kind of potential that Native-English speakers do not, just as Loki has the kind of potential that will never be experienced by Thor. Loki has a power-fluidity that arises from his ability to move from space to space: he shows great skill in his ability to be cunning, strategic, and witty, but he is only able to do so because he knows the rules and contexts of the cultures he's shifting between. ESL students have the potential to be just as strategic, clever, and witty in academia, if educators empower them with an extensive knowledge of the cultures they're attempting to shift between.

When educators fail to acknowledge the complexities of learning the English language, its cultural context, and the time it may take ESL students to do so, the impact is greatly detrimental to ESL students in their pursuit of American education. Such a misunderstanding of the experiences faced by ESL students can even lead educators to grade ESL students more harshly for the same mistakes made by their Native-English speaking counterparts, as explored in the article "How Faculty Attitudes and Expectations toward Student Nationality Affect Writing Assessment," by Peggy Lindsey and Deborah Crusan. According to Lindsey and Crusan, educators will look harder for grammatical and surface level mistakes in ESL students' work as a result of unconscious biases educators hold based on students' nationalities (2). This disparity in the way Native and Non-Native English speakers are graded makes ESL students' successful path to higher education even more difficult, as such grading often points out mistakes, but doesn't help the students learn how to stop making them (as I witnessed with students in the Writing Center). Such biases also result in a literal inequity in the way ESL students are graded, holding them to standards that Native-English speakers are often not held to themselves. The Vikings read Loki's occupation of a medial space as threatening, rather than seeing the potential and possibilites afforded by his occupation of such a space. When educators mark ESL students as "different" in a negative way, we are already forcing them into a place of disadvantagement. However, if we embrace the potentiality of ESL students' difference; if we promote their unique dualistic vantage point and teach them to use it in a way that empowers them, we will have a far greater success rate in the education of ESL students in the American education system. Understanding that we, as educators, have the tendency to hold these negative biases doesn't make us bad educators, or bad people, but if we are to truly help ESL students be successful shapeshifters, we must acknowledge that these biases are often an unfortunate part of ESL

students' educational experiences. We must put a stop to these biases and instead promote the great potentiality these students don't often realize they have.

Conclusion

The rhetoric used in relation to both mythological shapeshifter figures and in regard to ESL students is highly illuminating in terms of ESL students' current experiences in English-centered higher education. As students who are journeying from one culture to another, and from one language to another, they have the hard but laudable task of going from a higher-level understanding of reading, writing, education and communication in their Native culture to a higher-level understanding of reading, writing, education, and communication in the English language, which is notably one of the most difficult languages to learn as a secondary speaker. We should celebrate ESL student's efforts to become fluent (in every sense of the word) in another difficult language. Instead of ascribing them with the identity of shapeshifter without properly preparing them to successfully shift from one culture to another, we educators should view ESL students as they are, and as they themselves would like to be viewed; as travellers and adventurers, journeying their way through learning a different language and learning to become cultural shapeshifters. Journeys take time, immersing oneself in another language and culture takes time, and the time it takes for ESL students to grow in their adventures in the English language should be understood and respected, not hurried or forced.

It is worth noting that while this essay is the first instance in which ESL students have been understood through the lens of cultural shapeshifter, there are several other ESL education scholars who are doing valuable work with the same goals. Min-Zhan Lu has written many articles analyzing the current pedagogical practices used for ESL education and how educators should change the way they think about the multicultural classroom. In one such article, titled "Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone," Lu stresses the

importance of viewing any classroom as a "contact zone" where different cultures and their contexts have the potential to "clash" and push against one another (447). For Lu, it is vital that educators acknowledge the different cultures, backgrounds, and contexts their students have been accustomed to and teach them in a way that is both culturally-responsive and conscious of ESL students' need for a bridge between cultures (447). Lu also teamed up with Bruce Horner to write several articles on ESL pedagogy such as "Translingual Literacy, Language Difference, and Matters of Agency," where they analyze the negative impacts of what they call *monolingualism,* "which treats languages as discrete, stable, internally uniform, and linked indelibly to what is held to be each writer's likewise stable and uniform location and social identity," (583). Lu and Horner seek to explore how monolingualism works to systemically and negatively other non-Native English speakers, expecting them to lose every sign of their Native language and culture in lieu of assimilating into English language and American culture. They argue that it would be far more valuable and valid to promote a space of liminality, that both promotes the learning of the English language and American culture, but still respects and values the Native cultures of ESL students.

Paul Kei Matsuda is yet another scholar doing valuable work to promote the agency of ESL students' potential duality. Within his article "The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in U.S. College Composition," Matsuda discusses the problems ESL students face in their pursuit of higher education in composition and writing classrooms. He states: " the dominant discourse of U.S. college composition not only has accepted English Only as an ideal but it already assumes the state of English-only, in which students are Native English speakers by default," (Matsuda 637). His exploration of the "norm" of introductory composition and writing courses demonstrates the way in which ESL students begin their American studies already at a major disadvantage; that of not even being acknowledged. Not only do these students have very few

provisions made for the specific needs of their education and cultural backgrounds, but their very presence in institutions of American higher education is often completely ignored. When the individual experiences and needs of ESL students aren't met or even acknowledged, the assumption is that they must alter themselves to fit into the "norm" of "English Only," as Matsuda points out. This is an impossible task to simply expect of students who find themselves in between two very different cultures, especially without the help, guidance, and support of the educators they are told to rely on.

While many scholars in the Composition and Rhetoric and English Literature disciplines are doing very valuable work, arguing for the acknowledgement of the experiences and challenges faced by ESL students, it is helpful to think about this issue through the lens of cultural shapeshifting. The main issue faced by ESL students in modern English-centered American education is that they're expected to occupy a comfortable space of easy cultural transition, and they are seldom given the tools, guidance, and support in doing so. We as educators cannot simply expect ESL students to shift themselves into Native English speakers because it would make our own lives easier, or because they are outnumbered by Native English speakers, or because the current institutional systems in place rarely acknowledge their presence in helpful ways. We must change the way we operate, as members of higher education institutions, leaders in our classrooms, and fellow intellectual adventurers to our ESL comrades. For if we promote the potential of ESL scholars; if we acknowledge their incredible potential as intellectual thinkers with the ability to shift between cultures and have dualistic perspectives, we will not only be empowering those students, but also bettering our intellectual communities and the world around us.

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