

BECOMING ONE WITH OUR ANIMAL SELVES: ON MOTHERHOOD AS
METAMORPHOSIS

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ABSTRACT

This project simultaneously enters and tracks the liminal spaces and positions that the (non)human female body inhabits as it oscillates between human and animal corporeality, especially through the process of “becoming-mother.” Turning to Rachel Yoder’s *Nightbitch* (2021), K-Ming Chang’s *Bestiary* (2020), and Emily Habeck’s *Sharkheart: A Love Story* (2023)—three contemporary feminist speculative fiction novels published in the past five years that effectively respond to the current social and political climate surrounding the instable discourse of women’s reproductive and individual human rights—I interrogate the ways in which humanity, animality, and motherhood fluidly coexist and permeate each other in alternative worlds that allow women to reclaim and explore the true power of their (non)human female bodies. By first examining the physical and psychological differences that exist between the pregnant and maternal body and how they then inform the intrinsic bond forged between a mother and her offspring, this project brings these three novels together to follow the female body along its corporeal process of becoming both “mother” and “animal.” Put in conversation with the critical theory coming out of posthumanism, animal studies, new materialism, feminist science and technology studies, and maternal feminist thought, these three novels celebrate the female body across human and nonhuman worlds to showcase women’s ability to resist patriarchal capture and dismantle the cultural illusions of control that still work to define their corporeality and (non)human identity.

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INTRODUCTION

To what identities do women turn when those available to them fail? How do women expand their identities to encompass all parts of their beings? How might women turn to the natural world to express their deepest longings and most primal fantasies?

Rachel Yoder, *A Field Guide to Magical Women, Nightbitch*

As American poet and essayist Adrienne Rich reflects on her personal experiences in tandem with the historical underpinnings of motherhood in her work *Of Women Born*, she succinctly states how the female (human) body is relegated to one of two categories under patriarchal mythology. On one hand, “the female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, ‘the devil’s gateway,’” and on the other, “as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and the physical potential for motherhood—the same body with its bleedings and mysteries—is her single destiny and justification in life (qtd. in O’Reilly 20). Forced to occupy not only a certain identity, but a certain body, women throughout history are expected to walk the line between a preserved “pureness” and the self-sacrificing act of reproduction and maternity.

Growing out of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a patriarchal anxiety began to emerge from what Rich calls “the male’s subjective experience of women,” which came to demarcate the unknown and unpredictable nature of women’s bodies and the reproductive power they possess (qtd. in O’Reilly 20). In what served as “the prehistory of motherhood in the eighteenth century,” this cultural fear punished and demonized women, labelling their bodies monstrous and in need of “female containment” in the domestic space of the home (Francus 19).

Following and inspired by the mythical stories chronicled in Ovid's epic retelling of Ancient Greek and Roman history *Metamorphoses*, Francus also asserts, "The teratological nature of these mothers also manifested in their [corporeal] appearance, for they have physical characteristics of animals, particularly dogs, dragons, and asses, which link them to classical female fiends like Scylla or the snake-haired Medusa" (Francus 26-27). Attempts to control, capture, and "domesticate" women and quell the cultural fears defining maternal misogyny thus contaminates Western conceptions of femininity and its proximity to the natural and nonhuman world, which continues to cause discomfort in feminist practices and scholarship today (Alaimo 2000).

Even as the rise of the biological and medical sciences began to permeate Western imaginations with rational constructions of the human in the eighteenth century, men continued to exude these gendered anxieties by highlighting the corporeal and emotional differences between the male and female body: "It was no accident that first moralists and then Victorian evolutionists looked to nature to justify assigning female animals the same qualities that patriarchal cultures have almost always ascribed to 'good' mothers (nurturing and passive)" (Hrdy xvii). As animals have historically been used both as a model for scientific research and as a metaphorical symbol throughout literature, it is important to track where and how the animal appears regarding the need to center the human in Western ideologies. With the "duality of man" (man as a moniker for both humanity and male identifying individuals) scaffolding a dominant narrative of control over (non)human female bodies, Rich notes, "The woman [is] praised for reducing herself to a brood animal [and] has [not] had any real autonomy or selfhood to gain from this subversion of the female body (and hence the female mind)" (qtd. in O'Reilly 21). Therefore, the body becomes a turbulent and problematic space for women that refuses them

their “deepest longings and most primal fantasies” to evoke the thoughts of the fictional academic Wanda White in Rachel Yoder’s novel *Nightbitch*.

Over the last century, reproduction and a woman’s right to choose when and if she gives birth remains at the forefront of Western social and political discourses—especially under the scrutiny of Foucault’s theoretical conception of biopolitics. As anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy states in *Mother Nature*, “The abortion debate is ultimately about what it means to be a mother” (5). Coming out of the turn into the twenty-first century, Hrdy goes on to accurately foreshadow the current debates that have already overturned legislation like *Roe v. Wade* and that continue to refuse and threaten the individual rights and bodies of women: “Few Westerners take seriously the possibility that old tensions between maternal and paternal interests could explode one day in their own country and transform a world they take for granted” (6). With the language and process of transformation continuing to permeate the historical underpinnings of how women inhabit their bodies, it is no surprise then that the interdisciplinary fields of feminist science and technology studies and new materialism emerged out of the late twentieth century and continue to rupture the patriarchal modes of capture that attempt to control the (female) (human) body and how it moves through time, space, and reality.

Drawing from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s assemblages of the body in their 1980 work *A Thousand Plateaus* and putting it in conversation with cultural feminist and linguist Luce Irigaray, feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti comments on “the current cultural fascination with monstrous, mutant or hybrid others [that] expresses both a deep anxiety about the fast rate of transformation of identities and also the poverty of the social imaginary and our inability to cope creatively with the on-going transformations” (5). Echoing the masculine anxieties that have historically dehumanized women and domesticated their bodies, Braidotti

constructs a new theory and process of becoming that—when applied to and taken up by women and the (non) human female body—is “neither reproduction nor imitation, but rather empathic proximity and intensive interconnectedness” (8).

Paired with environmental feminist and posthumanist Stacy Alaimo’s “transcorporeality” (2010, 2016) and adopting the fleshy discourses of Black feminist postcolonial scholarship (Hortense Spillers’ “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe, Tiffany Lethabo King’s *The Black Shoals*), this project contributes to the ongoing reconfiguration of women’s relationship to their corporeality and the more-than-human world, especially when read through the lens of motherhood. As such, I simultaneously track and become immersed in the liminal position of the female (non)human body and how it comes to be represented and transition within and between human and animal worlds, especially across contemporary feminist speculative fiction.

In her attention and subsequent analysis of what she terms SF (speculative fiction and science fiction), Donna Haraway utilizes the other “worldings” that these texts occupy as they respond to the cultural and biopolitical discourses that govern the movement and function of the body in the Western patriarchy. Worlding, as described by Helen Palmer and Vicky Hunter, “is a particular blending of material and semiotic that removes the boundaries between subject and environment...[and] affords the opportunity for the cessation of habitual temporalities and modes of being” (2018). As Haraway enters the questioning worlds of SF narratives, she maps how the body becomes a site for human relations with the nonhuman and more-than-human beings she names “companion species.” Echoing Braidotti and her new materialist theories of becoming, Haraway locates how non/human animal companion species “become with” the worldings they construct and inhabit (2008). Black feminist scholars like Theri Alyce Pickens (2019) and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020) have also turned to Black speculative/science fiction

to navigate the ways in which the (Black) body exists across nonlinear time and space and (post)colonial narratives. Inspired by Haraway, Pickens, and Jackson (among many others), I bring three speculative fiction novels that revolve around how the (non)human female body becomes (with?) mother(hood) together to showcase the alternative worlds they create and celebrate in response to the current political/feminist moment that continues to attack and dehumanize the rights and identities of both women and mothers: Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch* (2021), K-Ming Chang's *Bestiary* (2020), and Emily Habeck's *Sharkheart: A Love Story* (2023).

The first of the three novels that I analyze here is Yoder's *Nightbitch*. Approximately two years after the birth of her son, Yoder's unnamed protagonist "the mother" is struggling to orient herself in her newly adopted role as a stay-at-home mother after giving up her career and identity as an artist when she slowly starts to notice dense patches of hair appearing on her body. As time goes on, the mother finds it harder than normal to tame her "emotional" impulses, which earns her the nickname "Nightbitch" from her frequently aloof and absent husband. Her body continues to take on more canine characteristics and behaviors, which forces the mother to shed her (human) understandings and practices of motherhood to better embody her reproductive identity and power as an artist, a woman, a mother, and a (non)human animal. I specifically utilize Yoder's attention to the mother/Nightbitch's intimate relationship with her shifting maternal animality to lay the groundwork for how the other two novels inter-/intra-act with their own narrative experiences and processes of becoming both "mother" and "animal."

Originally released only a year prior, Chang's novel *Bestiary* navigates the maternal history of a Tiwanese-American family where each woman embodies a different cultural myth that comes to define how they understand their corporeal reality as both mothers and daughters. While the novel takes place across multiple points of view ranging from Ama (the grandmother),

Mother, and Daughter, Chang focuses primarily on Daughter and her relationship to herself and the women who came before her. Growing up listening to stories about a tiger spirit who lives inside women's bodies, Daughter wakes up one day to discover that she has birthed a tiger tail. As Daughter simultaneously struggles to accept and hide her new appendage, she embarks on a journey of queer self-discovery that brings her closer to both Mother and Ama amid familial tensions that threaten to tear them apart. It is only when Daughter leans into her symbiotic relationship with the tiger spirit inhabiting her body that she is able to acknowledge the cultural and mythical importance of the matrilineal heritage she shares across time and space with/in the bodies of Ama, Mother, and all women who come before and after her. Acting as the throughline between Yoder and Habeck's speculative works, *Bestiary* emphasizes how the individual experience of metamorphosis, especially from woman to animal, establishes a material ground for revisiting and reconfiguring the relationships forged and broken between mother and daughter.

The third and final novel of this project, Emily Habeck's *Sharkheart: A Love Story* (2023), places the reader in the midst of a world much like our own—barring the apparent prevalence of biological mutations that gradually transform the human body into different nonhuman animal species. Following the first few weeks of their marriage, newlyweds Wren and Lewis must quickly come to terms with the fact that this first year together will ultimately be their last as Lewis has received a rare diagnosis that will transform him into a great white shark. As Lewis slowly loses his grasp on his humanity, Wren cannot help but think about her mother, Angela, and the reptilian transformation that defined the majority of her childhood and ripped her away from Wren. Jumping back and forth between Wren and Angela's respective experiences with Angela's mutation alongside the fresh grief of losing Lewis, Habeck positions

Wren between the realm of the human and the animal as she begins to contemplate her relationship to herself and motherhood—especially when she makes the unexpected discovery that she is pregnant. Through the creation and simultaneous interrogation of a world where it is socially accepted that humans can and will become nonhuman animals, Habeck grasps at the complexity of motherhood and its close if not entangled proximity to nonhuman monstrosity and animality.

Brimming over with the material and mythical assemblages of (non)human female body, these three speculative fiction novels offer uniquely nuanced and inter/intrapersonal understandings, experiences, and practices of motherhood that, when brought together, reveal the corporeal reality and reproductive value of the (maternal) body in a patriarchal society that attempts to, but ultimately cannot control it. Therefore, in “Becoming One with Our Animal Selves: On Motherhood as Metamorphosis,” I posit how motherhood, following King’s reading of the body as an array of “hybrid assemblages and cumulative effects of multispecies entanglement” (140), exists and thrives on the boundary between human and nonhuman identity. By reclaiming and redefining women’s proximity to nature and the nonhuman world as a space of maternal power and bodily autonomy, I argue that tracking the processes of becoming that attach themselves to the female body blur the taxonomic lines and celebrate the innate relations between human and animal. Building on the historical and theoretical narratives mentioned above, I examine how each of the women in Yoder, Chang, and Habeck’s novels recognize, experience, and celebrate their female bodies and further shed their gendered passivity to stoke and hone their maternal experiences of animality. As they each undergo and intimately witness their nonhuman metamorphoses, the novels’ animal- mothers and daughters shatter the preconceived patriarchal notions of femininity to redefine how women occupy and move through

human and nonhuman worlds.

By proposing and establishing the maternal body as being distinctly and corporeally separate from the pregnant body, the first section “Woman, Mother, Monster: Transgressing Pregnancy and the Maternal Body” traces the physical and psychological changes of the female body as it moves through the simultaneous processes of becoming “mother” and “animal.” As patriarchal society attempts to capture women into domestic and biological roles as mothers, I examine how the women and mothers of these speculative fiction novels immerse themselves into the monstrous potential of their female bodies to reclaim their individual subjectivity and reproductive power that they possess. Transitioning into more of the “maternal” aspects of motherhood, the second section “The Mother/Infant Dyad: Redefining the Role of the Female of the Species” troubles the historical and scientific expectation of mothers being selfless and sacrificial for the survival of their children and species. Taking up Jennifer Case’s reading and experience of the evolutionary relationship known as the “mother/infant dyad,” this section further maps the intrinsic bond between a mother and her offspring to tease apart where mother ends and child begins. The third section “Becoming Wom:animal: The Hybrid Space of Motherhood” builds on the previous two to delve deeper into the physiological changes that take place when the women of these novels begin to take on nonhuman animal characteristics alongside and because of their proximity to motherhood. Adopting Sharon Holland’s relational position of the “hum:animal,” I go a step further to interrogate the entangled relationship that comes into being in the realm of the “wom:animal” where the woman/animal/mothers carve out and inhabit the liminal space between and beyond human and animal categorization to resist patriarchal expectations and practices of “good” motherhood.

While this project is being scaffolded using the works of Black feminist

scholars/theorists, it is important for me to acknowledge that this project does not include a narrative experience of Black motherhood. The entanglements of Blackness, female sexuality, and animality is a fruitful and necessary discussion that I would love to explore—I just did not have the space or resources to dedicate or participate within the confines of this work because of the conversations and connections that I am already invested in making across the speculative worlds of Yoder, Chang, and Habeck’s novels. At the same time, although I am taking up, responding to, and critiquing the current political climate surrounding women’s individual and reproductive rights, the scope of this project does not interact with or intersect with the legality or governmental policies that inspire these discourses. In bringing together critical thought across the interdisciplinary scholarship of posthumanism, animal studies, new materialism, feminist technology studies, and maternal feminist theory, “Becoming One with Our Animal Selves” asks us to sit with and in a moment of transition: as “female” becomes “mother,” the body transforms into something “other than” that opens the door between and beyond human/animal categorization to bring the female (non)human body back into the fold of its fluid becoming and being.

WOMAN, MOTHER, MONSTER: TRANSGRESSING PREGNANCY AND THE
MATERNAL BODY

Divine hosts? I begin to think. *Parasitic hosts? Is there a difference?*

Jennifer Case, *We Are Animals:*

On the Nature and Politics of Motherhood

What exactly does it mean to “become-mother?” Women have long been and continue to be expected to readily accept a seemingly inevitable transition from “woman” to “mother” that is enforced by the historical and patriarchal structures of Western society. Even with motherhood being cast through an idealized lens, Rich recognizes that “[t]he power of the mother has two aspects: the biological potential or capacity to bear and nourish human life, and the magical power invested in women by men, whether in the form of Goddess-worship or the fear of being controlled and overwhelmed by women” (qtd. in O’Reilly 7). Here, Rich directly acknowledges the double-edged sword that is forged through the human female body. Women/mothers are only allowed to possess and use their “power” under the careful watch and societal control of men who both worship and fear them. As such, “women are [thus] controlled by lashing us to our bodies,” (7) and to the naturalized domestic spaces that have historically held them captive.

This cultural reduction into the corporeal and domestic space inhabited by women becomes even more restrictive once a woman enters the realm of motherhood as her body begins changing to accommodate for the process of pregnancy. Before a woman can fully “become-mother,” she must undergo a series of physical and physiological changes that effectively restricts her and her body to a site of biological reproduction. As women and their pregnant bodies navigate their newfound fluidity, Western culture, created and reinforced by Man, pushes women to the boundary of humanity—dehumanization, as a patriarchal and cultural practice,

therefore establishes a complex relationship that renders nature female and women as not exactly human.

Consequently, as the pregnant body transgresses sites of the human/nonhuman and woman/mother, it becomes an “othered” identity that cannot be adequately confined by Western systems of categorization. The simultaneous divine exaltation and parasitic corporeality that Jennifer Case grapples within the quoted epigraph above, paired with Rich’s double reading of the power of the mother, reaffirms the ambiguity that women and their (pregnant) bodies are constantly in relation to. Not only does this elusiveness instill fear in patriarchal society, but it also causes an intimate and unique anxiety in women who do not and cannot fully comprehend the “otherness” attached to their bodily selves. As Rosemary Betterton argues, “The embodied pregnant woman, like the monster, thus destabilizes the concept of the singular self, threatening to spill over the boundaries of the unified subject” (85). It is no surprise, then, that the pregnant body exists in such proximity to the corporeal and cultural construction of monstrosity in Western literature, media, and film.

While Betterton does critically examine the continued comparison of pregnancy to monstrosity in her work, she routinely uses “the maternal body” to describe the experiences and bodies of specifically and only pregnant women. As such, she conflates maternity with pregnancy, which serves to collapse the complex identities and spaces that women inhabit as they undergo the process of “becoming mother” both through and outside of pregnancy and childbirth. While the Oxford English Dictionary also defines “maternal” along these lines, I want to propose a more nuanced understanding of maternity as being separate from pregnancy: where pregnancy and childbirth are immersed in the physicality of the female body and the process of biological reproduction, I argue that maternity proceeds pregnancy and comes to encompass the

mental and emotional changes that new mothers navigate when learning to nurture and care for their child.

The conceptualization of the “maternal instinct” becomes superimposed on the selfless and sacrificial facets of maternity here and plays right into the hands of my analysis of how the process of “becoming mother” transforms the human female body and allows it to occupy the liminal space between human and animal. The pairing of “maternal” with the biologically innate behavior(s) that come to be associated with “instinct” effectively confirms the mother’s animality and women’s proximity to the natural world. However, are the facets of maternal care (the innate drive to bond and care for the child) truly as automatic as Western scientific and cultural discourses want us to believe? Rich, a mother herself, does not think so (O’Reilly 6). It is therefore important for me to stress this necessary distinction between the “maternal” body and the “pregnant” body to accurately record and analyze the diverse ways in which the female body transforms and transcends Western modes of taxonomic classification.

As such, this section goes to these three novels to understand/analyze the physical and psychological changes that women undergo first through pregnancy and childbirth and then later through maternal care of the child to call attention to the perceived control that patriarchal society utilizes to silence and dehumanize women’s minds and bodies. I call attention to the “perceived” notion of control here to emphasize how the feminine and child-bearing body reclaims its power (of creation, destruction, and being) in the liminal borderlands that persist between the human/animal divide. To do this, I examine how the women-mothers in Yoder, Chang, and Habeck’s speculative fiction novels portray both pregnant and maternal bodies while also grappling with individual and structural modes of control that underscore the creation of (maternal) life. This argument is important to these texts because it highlights the simultaneous

brutality, power, and darkness of motherhood alongside its sanitized, domesticated, and contained representation within both historical and modern structures of patriarchal society. The literal and figurative violence enacted on both human and nonhuman female bodies simultaneously responds to and reproduces the cultural “need” to separate “mother” from both “woman” and “human.”

While it is sparingly mentioned throughout the novel, Yoder includes flashbacks to the mother’s experience of childbirth to begin the process of allowing the mother to recognize the physical violence and animalistic power that it entails, which then frees her from the mind-numbing cycle of living and being held captive in the role of a newly minted stay-at-home-mom. As the mother settles into her new routine, she reflects on the importance of her female body and the creative/transformative power that it possesses: “She can be a body and instinct and urge...she can revert to a pure, throbbing state. She had that freedom when she gave birth, had screamed and shat and sworn and would have killed had she needed to. Her husband nearly passed out from the noises coming from her mouth” (Yoder 83-84). The past tense used to describe the “freedom” that the mother had during childbirth reaffirms the patriarchal structures that her (now) maternal body is confined to: it is only when the mother loses her grasp on her humanity and femininity that she feels liberated. Additionally, the “freedom” that the mother feels she had can only be defined as a freedom to exist outside of categorizations of human, woman, and even animal. She existed in that moment as “a pure, throbbing state,” which sets up an interesting dynamic here. Through the process of childbirth, the mother (and her pregnant body) undergoes a painfully corporeal and metaphysical transformation that eradicates any and all personal or cultural control that has since contaminated her identity as a woman and a mother. At the same time, the subsequent violence that accompanies her and her body’s experience of

childbirth comes to define the exact moment that the mother's body loses control and gives into its animality. This chaotic and violent transformation is so clearly rendered that her husband is almost unable to stay conscious to witness it. In reminding herself of her and her body's corporeal and reproductive power, the mother begins to lift herself out of the stagnant domesticity that has become attached to her maternity.

As the mother continues to dive deeper into her physical and mental imaginings of motherhood, Yoder begins to transition the naming of her female protagonist from "the mother" to "Nightbitch" to signify the animalistic power that she (re)gains once she refuses and criticizes the cultural control that the patriarchy has over her positionality as an individual in the home and as a (re)productive member of modern society. Occurring for the first time only nine pages into the novel, Yoder introduces "Nightbitch" as another name that the mother can give herself, which effectively opens a space for the mother to interrogate her (non)humanity. Thinking of her uncharacteristic anger, "[The mother] wanted to think she had become another person altogether the night before, but she knew the horrible truth, that Nightbitch had always been there, not even that far below the surface" (Yoder 9). Because this is still very early in the novel, Yoder emphasizes the mother's struggle with Nightbitch to represent her struggle to conform to societal expectations of (human) femininity and motherhood. The mother tries to initially rationalize the appearance of Nightbitch by physically separating this identity from her own—not to mention the fact that she views Nightbitch as a "person" as opposed to something "other than." Yet, her quick realization that Nightbitch has always been a part of her identity serves both to scare her and to force her to raise questions about what it means to be a/the mother. For years, Yoder's protagonist "had been the very picture of a mother, self-sacrificing and domestic, un-gripey, un-grumpy" (9); the subsequent polarization of the maternal body and Nightbitch here reinforces the

mother's want/need to conform to a proper form of motherhood, but it also allows the mother to see the cultural differences constructed between her humanity and her animality. Even with her ability to strive to "follow the rules," she comes to know that no matter how hard she tries, her identity as Nightbitch will and does come to represent the dark, vulnerable, and "dogged" aspects of motherhood that patriarchal society ignores; therefore, the mother comes to embrace Nightbitch and fully use the name as the novel progresses.

To complete her metamorphosis into mother-dog-woman, Nightbitch gives in to her animalistic nature to trouble cultural distinctions between "mother" and "monster," and, in blurring these notions with her (non)humanity, celebrates her duality to create and destroy her individual and the ever-looming societal constructions of motherhood and womanhood. Echoing her reflection on the freedom she had during childbirth, Nightbitch asks, "Was being free to do what you needed and be who you wanted – truly free – *monstrous*? If so, it was not a wrong kind of monstrous, but a beautiful one. A way of being to celebrate rather than to run from" (Yoder 179). As Nightbitch becomes more comfortable and empowered in her (non)humanity as a mother, she reclaims her autonomy by equating her maternal freedom to monstrosity. Much like when she was struggling to come to terms with "Nightbitch," the mother has given in to the monstrous quality that is her maternal animality. As she reframes her understanding of what is deemed "monstrous," Nightbitch embraces her transformation and liberates herself from what patriarchal society expects her to become: a "good mother."

Likewise, the shifting morphology of Nightbitch's maternal body from human to animal is reflected in the linguistic morphological shift that Yoder cleverly makes between "mother" and "monster." As Nightbitch contemplates her desires and struggles to complete a list of ten things she wants to do before she dies, she forces herself to blindly write down the first few

things that enter her mind; one of those being, “...*I want to be an artist and a woman and a mother I mean a monster I want to be a monster*” (Yoder 178). The progression of the identities present in just this one entry tracks an unconsciously deliberate shift Nightbitch is making between the human and the nonhuman: nestled comfortably in between “artist” and “monster” are “woman” and “mother.” As such, Nightbitch’s acknowledgement of her positionality as both “woman” and “mother” has pushed her away from the only real human occupation she has ever had as an artist. The liminal positions that she now inhabits as a woman and a mother thus make it that much easier for Nightbitch to unconsciously make the transition from “mother” to “monster” here. This move interrupts the flow of the list she is creating as she comes to understand the almost identical morphological relationship these words and identities have to each other, and she doubles down on this by reinstating the “I want” to assert her newfound acceptance of her monstrous motherhood. Although Nightbitch continues to struggle with the changing structures of her mind and body, she becomes more attuned to what motherhood means to her and the creative/destructive powers that liberate her from both her humanity and the regulatory bonds of patriarchal society.

Moreover, where Yoder’s narrative hinges on the individual experience of the mother, Chang’s *Bestiary* expands on the mythologized and matrilineal relationship between mother and daughter to home in on the physical and mental aggressions done to the pregnant body. Prior to and during the births of both Daughter and Ben (Daughter’s love interest), both of their mothers’ pregnant bodies were sacrificed to the external and internal modes of labor that come to define biological and capitalistic reproduction. For Daughter, her mother’s first ever job resulted in sawdust invading her body and interrupting/changing its normal functions— “It even sanded down the walls of her womb, and that’s why it hurt to birth me” (Chang 17). The physical

change to Mother's body brought on by her participation in capital labor inadvertently impacted her ability to participate in the "natural" labor of childbirth. The abrasiveness of Chang's word choice reflects the reductive nature of patriarchal society in confining women to their corporeal bodies—especially when they are pregnant. Here, the image of Mother's womb being "sanded down" describes a literal smoothing and scraping away of the walls of the womb that protect the fetus during pregnancy. This diminution of both the womb and Mother to their biological materiality thus hinders her ability to navigate a "natural" and "normal" birth experience.

The specific focus on the Mother in this instance also emphasizes Chang's intention to shift the reader's collective and cultural attention to the mother's pregnant body over the child. Having a similar story about her own birth, "[Ben] said she'd been born with the key, a silver milk tooth jutting from her mouth. It tore her mother during birth, snagging on the placenta and causing her mother to hemorrhage" (Chang 84). Compared to Daughter's reflection on her mother's birth experience, Ben's birth is described in much more painful and visceral detail. It is Ben's body that tears into her own mother's placental wall instead of a foreign substance that has invaded the body. Chang critically uses the mutilation of Ben's mother's body in this moment to subtly comment on the vast array of complications that happen more often to the pregnant body than Western practices of medicine would have us believe. Not only does this violence happen to the pregnant body during childbirth, but it can impact the ways in which the body changes and recovers from the invasion of both child and patriarchal society. Therefore, both Daughter and Ben's mother's pregnant bodies fall through the cracks of what constitutes a "normal" pregnancy due to the biological violences forced onto their bodies during childbirth.

In accentuating the fantastical and visceral power of the female body, Chang's thematic focus on the embodiment of holes creates an opening into how Daughter communicates across

and within categorical barriers to recognize, reclaim, and celebrate the evolving capabilities of female, maternal, and animal bodies. Daughter's curiosity about her own body and the resulting conversation(s) she has with Mother introduces the entity of the hole in a way that queers the corporeal and animalistic purpose of them in the biological and material world. When she begins to feel her body changing to accommodate her tiger's tail, "[Daughter] named every hole-species [she] knew: wells; wombs; wounds...which meant most of the world was a hole, which meant [she] was native to holes, animal burrows, anuses, atlases..." (Chang 44). The morphological similarity between "womb" and "wound" sets Daughter up to interrogate the violence enacted on the female body—particularly her own mother's as she has already discovered. The close association drawn between these words becomes essential to how she understands the changing/maturing facets of her own body as well. In naming and identifying the role of holes, Daughter recognizes them as a boundary site of origin and transition of animal to human as well as human to animal: "I don't believe bodies are born as wholes. We aren't born anything but holes, throats and anuses and pores: ways of being entered and left" (Chang 206). The slippage Chang creates between "holes" and "wholes" highlights the incompleteness and necessity of corporeal development that defines the mythical and physical power of the female body. At the same time, Daughter's reflection here queers the function of holes as they become to represent the permeable barrier that transforms humans, women, mothers, and animals into their (w)hole, material selves. In identifying with and through the female body's origin and transformation from holes, Daughter comes to unearth a new form or being that allows her to embrace her queerness as a corporeal entity in the fantastical and natural world alongside other foremothers.

To continue, *Bestiary*'s corporeal and gory illustrations of nonhuman animals born from women's bodies evade cultural categories to embody the powerful (and queer) hybrid

relationships that the female body has as it permeates the boundary written across womanhood and animalhood. What initially may be perceived as the mother being caught between the human and the animal opens a space for Chang to explore the ways in which the human and the animal encounter each other through the mother's body. When describing the emotional and physical experience of Mother's miscarriage at the beginning of novel, Daughter recognizes a relationship between her mother's pregnant body and its visceral, violent animality as her body navigates the labor of still-birth: "When I brought her the bucket, she squatted over it for the rest of the night, her blood baying into it, making a sound like a trapped dog" (Chang 32). It is not clearly stated who (or what) is creating the animal noises at this moment: is it Mother or is it the bloody material that would have been her third child? The ambiguity between the source of these noises allows Chang to trouble the humanity of both Mother and her stillborn fetus, and, at the same time, it works as a moment of foreshadowing for the animalistic labor of Dayi, Mother's eldest half-sister. Coming to stay with Mother and Daughter due to her frequent health complications, Dayi unexpectedly starts going into labor in front of Daughter and Ben. No one had any idea that she was even pregnant. When Mother arrived home to her half-sister mid-labor, "[she] squatted between Dayi's legs, tugging something out of her: a dark scarf of blood unknitting into a neck. It was a goose, born beak-first, gowned in slime and blood...Dayi said nothing, crouching. Then she took off her gloves and pet her goose once, head to tail, until it was red, a species no one had named yet" (Chang 128). Here, Dayi's unforeseen pregnancy becomes even more of a shock when she gives birth to a seemingly full-grown goose. The subsequent move of Dayi's pregnant body to her maternal body is explicitly shown as she immediately begins to nurture her newborn goose child—her "maternal" care also straddles the human/animal divide as she both "pets" the goose and cleans away the blood and afterbirth that is reminiscent of how nonhuman animal

mothers lick their offspring. While Dayi and her goose offspring may distinctly embody the human and animal respectively, the transgression of having an animal child born from a human female body marks the pregnant body as a boundary site between both woman/mother and human/animal.

As another example of women growing and bearing nonhuman offspring within their wombs, *Sharkheart*'s Tiny Pregnant Woman (TPR) grapples with her high-risk pregnancy with bird twins alongside her resistance towards becoming a mother. As such, the subsequent and impending violence that comes to define her pregnancy calls attention to how modern portrayals of pregnancy erase and sanitize the potential and real medical harms from public knowledge to maintain the visage of patriarchal control over women's bodies. Introduced in Habeck's narrative as a well-trained runner and swimmer, TPR's identity becomes solely reduced to the embodiment of her pregnant body. We are not explicitly told her name until the end of the novel after Wren discovers her death in the local newspaper's obituary: "*Nora Clifton, 33, of Dallas, Texas, went to be with the Lord on December 3, 2016, after complications in childbirth. She was a daughter, wife, and mother and once, a decorated young swimmer*" (Habeck 385). The initial reduction of Nora's identity to the size and function of her body effectively strips her of her human identity and situates her body into the corporeal experience of her pregnancy. Even in her obituary, her athletic achievements come second to the three positions that women are allowed to occupy in patriarchal society: daughter, wife, and mother. While her pregnancy and its subsequent complications appear to be glossed over in the obituary, the root of Nora's problems becomes apparent when she learns about who (or what) is growing inside her womb: "'I'm having twins. Birds. One of them is expressing too early. Wings, beak, little talons. Cute, right?'" (104). Instead of finding out the *gender* of her twins, she finds out the *species*. Nora's blunt and

sarcastic tone during her reveal of “what she is having” creates a stark contrast to the overwhelming excitement that is expected from pregnant women. As someone who never wanted to be a mother, Nora rapidly adjusts to her newest shock the same way she reacted to becoming pregnant in the first place: by choosing to ignore it and continue with her life. Yet, the looming danger of her impending “childbirth” becomes more prominent as she lists her symptoms:

A decreased appetite indicates falcon twins, the eyases, are strong enough to claw, peck, and scratch themselves out of the mother’s womb. The eyases will emulate the hatching process by incorrectly assuming the mother’s body is an eggshell, creating an orifice to exit anywhere they see fit. For this reason, bird pregnancies are often fatal to the mother, and the mother should not deny this possibility. She should plan for two outcomes: death and living in an impaired body. (Habeck 131).

In recalling her situation to Wren, Nora consistently refers to herself in the third person as “the mother.” Not only does “Tiny Pregnant Woman” dehumanize Nora, but she also actively gives in to her loss of identity by becoming so detached from her own “situation” by separating herself completely from her impending role as “the mother.” It is almost as if Nora is conscious of the fact that she will never reclaim her humanity as she transitions into motherhood—this idea is emphasized by there only being two potential outcomes to carrying her baby birds to term: “death and living in an impaired body.” Either way, through death or disability, Nora has succumbed to her fate by both refusing to acknowledge it and to remove herself completely from the idea of “becoming mother.”

Further into the novel, Habeck reaches back in time to consolidate the physical and mental transformations from woman into mother and woman into animal through the pregnancy and transitional mutation enacted on Wren’s mother’s body and mind. Upon learning of her pregnancy with Wren, Angela remarks, “Unlike puberty, pregnancy was a physical transition

with a tangible end” (Habeck 228). Quite the opposite from Nora, Angela is confident and excited for the prospect of becoming a mother. While she has no concept of motherhood yet, her comparison of pregnancy to puberty reaffirms the changes she sees taking place in her body. Angela recognizes the importance of her pregnant body as a site of “physical transition,” which allows her to be more in tune with her body as well as her femininity as prescribed by modern patriarchal society. While she comes to celebrate and embody her pregnant body, she begins to understand the true power of her body when she receives the diagnosis of a biological mutation that is slowly turning her into a reptile. As Angela enters the third and final stage of her transformation when Wren is between the ages of 5-8, she begins to question this newfound ability of her body to turn on her: “How was it that her self’s container, her only true protection from the world’s elements, had only ever betrayed her, surprised her, and enforced uncertainty and strangeness?” (Habeck 309). Even as she describes the contradictory and “strange” happenings of her body, Angela intentionally separates herself from her body to make sense of “uncertain” positions her body has occupied through pregnancy and mutation. Angela’s corporeal detachment mirrors Nora’s as both women mentally resist their bodies and the changes happening inside of them. While both women experience motherhood and encounter their animality in different ways, both Angela and Nora demonstrate the intimate and acute stressors that are enacted on the female body as it transitions from pregnancy into maternity.

As her childhood comes to be defined by her mother’s violent transformation(s), Wren’s imaginings of her own womanhood and potential motherhood break away from the patriarchal underpinnings that suppress and subdue the maternal and female human body. All Wren has ever known with her mother is that her body is slowly evolving in a way that she cannot fully comprehend. It is only when Angela recognizes how both her and Wren’s bodies are changing

that Wren may begin to become conscious of her mother's mutation: "In 1992, Wren and Angela stood at the doorways of separate but significant physiological changes. Wren, of puberty. Angela, of reptilian mutation...Wren did not go careening into womanhood as Angela had at the same age...Her daughter's body was not as dangerous as her own was" (Habeck 309). The simultaneous changes occurring in both women's bodies offer a nice parallel between both Angela and Wren's experience of womanhood. Whereas Angela leapt headfirst into her sexuality and subsequent maternity, she is relieved to be able to juxtapose herself and her body to Wren. It is only when Wren goes through puberty that she can fully acknowledge the danger superimposed onto both her and her mother's bodies as one becomes more "woman" and the other becomes more "animal." At the culmination of Angela's transformation, "[Wren] took one last look at the woman who raised her...Her mother, her mother, her mother, her mother, her mother. Her mother, an animal, whose eyes were filled with blood" (Habeck 315). Even though Angela is now fully a reptile with little to no humanity left in her new body, Wren still actively acknowledges her mother's role as a woman and mother in her life. The repetition of "her mother" followed closely by the recognition of Angela's violent transformation into animalhood keeps Wren grounded as she enters this new stage of her life without her mother. While Habeck's fictional society filled with animal mutations encourages loved ones to detach themselves from those who have been diagnosed, Angela's transformation over the course of her childhood nestles Wren comfortably between the human and animal worlds that her mother occupies. Whether Woman or Komodo Dragon, Angela embodies all the complex entanglements that come to represent true motherhood.

Overall, these three novels concretely explore the transformative value of the female body as it navigates the physical and mental challenges attached to both pregnant and maternal

bodies and their distinct representations of the mother. Even with each novel approaching and reacting to pregnancy, childbirth, and maternity in a variety of ways, all three subtly and succinctly push against patriarchal understandings of motherhood and the dehumanized, monstrous position that it routinely inhabits. In putting Yoder, Chang, and Habeck in conversation with each other through the corporeal changes enacted on both pregnant and maternal bodies, this section opens a space to explore the ways in which motherhood intersects with and thrives at the border between human, woman, monster, and animal.

By introducing a clear-cut distinction made between pregnancy and maternity, this project opens by exploring the nuanced ways in which the female (non)human body transforms both physically and psychologically as it undergoes the process of “becoming-mother.” While each of these three novels depicts pregnancy and maternity across different levels of understanding, prevalence, and experience, they all work together to position motherhood in the liminal spaces that break down the divide between the human and the nonhuman animal. Focusing more on the maternal experience of motherhood, Yoder’s *Nightbitch* encapsulates the corporeal frustrations and power that defines her identity as “mother,” “monster,” and ultimately “Nightbitch.” As “the mother” gradually begins to accept the multiplicity of her humanity and animality, she comes to realize the value of her monstrous motherhood by reclaiming herself and her body when she gives herself over completely to her identity as “Nightbitch.” At the same time, Chang’s *Bestiary* brings the pregnant and maternal body together to effectively explore the violence enacted on the female body and the relationship between mother and daughter. Perceived through the eyes of both mother and daughter, the pregnant body is seen to be an integral part of their family’s mythology as it establishes the connections of both mother to child and human to animal. Even as Habeck’s *Sharkheart* also revolves around the complex

relationship between mother and daughter, the novel centers Wren and her experiences with the transformative dangers that attach themselves to both pregnant and maternal bodies. Armed with the memories of her mother's reptilian mutation, especially when both of their (female) bodies develop in drastically separate ways, Wren comes to better understand how women are deeply submerged in the liminal spaces that motherhood opens between human and animal worlds—no matter how adamantly you resist it. Whether it be through the corporeal lens of the pregnant body or the maternal body, women claw their way out of the structures of patriarchal domestication to “become-mother” by creating and celebrating the hybrid spaces in and between humanity, animality, and monstrosity.

So, what does it mean to “become-mother?” It means to embrace the corporeal experience of the pregnant body and the monstrous liberation that comes from childbirth and labor. It means to interrogate the biological changes that the female body undergoes as it becomes proximally situated with the nonhuman animal. It means to redefine maternity as a site of (un)domestication to explore the variety of hybrid positions that exist in and between human, animal, woman, and mother.

THE MOTHER/INFANT DYAD: REDEFINING THE ROLE OF THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

Woman...is the one animal in all creation about which man knows the least...a foreign species.

Clemence Royer qtd. in Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mother Nature*

Women and other nonhuman female animals have been readily conflated with mothers and maternity throughout history and the evolution of the biological/natural sciences. The “natural” associations of femininity with selfless, nourishing, and maternal behavior towards others not only restricts women to the role of the mother, but it also dismisses and limits the scientific study and importance of the diverse non-maternal roles that nonhuman female animals inhabit daily. Heavily influenced by the patriarchal gaze, (male) biologists and evolutionary scientists have historically and purposefully chosen male-dominated nonhuman animal study species to validate and stabilize “man’s” control over female sexuality and ultimately, maternity (Smuts 1995). This implicit bias reaffirms nineteenth century French scholar and translator Clemence Royer’s above missive on women being “the one animal...which man knows the least” (Hrdy 20-21).

As such, the female human and nonhuman body is confined to the role of the mother, which effectively erases both any claims to personhood as well as the right to individual autonomy as a living being. In her book *BITCH: On the Female of the Species*, Lucy Cooke explicitly notes the extremely narrowed definition of motherhood when she writes, “Motherhood is an emotive subject—synonymous with nurture and sacrifice; and, as such, riddled with misconceptions, the most fundamental being that all females are born ‘natural’ mothers, imbued with an almost mystical maternal instinct that drives them to effortlessly intuit their offspring’s

every need” (124–125). Seeing as this violently limiting perspective persists today, how does the “mystic” and apparently inherent relationship between mother and offspring reaffirm the cultural and scientific construction(s) of the mother and how it becomes superimposed onto the bodies and minds of the female human and nonhuman members of their respective species?

To answer this question, and to further acknowledge the liminal position mothers are thrust into, I turn to environmental feminist and writer Jennifer Case and her most recent work titled *We Are Animals: On the Nature and Politics of Motherhood* (2024). In this collection of essays where Case interrogates her own experiences of motherhood alongside her scholarly research into the historical and contemporary patriarchal structures that continue to shape women’s reproductive rights and identities, she also immerses herself into the animalistic nature of the female body as it transitions from woman into mother. In her exploration of the bond forged between a mother and her offspring, Case writes, “In the scope of human evolution, a mother’s role is so tied to her child’s that the two are not discussed as distinct individuals—mother and child—but rather as a unit: the mother-infant dyad” (164-165). The “mother/infant dyad” not only represents the intimate relationship between mother and child, but it explicitly defines the role of the mother when caring for her offspring. So closely knit is this bond that it completely erases the mother’s autonomy and reduces her to the biological nature that comes to be ascribed to “the maternal instinct.” Mother and child thus exist as one being (one unit), and while there has been pushback against the mythical idealization of this maternal relationship, it remains heavily influential in the modern politics that shape and control female sexuality, standards of maternity, and ultimately a woman’s identity.

Therefore, in this section, I explicitly argue that the bond between a mother and her offspring simultaneously erases her (and her child’s) bodily autonomy and overall identity

completely, resulting in an embodied form of dehumanization that keeps women (and their bodies) in the liminal space between human and animal. To do this, I examine how the women/mothers in each of Yoder's, Chang's, and Habeck's speculative texts come to recognize and navigate their personal experiences with the mother/infant dyad and how that shapes their relationship not only to their children and own mothers in some cases, but also to society writ large. While the manifestation of this bond between mother and child may be explicit in some texts over others, each of these three novels are important sites of critique when observing how these mothers concurrently accept/reproduce and violently resist/reclaim their bodily autonomy and identity as (non)human mothers. This argument is important to these texts because it emphasizes how the biological and cultural implications of the mother/infant dyad become an essential cog in the patriarchal machine that works to define and control the lives, bodies, and rights of modern women.

At the beginning of Yoder's *Nightbitch*, "the mother" laments the primal evolutionary bond that she shares with her son because it both isolates and essentializes her role as his sole caregiver. The first time the mother comments on this "essential" role of motherhood, she is grappling with the closely intimate relationship that has resulted between her and her son through the mother/infant dyad and her new status as a stay-at-home mom. She is specifically struggling with how "[i]n an essential way, at that point in the boy's life, she was the only person in the entire world who could understand him, could understand this unspoken language only the two of them shared" (Yoder17). The repeated use of the word "only" emphasizes the mother's mounting frustration when thinking about the special bond she has established with her son. Not only is the mother commenting on the absolute necessity of the mother/infant dyad here, but she also understands how this essentialization of her motherhood is effectively isolating her from the

rest of human society. This idea is further reinforced as the mother describes her relationship with her son as if they are sharing an “unspoken language” between the two of them. The production and presence of language has long remained a controversial debate amongst scientists and theorists when establishing and solidifying the distinction between human and animal. Yoder’s choice to describe her understanding of the mother/infant relationship between the mother and her son in her novel explicitly situates these characters right amid this outstanding discussion—not only is this a language between mother and child that cannot be understood by other humans, but it is also unspoken. The connection made here between the unspoken, mental, and emotional bond shared between mother and child thus serves to essentialize the role the mother has involuntarily been thrust into through the simultaneous process of isolation and dehumanization.

At the same time, as the mother reflects on her career as an artist prior to becoming a mother, she feels her grasp on her humanity and autonomy slipping through her fingers. In an email she sends to the author of *A Field Guide to Magical Women*, the mother frantically writes, “It is as if all of my dreams have been reset. The walls are blank, and with them I am blank, too...art seems essential, as essential as mothering. In order to be a self, it is essential. I should perhaps cease being a person without it” (Yoder 82–83). The urgency and desperation permeate the mother’s words here: what once was the most important thing in her life (art) has now been overshadowed by her maternity and the subsequent bond that has been established between her and her son. In the mother’s mind, her ability to understand and practice art defined her humanity, so now that this ability has been taken away from her, her concept of her humanity, her “self,” and her personhood have been completely erased from her identity through the process of motherhood. Although the mother is attempting to push back against the evolutionary

bond she has developed with her son, she slowly feels herself giving in to the “necessary” changes that patriarchal society have bestowed upon her: she must retreat from her humanity to become a “good” mother.

However, as the novel progresses, Nightbitch comes to better understand the invisible strings that tie her and her son together—so much so that she revels in the animality that it not only grants her, but also her son through their perceived “doggy games.” Throughout the last few years after her son was born, the mother had consistently struggled to get the child to sleep both in his own room and his own bed. Now that the mother has discovered and accepted her empowered nonhuman animality through Nightbitch, she knew she had had enough of her perceived failure to effectively do “night-nights,” so one night, “the blood of Nightbitch flowed through her veins, and she told the boy that they would play a doggy game, and the only way to keep playing was to remain a doggy...and where do doggies sleep?” (Yoder 131). As such, the mother effectively “trains” her human son to start sleeping in a dog kennel. The line between human and dog is thus successfully made ambiguous through the institution of Nightbitch’s “doggy games” with her son. What before started as an innocent imitation of dogs playing together has now taken a drastic turn when the mother challenges her son to “remain a doggy.” Not only does this free the mother from the consistent (and domestic) torture of doing “night-nights,” but it also gives Nightbitch the perfect opportunity to revel in her own animality alongside her son. After that one night, this new iteration of the doggy game becomes a new facet in their daily routine that slowly starts to permeate into how they play, act, and move through human society. And yet, still feeling the weight of her identity as “the mother,” Nightbitch continues to internally struggle with her simultaneous maternal and animal instincts. She worries “that the doggy games have gone too far, that she herself was out of control and had

crossed a line, that her son might be permanently damaged from such a childhood that some might even construe this as abuse, bad parenting, mental illness, if given the opportunity to” (Yoder 168). The line that Nightbitch refers to here represents both the slash located between human and animal in the human/animal divide and the patriarchal distinction between what is a good versus a bad mother. The mother/Nightbitch (another potential line crossed here) begins to question if she has gone “too far” in allowing both her and her son to “lose control” of their humanity. While mother and boy have become empowered and comfortable respectively in their new understanding of their mother/child relationship, the mother can feel the judgemental stare of the patriarchy and how it will demonize her animalistic bond with her son as it paints her as a bad mother willing to sacrifice the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of her child. The selflessness that becomes associated with the essentialized creation of the mother/infant dyad thus adds another obstacle for Nightbitch to navigate as she continues to untangle herself and her son from the perceived control that patriarchal society thinks it has over both their relationship and their (non)human animal identities.

By the end of the novel, Yoder allows Nightbitch to fully embrace and celebrate her role in the mother/infant dyad in a way that reshapes and reclaims both her and her son’s human and animal autonomy through her daily life and later famous artistic performances. It is only once Nightbitch has shed her ingrained definition of a “good” mother that she is able to feel proud of the canine connection she has forged with her son. This intimate bond is solidified one day when mother and son are playing fetch: “When he returned, he obediently sat at her feet and turned his perfect little face to hers to let out the smallest little *ruff*, not like a child saying the word *ruff* but like a child who was actually part dog communicating via his language of choice, a guttural, quiet little animal sound that Nightbitch adored so intensely it made her insides hurt” (Yoder

198). Here again, Yoder includes a reference to a language shared between the mother and the boy; however, now the language is “spoken”—only when both Nightbitch and the boy accept their animality can they outwardly/physically communicate with each other. Nightbitch realizes that this game is no longer actually an imitation of human as dog, but that both her and her son have effectively *become* human as dog. As such, she feels so much love and connection with her son that the mother/infant bond between the two has only strengthened.

This moment becomes pivotal for Yoder as she opens a space for Nightbitch to reclaim her autonomy as a mother, woman, dog, and artist. No longer scared to disappoint herself, her son, or society, Nightbitch turns herself and her relationship with her son into an artistic performance that showcases the true (animalistic) nature of motherhood. During the very last scene of the performance (and the novel overall), “Nightbitch [is] there onstage, with a small boy – her son – to whom she delivers the limp body of the bunny, for him to sniff and caress...a feral woman and her offspring with a still-warm body of a rabbit in his hands...as if he weren’t the most impossible thing in the entire world” (Yoder 238). This final moment that Yoder presents to both the reader and the audience serves to redefine how integral, how *human*, the connection between mother and child truly is. The body of the bunny effectively serves as a physical manifestation of the love, nourishment, and overall bonded relationship that mothers have for and with their offspring. In giving this life over to her son, Nightbitch is reaffirming and empowering the intimately special relationship she shares with her son and how it has only become stronger through both of their perceived animality. The “impossibility” that is attached to the boy during this moment also calls attention back to how the mother worried over when patriarchal society would label her a “bad” mother. The care and the love that pass through Nightbitch and into her son seems impossible through the patriarchal gaze as neither submits to

the idealized human standards of motherhood and maternal care. By recreating her daily navigation and transformation of both mother and dog into an artistic performance, *Nightbitch* (and her son) challenge and redefine what it means to be and become-mother through the evolutionary process that establishes the necessity of the mother/infant dyad.

Whereas *Nightbitch* explores the mother's individual experience with the essentialized bond with her son, in Chang's *Bestiary*, the mother/infant dyad culminates as a site of violence and resignation that we see manifesting for both mother and daughter in the narrative. As Daughter urges Mother to confront her own mother (Ama), Mother becomes uneasy and recounts a story she has told Daughter many times over the course of her life: "The story about the woman, she said, was a story about choice. How we had one... *I chose you*, my mother said...I wanted to say she'd made the wrong choice, but that would mean reversing my own body, returning to water inside her" (Chang 196-197). Mother emphasizes how this story is based on a "choice" mothers must make, not necessarily for themselves, but for their daughters. This statement is even more apparent because "*I chose you*" appears in italics and succinctly allows Mother to assuage her uneasiness towards confronting her own mother. Never during this moment does Mother state that she chooses herself, only that she chooses Daughter—in establishing the mother/infant bond with Daughter, Mother is hinting that she has severed her own mother/infant bond with Ama. In other words, when Mother ceases being a "daughter," she immediately becomes a "mother." Even while getting a glimpse into the complex relationships that exist across matrilineal generations, Daughter still believes that her mother made the wrong choice here, yet she does not voice her concern because she is more aware than ever before that she would cease to exist otherwise. If her mother *had* chosen herself, not only would Daughter and her body violently disappear from the matriarchy, but Mother's view of her mother/infant

bond with Ama would still be intact, lashing their (non) human bodies and minds together forever.

In continuing to discuss the fraught choices mothers make for their daughters, it is important to note that “mother” and “daughter” in this next paragraph represents multiple women’s identities in Chang’s novel. As the novel unpacks the matrilineal relationship across multiple generations, “mother” and “daughter” collapse together depending on where in the family tree Chang has situated her reader. For example, while Mother’s goal was to separate herself from Ama, Ama’s goal was to separate herself from not only her daughter(s), but her granddaughter as well. After attempting to confront Ama and leaving her house, Daughter tries to rectify the new image of her grandmother that she has just been confronted with: “She let us go because years ago she’d tried to sever herself from her daughters, and not even the river could cut through them. She let us go, knowing she was with us in the car and in our yard, a fishline threaded through our spines” (Chang 236). Where it is more subtle in the previous paragraph, the violence and resignation abound here. When Ama tries to “sever” her mother/infant bond with her daughters (by throwing them in a river), she discovers just exactly how entangled their identities are with each other. Not even nature (the river) can come between the bond forged between mother and daughter—and even grandmother and granddaughter. Because Ama has simultaneously become aware of and given in to the true power located in the mother/infant dyad, she understands just how embedded each woman is within their matriarchal lineage. Daughter has slowly come to realize this as well because she is beginning to see the barely visible thread of fishline that intrinsically ties Ama, Mother, and herself together across temporal and spatial boundaries. As each of these three women realize they are forever caught in the matrilineal bond they share with each other, Daughter discovers that “[t]he verb *cleave* has two

meanings: to split from and stick to. Another doubling: When my mother says *mother* she means the body that gave birth to her and the one that tried to kill her” (Chang 240). The connection drawn between “cleave” and “mother” here is a pivotal moment for Daughter as she navigates her relationship to Ama, her own mother, and even her own body. This moment, I argue, nicely encompasses the mythological presence of the mother/infant dyad, especially within Chang’s novel. Not only does the slash between “mother” and “infant” bring the two together in a way that can never truly be separated, but it also works to “cleave” the infant from the mother. How can mother and daughter be “cleaved” from/to each other? By becoming-mother themselves.

In a similar vein, Chang utilizes the embodied nature of the cultural and evolutionary bond that defines the mother/infant dyad by engaging in a fleshy discourse of connection (the umbilical cord) between mother, daughter, and grandmother through the manifestation of the daughter’s tiger tail. Daughter’s tail is compared to an umbilical cord on two separate occasions by two separate women: Ben and Ama. As Ben and Daughter read over one of Ama’s letters sent through the holes in the backyard, Ben begins to question the presence of the tiger tail not only on Daughter, but in Daughter’s family’s mythology. Presented as a footnote to their translation of Ama’s letter, Ben writes,

WHAT IF YOUR TAIL IS SOME KIND OF REGROWN UMBILICAL CORD/
WHAT IF YOU’RE BEING FED THROUGH IT? I KNOW CORDS DON’T
USUALLY GROW OUT OF THE ASS< BUT IF I WERE AN UMBILICAL
CORD, I’D WANT TO COME BACK AND AVENGE BEING CUT. WHAT
ARE UMBILICAL CORDS FOR, ANYWAY? THEY HYPHENATE TWO
BODIES. DO YOU SPEAK THROUGH IT LIKE A TELEPHONE CORD?
DOES IT CARRY MEMORY FROM THE MOTHER TO BABY? -BEN.
(Chang 156-157)

As Ben attempts to unpack the meaning of Daughter’s tiger tail, she unconsciously also begins to question the sanctity of the mother/infant dyad. Seen as a physical representation of the bond between mother and daughter, Ben unknowingly reads the umbilical cord, and the subsequent

procedure performed to cut said cord immediately after birth, through a thematic lens that has permeated both Chang's writing as well as my earlier analysis of the complex relationship that exists between mother, daughter, and grandmother: the desperate need to sever the connection (physical and mythical) between mother and daughter. As such, Ben's ponderings about the function and presence of Daughter's tail (written in the footnotes and in all capital letters) emphasizes how indestructible the bond between mother and daughter truly is. Even when attempting to break the connection between the two, it always finds a way to "avenge being cut" and reestablish itself between and within both mother and daughter. This reading is demonstrated once more when Ama notices Daughter's tail for the first time: "Ama spun my tail in her hand, and when I looked down at our shadow, its shape was a bridge that hyphenated us, an umbilical cord that had grown without our knowing. I wanted to sever it, to separate us, differentiate our shadows, our hungers" (Chang 224). Again, Daughter's tail becomes the physical site of this matrilineal connection; however, the "umbilical cord" being constructed in this instance is not between mother and daughter, but grandmother and daughter. On one hand, much like her own mother (and Ama), Daughter wants nothing more than to "differentiate" herself from her grandmother. On the other hand, because Ama has already attempted to sever her maternal connection with her daughters, she understands the unbreakable bond of the mother/infant dyad and recognizes that it extends through all the women in her family. Therefore, Daughter's tail, read as an umbilical cord tying her to both her mother and grandmother, represents how the mother/infant dyad subsumes mother and daughter as they come to realize the impossibility of ever separating and establishing themselves as individual beings outside of their matrilineal history.

Furthermore, because both the mother and the daughter's perspective are represented in

Chang's novel, *Bestiary* offers a unique and integral look into how the mother/infant dyad manifests specifically in the eyes of the daughter. Coming right on the heels of the previous paragraph, recognizing Daughter's positionality in this relationship is important to unpack here because it fleshes out how essentialized and restrictive this bond is not only for the mother, but for the child as well. After confronting her emotionally volatile father and leaving him in the parking lot at the zoo, Daughter reminds herself that she did not only stand up to him to protect her brother, but to also protect and align herself fully with her mother. She reiterates, "[It is] because my mother was who I belonged to, the only place I'd ever lived, the only person who knew me before I had a name" (Chang 99). The conflation of viewing her mother as a "person" and a "place" to which she belongs to and comes from accurately depicts how the mother/infant dyad erases a mother's identity as a human woman and dehumanizes her by placing her in the position of "mother." Placed on the other side of the slash in this intrinsic relationship, Daughter reaffirms Mother's identity as "mother" because that is who (and what) she has only ever known or expected from her. Just a few pages later, Mother reinforces the strength of her shared bond with her daughter when Daughter recalls, "My mother liked to say she and I were born at the same time, into the same story, and that we were just growing at different rates... She said she'd died and been reborn many times in the span of my life" (Chang 110). Occurring alongside Daughter's birth, Mother simultaneously becomes a "mother." In other words, at the moment of birth, when the mother/infant dyad is forged, Mother's humanity becomes overshadowed by her new role as "mother;" therefore, mother and daughter are born "at the same time." As Daughter continues to grow (and perhaps even grow away from her mother), the role of "mother" continuously shifts to compliment the changing needs of her child. With her humanity already cast outside of her role as "mother," Mother is shedding the worn-out, damaged versions of

herself, much like a snake shedding its skin, to open a space for the new growth happening in Daughter. Here, Mother's rebirth pushes her further from her own humanity, and her continued shedding of different versions of motherhood traps her into this role, making it nearly impossible to view herself outside of dehumanizing confines of "mother." Both Mother and Daughter recognize how difficult it is to discern where one begins and the other ends; therefore, Chang's reading of the mother/infant dyad represents and creates a restrictive liminal space outside of the human to emphasize how "mother" and "daughter" collapse together to become one deeply entangled identity.

Much like in *Bestiary*, Habeck's *Sharkheart* views the bonded relationship between mother and daughter through the eyes of both women, particularly as both Angela and Wren struggle to come to terms with Angela's imminent transformation. After first receiving the diagnosis of her reptilian transformation, Angela immediately thinks of Wren and the strain this will inevitably put on their relationship: "*When will I stop becoming new versions of myself but something else? Will I be able to care for Wren? And the worst: Will Wren have to care for me?*" (Habeck 296). Alongside Mother in *Bestiary*, Angela also recognizes the necessity of "becoming new versions of herself" now that she has taken on the identity of "mother"; however, Angela grows uneasy at the prospect of becoming "something else." In this way, Angela sees her oncoming transformation from human to animal as hindering her ability to strengthen her maternal bond with Wren. By becoming something other than (human) mother, Angela is uncertain in her ability to care for her child, and for her child's later ability to someday take care of her. Because Angela's motherhood has already placed her outside of the human, it is easy for the animal (represented through the biological mutation occurring in Angela's body) to infiltrate the proximate bond she has with her daughter. Now, Wren is still young when Angela is first

diagnosed, but as she grows older, she starts to understand more how her mother's animal mutation has started to sever her maternal connection to Angela. Wren notes, "The precise day Angela became a wild animal is hard to say. It might have been...when she stopped loving, at least in the way Wren knew her mother to love" (Habeck 314). While Angela's mutation took over her (human) body gradually, Wren's prediction of when her mother fully transitioned into "a wild animal" is when she no longer can recognize her mother's ability to love her. Much like her proximity to her humanity, Angela's maternal connection to Wren is slowly moving further out of reach—it is only when Wren ceases to feel her mother through the mother/infant dyad that she knows Angela's transformation into a Komodo Dragon is complete. Thus, Angela's diagnosis and subsequent animalistic transformation disrupts and strains the relationship between mother and daughter resulting in Wren's effortless separation from any association with her mother and the nonhuman animal she inevitably becomes.

As Wren unexpectedly becomes a mother herself, she reflects on the frayed bond she shared with her mother and seeks to repair it through the bond she forges with her own daughter. When Joy, Wren's daughter, reaches the age of six, Wren decides to plan a trip to her hometown to show Joy where both she and Angela grew up: "Wren and Joy go up to Oklahoma when the weather is nice and teach themselves how to thrive in the wild. The natural world becomes both a mystery and a home. In nature, Wren realized she is becoming more like her mother and thinks, *How wonderful*" (Habeck 397). Being in such proximity to where her mother grew up, Wren is instantly reminded of the "mystery" and "home" that her mother became over the course of their relationship. In going "back home" and into nature, Wren feels closer to her mother than she has in years, and with her daughter now by her side, Wren does not just feel closer to Angela, but she feels as if she is *becoming* her mother. By putting herself in Angela's

shoes when looking at her own daughter, Wren sees that her connection to her mother persists despite her mother's animality. Here again, we see "mother" and "daughter" collapsing together through the revival of mother/infant dyad as Wren channels and "becomes" Angela in raising her own daughter.

Overall, the mother/infant dyad that manifests between a mother and her offspring takes on many different forms and undergoes many different somatic processes that position both mother and "infant" in a realm between human and nonhuman animal identity. Culturally seen as "one unit" rather than two distinct beings, mother and child are so wrapped up in each other that it becomes expected of the mother to lose all sense of herself and her humanity to be in tune to the wants and needs of her offspring to be labeled a "good" mother. As each mother in Yoder, Chang, and Habeck's novels navigate these intimate bonds with their offspring, and in some cases with their own mothers, they must give in to their dehumanization to better understand themselves and their maternal animality. Although each of these novels uniquely approaches and critiques the mother/infant relationship in their own way, this section connects these women/mothers together to construct a more cohesive understanding of the complex entanglements that exist within the physical, emotional, and mental (non)human female bodies "naturally" subsumed under and confined to patriarchal structures.

In further interrogating the relationship established between mother and child, the second section of this project adopts the phrase "mother/infant dyad" as used by Jennifer Case to tease apart the metaphysical bond that evolves to consolidate the individual bodies and selves of both mother and child. While the mother of Yoder's novel grows to mourn the loss of her individuality (and humanity) over the first two years of her son's life, her transformation into Nightbitch reframes her maternal perspective to bring her son into the fold of her newfound

experience of human-animal relation. Through the creation and repeated use of “doggy games,” Nightbitch effectively blurs the line between human and animal reality for both her and her son, which allows her to reclaim and explore her identity as both an artist and a mother. Where Yoder writes about the individual experience of the mother’s role in the mother/infant dyad, Chang’s *Bestiary* emphasizes how both mother and daughter react to and move through the bonds they share with each other and all the other women in their family. As the complex relationships between mother and daughter (and grandmother) violently emerge throughout the novel, it becomes clear that no matter how hard you try to sever these maternal bonds, you are intrinsically attached to each other across space, time, and (non)human mythology. Knowing the inevitability of the bond forged between mother and daughter, *Sharkheart* complicates and disrupts Wren and Angela’s ability to relate and connect to each other through the slow progression of Angela’s mutation. It is only when Wren becomes a mother herself and establishes a connection with her own daughter that she can revisit and recognize Angela in herself, her body, and her maternity. In giving themselves over to not knowing where mother ends and child begins, these three novels liberate mothers (and daughters) from the sacrificial expectations attached to “maternal instincts” and instead delve deeper into the liminal space they forge between humanity, maternity, and animality.

As such, each of these three novels contend that while it is easy to place women squarely in the nonhuman confines of their “maternal instincts,” they have never remained complicit to these limited and violently ignorant positions that men have put them in. In other words, the mother/infant dyad does not cage mothers in, but it opens a nuanced space for the female body to celebrate and reclaim its evolutionary history as human, nonhuman, and everything in between and beyond. Royer’s passionate assertion still rings true then—women are a foreign species

indeed.

CONCLUSION: BECOMING WOM:ANIMAL AND THE HYBRID SPACE OF MOTHERHOOD

But I do know that for years I believed I should never have become a mother, that
because I felt my own needs acutely and often expressed them violently, I was
Kali, Medea, the sow that devours her farrow, the unwomanly woman in flight
from womanhood, a Nietzschean monster.

Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*

It is a body with boundaries that are vulnerable and open.

Isabel Karpin, "Reimagining Maternal Selfhood"

In her most recent book *an other: a black feminist consideration of animal life*, Sharon P. Holland adeptly blurs the distinction that separates human from animal in a way that allows both identity categories to exist in relation to each other as well as within each other. In doing so, Holland uses and defines this intentional ambiguity as "hum:animal": "My use of the term *hum:animal* is to have us reflect upon how the animal opens to the human and the human opens to the animal" (xiii). Building on this (de)construction, I move to take Holland's "hum:animal" a step further to interrogate the entangled relationship that has become apparent between woman and animal through the lens and embodiment of motherhood. How does the animal "open to" women and vice versa? Through the hybrid space of motherhood, becoming-mother, and ultimately becoming *wom:animal*.

Even as woman, femininity, and motherhood have historically been placed near nature, the ease with which the (human) female body traverses the human/animal boundary remains a source of cultural anxiety as it eludes patriarchal structures of capture and domesticity. Earlier in this project, I have explored how patriarchal society attempts to (re)establish control over

women's bodies (pregnant, maternal, and otherwise) by deeming them as othered and monstrous. The resulting dehumanization not only subsumes women and mothers under the domination of man, but it also eradicates any claim to autonomy that women have over their corporeal selves. As women continue to navigate their unstable position between the human and the nonhuman, they must also continue to grapple with how current biopolitical discourses are reevaluating the necessity of women's reproductive rights—what better place to do so than in contemporary feminist speculative fiction.

Therefore, having already interrogated the physical and mental changes that the female body undergoes during and after pregnancy that in turn scaffolds the evolutionary bond between mother and child, this section explicitly highlights the metamorphosis of the maternal human body into the maternal nonhuman animal body. The ease with which these women and their bodies fluidly move within and between categorizations of the human and the animal emphasizes how motherhood can successfully elude and transcend patriarchal structures of human society by “becoming-wom:animal.” While all three novels participate in this corporeal transformation from human to animal, they each engage with their female character's changing bodies in curious and empowering ways. In *Nightbitch*, I specifically examine the mother's transition from woman to canine and how she grapples with this new facet of her maternal identity. Likewise, I investigate the physical manifestations of the animal body in Chang's *Bestiary* as it comes to define the cultural and matrilineal mythology of the women in her fictional Taiwanese-American family. I then turn to *Sharkheart* to interrogate the social acceptance and regular diagnosis of a biological mutation that forces humans to turn into animals; I pay particular attention to how Wren's mother's diagnosis and resulting transformation impact their relationship to each other and their own experiences of motherhood.

In building on the previous two sections and the concepts they thematically explore, I utilize this final section to analyze the ways in which these three novels prominently display how the female (maternal) body becomes the site of nonhuman metamorphosis. This argument is important to these texts because it highlights how each author's turn to speculative fiction uniquely responds to modern discourses surrounding women's reproductive and maternal rights. In shifting the perspective onto the mother, these novels not only reclaim the mother's bodily autonomy and creative/destructive power, but they also explore how (non)human animal, female, and maternal bodies move beyond patriarchal boundaries and undergo new and entangled processes of becoming.

During the beginning stages of her transformation from woman to dog, the mother of Yoder's *Nightbitch* adamantly refuses to acknowledge her changing body and behaviors to keep herself attached to the rational and patriarchal scaffoldings of a "good mother." Coupled with her first few moments of noticing her body taking on more canine characteristics, the mother finds herself barely able to "tame" her maternal rage towards her son, her husband, society, and even herself. During one of the many attempts to lull her son to sleep as they lay in bed together, the mother feels her grasp on her human rationality slipping; however, "[s]he did not allow herself to growl, to bark ferociously, to show her teeth, to narrow her eyes and pull her ears back closer to her skull, though she would have liked to do all these things" (Yoder 44). The mother's mounting frustration at this moment can no longer be expressed through a human understanding or experience of anger. Instead, her maternal rage pushes her further from her humanity as she acknowledges the aggressive canine behaviors she feels and longs to express, yet she keeps herself from giving into these animalistic urges. The immediate refusal to express these canine behaviors is clearly stated as the words "she did not allow herself" appear right at the beginning

of the sentence and before she even starts listing off the aggressive urges she feels. While she does acknowledge that she would like to give in to her animality here, those first few words serve to tame Nightbitch before she can fully emerge.

Later in the novel, after the mother has now experienced her first full transformation into her Nightbitch, she still finds it hard to fully give in to her metamorphosis from human mother to dog mother: “She longed to tend to her son the way she felt she should, licking him and biting him at his feet lovingly, yowling as they played, and feeding him raw meat. And though the animalness of her being remained, she was also inside her full human-mother being” (Yoder 102). Here, Nightbitch does not instantly bar herself from her nonhuman canine urges like she did in the earlier instance. She allows herself to feel the maternal “longing” to dote on her son as an animal mother would before positioning herself more in line with her human self (the mother) over her animal self (Nightbitch). Even still, it feels like the mother feels more comfortable with her identity as *both* the mother and Nightbitch—she no longer feels as if she is “not allowed” to become Nightbitch, but she acknowledges that her animality “remains” alongside her humanity. This shift blurs the lines between human and animal further and allows Yoder to immerse the mother/Nightbitch into her liminality as woman, mother, and dog. This interior struggle between the identity of “the mother” and “Nightbitch” thus illustrates how women are forced to navigate the delicate balance between their humanity and animality, especially when they become mothers.

As her body continues to rapidly shift between human and dog, the mother feels incredibly isolated and on the edge of sanity until she comes across *A Field Guide to Magical Women*, which uncovers an array of different woman/animal hybrids who resist heteronormative standards of reproductive and humanist ways of being. Thinking she is the only woman/mother

experiencing these animalistic changes occurring in her mind and body, the mother discovers an academic field guide that lists different “domestic breeds of magical women” (Yoder 46).

Written by the elusive Wanda White, this field guide explores the different ways in which women have simultaneously evolved in and refused current and historical structures of patriarchal (domestic) society.

While the field guide uncovers and classifies an array of different “hum:animal” women (Holland 2023), Nightbitch finds herself drawn to White’s depiction of “WereMothers,” a tribe of predatory women devoted to their role as mothers: “*The WereMothers walked on all fours, though they had opposable thumbs on their front ‘paws’ if I could even call them that. Rather, they appeared to be modified hands, incredibly similar to those of Homo sapiens. Their faces I found to be quite beautiful, a mix of human and canine features, with a protruding snout and large, soulful eyes*” (Yoder 174-175). Much like Nightbitch, these WereMothers exhibit both human and canine characteristics; however, where Nightbitch finds herself able to transition back and forth between her human and animal positionality, it appears that these mothers explicitly only inhabit the hybrid space between woman and dog. Why would Yoder create this difference between Nightbitch and her seemingly close kin the WereMothers? The “mix of human and canine features” recalls the mother at the beginning of the novel as she begins to navigate the horrific discovery of her human maternal body becoming nonhuman: “Beneath her sweatpants, her tail twitched instinctively. She suddenly had independent control of each of her ears, which she moved back and forth to listen to each and every breath and whine and gulp of the dogs” (Yoder 72). While both “species” of women possess both human and canine characteristics, Nightbitch is only now manifesting her animality after becoming a mother. The WereMothers have evolved into their simultaneous animality and maternity—so much so that that

“Mother” is a facet of their species name—to illustrate how both attributes have become so intrinsic to their identity. Because Nightbitch has only just “become-mother,” the existence/introduction of these WereMothers is meant to reassure her and empower her on her journey through her maternal metamorphosis. In coming to terms with her emerging maternal animality, Nightbitch finds solace and community amongst White’s depiction of the WereMothers and how they embrace and evolve into their canine embodiment of motherhood.

As such, once Nightbitch finally gives in to her identity as a woman-dog-mother, she reclaims control over herself and her animality and fully immerses herself into the feral reality that constitutes true motherhood. When undergoing her first full transformation into a wolf-sized dog, Nightbitch feels the power moving through and with her body as it begins to physically change: “She curled her fingers against the pavement of the driveway, showed her teeth. Her eyes lit with fire, and she could feel the hair on her head growing, her mane expanding into a monstrous spectacle. The muscles in her haunches rolled. One thought came and then left as quickly: *you are an animal*” (Yoder 74). Finally unable to refuse her identity as Nightbitch, the mother gives in to the aggressive (read powerful) urges that she had adamantly repressed at the beginning of the novel. Accompanying her ability to “finally” bare her teeth and stoke the maternal rage in her body, Nightbitch sees as well as feels her hair and muscles transforming her from human to animal mother. Marking the end of this metamorphosis is the thought that flickers quickly through Nightbitch’s mind, “*you are an animal.*” This is not a moment of mortification or terror for the mother (as it has been thus far in the novel) as she is instead confidently asserting herself as an animal, as a mother, as Nightbitch. Further into the novel, “[Nightbitch] became more powerful and more terrifying. She saw in the eyes of other mothers, in their sidelong glances and stares and quick turns askance. She saw it in the eyes of men, men both

hungry and horrified” (Yoder 180). It is important to note here that Yoder does not say women and men, but “other mothers” and men. Would women who were not (yet) mothers have the same reaction to Nightbitch as these “other mothers,” or is it only through the shared burden of motherhood that these women are able to look and long for their own manifestations of Nightbitch and the maternal power she represents? Additionally, the structure of the three sentences of this quote also enhances the distinction between the reactions of both the mothers and men that Nightbitch encounters. The first sentence describes Nightbitch first as “more powerful” and then as “more terrifying.” The following two sentences mirror this pattern where the “other mothers” react as if they are in awe of the power Nightbitch possesses whereas the men are “terrified.” In other words, her confidence as both a mother and a woman not only inspires/intimidates other mothers (still enfolded in the fictional narrative of patriarchal control) but also terrifies men and unsettles the masculine control they try to have over women’s bodies. Therefore, as Nightbitch reclaims herself and her maternal animality, she recognizes how her transformation is not a source of shame and isolation, but power and inspiration.

Conversely, Chang’s *Bestiary* revolves around the cultural and matrilineal myth of Hu Gu Po, who becomes physically manifested in Daughter’s body through the birth and subsequent development of a tiger tail. Hu Gu Po is a mythical tiger spirit that lives in the bodies of the women of Mother and Daughter’s family across generations. As a fair trade, “Hu Gu Po could remain a tenant in the woman’s body as long as she hunted;” therefore, the tiger spirit can transform the female body in any way that would help her keep her end of the deal (Chang 14). As the previous section has illustrated, Hu Gu Po has made her presence known in Daughter’s body through the growth of a tiger tail: “Between my buttocks, my tail burned like a fuse, heat clawing up to the root, a pain pinned to my lower back. I bent forward, hunching until my palms

were pressed to the hardwood and I was on all fours, my tail flicking between my legs” (Chang 70). Not only has the tiger spirit made her home in Daughter’s body, but she is also seemingly forcing Daughter (and her body) to comply with her nonhuman animality. The pain that Daughter experiences as her tail grows and moves independently from her human body effectively “pins” her to the ground “on all fours.” In other words, Daughter’s human (female) body is at the mercy and control of Hu Gu Po’s nonhuman animal spirit.

Knowing the historical and cultural significance that Hu Gu Po has in her family, Daughter must come to terms with her newfound proximity to the nonhuman animal by learning from and taking care of her tiger tail as if it were an infant. Like any developing newborn, Daughter’s tiger tail grows restless and impatient—so much so that Daughter describes her tail as being “colicky” as tensions rise between Mother and Ama towards the end of the novel: “My tail, too, was colicky, its stripes steel-bright with sweat...It was honing itself, rubbing against the whetstone of my bedroom wall. Only stilled when I promised to steer it like a spear, tell it who to stitch through” (Chang 188). Here, we can see Daughter and Hu Gu Po internally grappling with both of their proximities to animality and humanity respectively. Because it is attached to her body, Daughter feels responsible for the tail that has been birthed from her body; however, this tail is to serve a purpose to allow Hu Gu Po to hunt. Daughter can only soothe her “colicky” baby of a tail by promising Hu Gu Po that she will be able to use it as a weapon to protect her mother from Ama. As Daughter and Hu Gu Po grow into themselves and into Daughter’s female body, both human and tiger spirit must turn towards their cultural and matrilineal history with (non)humanity to cultivate a symbiotic relationship that manifests through the presence of the tiger tail.

In addition to having Daughter navigate her new identity between human and tiger, she

also settles into understanding her carnal desires as they straddle the line between maternal hunger and queer animality. Much like the mother from Yoder's *Nightbitch*, Daughter becomes increasingly anxious about her animal transformation. Not knowing whether she will transform fully into a tiger, Daughter tries to accept the inevitability of her animality by exploring what she calls her "hungers:" "Every morning I said my hungers aloud, rehearsing for my future body: *Today I want to eat my mother. I will eat as much of her as fits in my belly, and then I will rebirth her. I will eat her into a new future*" (Chang 52). Not only is Daughter naming the physical sensation of hunger, but she is also naming her desire to protect and stay connected to her mother. Here, Chang effectively blurs the line between "hunger" and "desire" as Daughter enters the realm of carnal motherhood with both her tail and the "rebirth" of her mother. Recalling how the tiger tail becomes a physical manifestation of the mother/infant dyad through its comparison to an umbilical cord, Daughter opens herself up to her (non)humanity by exploring the maternal connection she shares with both her mother and her tail. At the same time, the birth of Daughter's tail also creates a space for her to begin to acknowledge her queerness alongside her budding animality. During her first time hanging out with her crush, Daughter is unsure whether she can show Ben her "true" self (her queerness nor her animality) as it has come to be represented through her tail. Daughter ponders, "I was afraid to show her its length, in case she pulled on it like a lever by accident, transforming me into Hu Gu Po. I'd bite off her breasts, scoop them clean like grapefruits and flush away the skins" (Chang 82). Once again, Chang pushes Daughter further into this liminal space between hunger and (queer) desire as she struggles to come to terms with what her full animal transformation has in store for her, her body, and her humanity. The violence that comes to be associated with how Daughter views her relationship with both Mother and Ben only becomes possible once she accepts the physical

transformation that her body is actively undergoing with Hu Gu Po. While Daughter never completely transforms from woman into tiger, she does come to understand both her humanity and animality as they explore the formative relationship being constructed between her experiences of maternal hunger and queer desire.

At the climax of the novel where Mother and Daughter confront Ama, Daughter reveals her tail and must finally face how valuable it and the tiger spirit are to her cultural identity as well as her placement within her family's matriarchy. Here, it is important to note that Hu Gu Po does not choose to live in every woman's body of this family because Ama always wanted but never had the opportunity to house the mythical tiger spirit: "She said she must have dreamt growing a tail just like this when she was a girl, but sometimes a wound skips a generation or two, appearing again in the body that is the most ready to wield it" (Chang 225-226). As mentioned earlier, Hu Gu Po can only inhabit a woman's body with the condition that she be able to hunt and satiate her animalistic hunger. In learning of the fraught relationship that exists between her mother and her ama, Daughter realizes that Hu Gu Po's purpose for entering and transforming her body is to protect her mother and the valuable bond they share. Seeing as Ama also calls Daughter's tail (and the subsequent presence of Hu Gu Po in her body) a "wound," this further shows how unworthy she is to birth and take care of the animality that Hu Gu Po inspires in her family's matriarchy. In her bitter fit of jealousy at seeing her granddaughter housing the tiger spirit, Ama also attempts to scare and dehumanize Daughter: "*What would you be without this tail*, she said, reaching down to grasp it. *Free*, I said, but I knew it wasn't true...I'd never been freer than inside my mother's belly, Ama's blood braiding into me. My body multiplied by theirs" (Chang 246-247). Ama does not ask "who" Daughter would be, but rather "what" Daughter would be without Hu Gu Po and her tail as if she knows that the two are entangled

together in Daughter's body. Even though Daughter claims she would be free without the "burden" of her tail, she has come to realize throughout the novel that her tail, whether acting physically as an umbilical cord or mythologically through the matrilineal descent of Hu Gu Po, connects her to all the women within her family. Daughter has never felt "freer" than when she was physically bound to and inside of her mother. Her blood is also "braided" to her mother, grandmother, and all the women who came before them alongside Hu Gu Po. Therefore, it is only when Daughter, Mother, and Ama come together physically, emotionally, and spatially at the climax of Chang's novel that we see Daughter truly accept the cultural and matriarchal value that Hu Gu Po represents for her and her family as they continue to navigate the physical and mythical spaces between woman, mother, and animal.

Equally important, in Habeck's *Sharkheart*, Angela's biological mutation that transforms her from human mother to nonhuman reptile emphasizes the vulnerable positions that both mother and daughter must navigate as they both grow and develop into themselves and away from each other. When Wren was only two years old, Angela began her mutated transformation, and it was brought to everyone's attention when Angela's arm involuntarily contracted around Wren's neck when she went in for one last hug before leaving for work, "and when it is all over, [they] sat in a heap on the grass gasping, afraid, and confused" (Habeck 291). What started as a moment of maternal care and connection between Wren and Angela quickly turns into a violent interaction that left both female bodies in a vulnerable state or duress. This emphasizes how Wren, not yet old enough to fully comprehend this violence, remains fully at the mercy of her mother when it comes to her well-being and survival in the world. Since Angela can no longer trust herself or her maternal body to care for Wren, she panics and makes an appointment to see her primary care physician where she is finally diagnosed with her biological mutation. Left to

reflect on her (human) life and her newly established role as Wren's mother in the face of her diagnosis, Angela becomes frantic as she begins to wonder, "*How do I protect others when I become venomous? What does it feel like to crawl with four legs instead of walk with two?*" (Habeck 296). Leaving little space to rationally think through each of these questions, Angela rapidly shifts from thinking about how her mutation will impact others to how it will affect her and her body. Whereas this first question comes from a place of maternal and human fear for others, the second question takes on a tone of curiosity as Angela thinks about the slow transformation her body is and will continue to undergo. As someone who has always had to look after herself, Angela cannot help but think about how her impending animality will once again change her and her body now from human mother to nonhuman reptile. In the previous section of this project, I looked at another series of questions that Angela asks herself that appear in the same list as the ones provided above—the most important being "*Will I be able to care for Wren?*" (296). Again, we see Angela's distrust here in her ability to connect and care for Wren. As such, both mother and daughter are placed in a vulnerable, isolated space where they each must grapple with Angela's animal transformation and how it disrupts and shapes their developing relationship.

Moreover, Habeck's novel interrogates the personal and proximal relationship(s) between human and nonhuman animal through the scientific/societal acceptance and resulting dissociation of people diagnosed with their animal mutations. As these people grapple with their mental and physical transformations into animality, they are forced to occupy (i.e. held captive) in sterilized facilities that simultaneously removes them from human society—much like a prison sentence for human criminals—while also putting them on display as a hum:animal menagerie. Angela's first time in the state-sanctioned facility takes place under the guise of a normal tour

through a zoo/educational complex; however, “When the keeper and Angela passed, five Komodo dragons, locked up like shelter dogs, growled, hissed, grunted, and scaled their cages with their sharp claws. Some opened their mouths wide, revealing long, forked tongues. They all had at least one human feature. Hand, nose, neck, calf, foot” (Habeck 295). Not so “normal” after all...or is it? The current “inhabitants” of the facility are far enough along in their transformations that their animality has consumed their humanity, yet they each retain at least one (still) human characteristic. Offered as a moment of juxtaposition, Angela, who still has a stable grasp on her humanity, is forced to come to terms with where her and her body are headed. Even as these (former) people are more physically animal than human, they are even further dehumanized when they are compared to shelter dogs locked in their cages, which takes the carceral imagery to new heights. Only families are allowed to “visit” their loved ones as they progress through their left sentence of animality. As such, Wren comes to visit Angela one last time years later once her mother has finally succumbed to her animal mind and body:

The last time Wren saw her mother, she was devouring state-provided roadkill at the facility, absent from the world around her. Somehow the woman who did not like her peas, mashed potatoes, and fried catfish to touch on the plate was also the reptile slurping intestines off a concrete floor. Her mother ate every scrap, even fur and bones. Wren did not want this to be her final memory, but here it was. This was it: mother and daughter, together, at the end. (Habeck 314)

Compared to the other individuals who were previously held in the facility during Angela’s initial visit, it is unclear whether Angela has retained any of her human features. The ambiguity of the state of Angela’s hum:animal body here is indicative of the perceived relationship that Wren had with her mother throughout her animal transformation. While she recognizes the distance that this mutation has wedged between their mother/daughter relationship, Wren still finds it hard to let her mother’s humanity disappear from her memory. It can thus be inferred that Wren finally had to reconcile with her mother’s (complete) transformation (and ultimate

imprisonment) once every shred of her humanity had left her body. Although Habeck structures her novel around the perceived societal norm of these animal mutations, she also interrogates how the transition from human to animal reinforces the slippery relationship that persists between human prisons and animal “care” facilities. Seen through both Wren and Angela’s human (and nonhuman) eyes, the facility effectively dehumanizes their “inhabitants” by placing them even further away from their rapidly dwindling humanity.

As she is forced to come to terms with both her husband’s and her mother’s animal mutations, Wren is left to contemplate her own humanity and animality as she begins to interrogate the function and desires of her own female body. Knowing the tensions that existed between her mother and herself throughout her childhood, Wren is initially adamant about not having children and tells Lewis as much when they first start dating, especially since the mutations tend to manifest in every other generation. However, not even two months after their wedding, Wren finds herself contemplating having a baby with Lewis and asking him what he thinks. Little does she know that her husband also has something he would like to discuss with her: his diagnosis of the mutation that is slowly transforming him into a great white shark (Habeck 40-41). Not only must Wren come to terms with the fact that she and Lewis will never have children or a long and happy marriage, but she also has to acknowledge that she is about to relive another animal mutation in one of the people she loves the most: “Wren howled at the absurdity of her rare odds, the suffering, the sacrifice...Wren thought of...everything she ever knew...‘I am an animal, too, you know’” (Habeck 384). In acknowledging her own animality amid the wreckage that both Angela and Lewis have left in the wake of their mutations, Wren positions herself between human and animal to better understand how her “suffering” and “sacrifice” mirrored that of both her husband and her mother. In other words, even as Wren gets

to retain her full humanity, she chooses to name herself as an animal to create a space of understanding and reconciliation that allows her to better understand the involuntary sacrifice and suffering that Angela and Lewis underwent right alongside her. Immediately upon opening herself up to her own animality, Wren finds out that she is in fact pregnant (Habeck 385). As such, Wren's interrogation of her own humanity and animality positions her and her body in the realm of (single) motherhood as she begins to navigate the uniquely wom:animal capabilities of her female body.

Overall, this section has explored the ways in which the female body becomes the physical site of transformation from human to nonhuman animal through the lens and narrative experience of motherhood. As each of these three novels illustrates, women are capable of easily evading the patriarchal confines that attempt to control and define their (human) bodies based on their ability to reproduce and submit. While they each do so in different ways, *Nightbitch*, *Bestiary*, and *Sharkheart* all work in tandem to empower and reclaim the bodily autonomy of all women, especially mothers. It is important to draw from Holland's notion of the "hum:animal" to trouble the ways in which patriarchal society refuses to celebrate the permeable relationship that exists between and across human and nonhuman worlds and identities.

Becoming the formative crux of this project, the third and final section takes the essential findings from the previous sections and pairs them with Sharon Holland's construction of the "hum:animal" to examine how the female body physically transforms from human to nonhuman animal through its proximity and personal experiences of motherhood. Yoder's *Nightbitch* maps the delicate balance between the mother's obsession with being a "good" mother and the animalistic rage she feels and expresses when she ultimately fails to illustrate how *Nightbitch* debunks and reorients herself and her patriarchal practices of maternity to embrace the full power

that her body possesses in its simultaneous humanity and animality. Seen as equally powerful and terrifying, the wom:animal identity of *Nightbitch* collapses these patriarchal modes of control to reclaim the mother's bodily autonomy and inspire nonhuman ways of being in the "other" mothers around her. Even though Daughter is the one to undergo the transformation from human to animal in Chang's *Bestiary*, maternal language consistently permeates the developing relationship between her and Hu Gu Po, the tiger spirit that her body houses. In caring for her tiger tail as she would an infant, Daughter claims her place in her family's maternal mythology to fortify the (non)human bond she shares with her mother and grandmother. Also highlighting the vulnerable positionality of the human and the animal as it exists in and between mother and daughter, Habeck's *Sharkheart* responds to and critiques the social construction and acceptance of facilitated dehumanization as Angela and others slowly lose their grasp on humanity and must be locked up for the "safety" of those whose human identity remains intact. At the same time, as Wren grapples with the (repeated) animal transformation of someone she loves, her acceptance of her own animality simultaneously creates the opportunity for her to explore motherhood, which only serves to strengthen the relational bond that this project examines and establishes in the hybrid spaces that exist across the female body as it moves between human (woman) and animal worlds.

While all three of these novels interrogate different narrative experiences and aspects of what it means to "become-mother," they each embody how the female body of women, animals, and mothers reclaims its corporeal and reproductive power through the process of animal transformation. As such, this section takes Holland's work a step further to show how integral the female body is to be overcoming the line that separates not only humans from animals, but specifically women from animals. As we continue to navigate a fraught political climate where

maternal and female rights are constantly under attack, it is important to look at the corporeal power that the (non)human female body possesses when women walk the line between human and animal through their individual and collective experiences of motherhood. When women refuse the conventional definitions of who and what a mother is in patriarchal society, they open their bodies up to the historical and ultimately maternal power that emerges within both their human and animal selves.

CODA

Through their multifaceted processes of becoming, women and their bodies emerge as a site of hybridity in and between boundaries of the human and the animal when they shed cultural constructions of motherhood. As they inhabit the liminal spaces that exist between human and nonhuman identities, women and mothers reclaim their individual autonomy when they resist and evade the patriarchal confines that attempt to control their bodies and minds through the biological and social practices of reproduction. In navigating the individual and familial experiences of motherhood while simultaneously responding to the continued political discourse of maternal and reproductive rights, contemporary feminist speculative fiction has immersed itself into the necessary modes of worlding that interrogate multispecies storytelling and women's inhabitancy within it.

As these feminist stories and experiences have continued to rapidly emerge out of the last five years right alongside the ever growing and evolving debate of women's basic human and corporeal rights, authors like Rachel Yoder, K-Ming Chang, and Emily Habeck redefine the female (non)human body to showcase its plasticity as a biological and ideological template for a multispecies way of being. Their "other-worlding" narratives permeate and reconfigure the seemingly rigid modes of control that reinforce our contemporary understandings of patriarchal society. Taking both the internal and external transformations of the body into consideration, these speculative depictions of woman-, mother-, and animalhood establish themselves in such a way as to rupture regulated processes of being to inform new materialist processes of becoming. Therefore, this project puts *Nightbitch*, *Bestiary*, and *Sharkheart* into conversation with each other and with themselves to cohesively examine and reflect on the value of maternal metamorphosis as it troubles biological classifications of human, woman, mother, and animal.

Responding to the current political moment alongside the speculative novels that it analyzes, this project adds to new materialist configurations and readings of posthumanism, animal studies, and feminist science and technology studies to introduce motherhood as a mode of (non)human metamorphosis and becoming. For “Becoming One with Our Animal Selves” to effectively hold its own and clearly state and support its intended argument, not only were analyses of important characters and scenes left on the cutting room floor, but sections pertaining to female (maternal) rage and sexuality and the establishment of sisterhood or a maternal community were also consolidated and/or removed from final consideration. In doing so, this project opens spaces for further conversations to proliferate and develop towards a more nuanced understanding of how the female (maternal) body functions and moves through and outside of societal constructions of both time and space and the human and animal.

It is important to also acknowledge that the connections I draw between these three novels at the center of this work rarely if ever engage with critical race studies, genderqueer and sexuality studies, and transnational geographies or feminisms. Even as I bring Black feminist understandings of flesh (Hortense Spillers and Tiffany Lethabo King) and human/animal relationships (Sharon Holland and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson) into the fold of this work, it is not my intention to appropriate or relegate them to the mostly white female bodies at the center of these three novels. While subtly mentioned or completely absent from Yoder, Chang, and Habeck’s writing, the entanglements of race, gender, and sexuality (especially outside of dominant Western/U.S. system of the cis-heteropatriarchy) only serve to strengthen the multimodal integrity of the maternal body as it is defined here and across all its human and nonhuman representations within and outside of these novels. In expanding the concept and positionality of motherhood beyond its racialized and gendered borders and further into the queer

liminal space of the “other than,” this project becomes established as site of creative possibility for future work to continue to question and navigate new materialist constructions of “the body”—especially when it eludes human notions of taxonomic classification and biological/capitalist modes of (re)production.

Overall, in bringing the human and the animal not only in conversation with each other, but corporeally together in the bodies of women and mothers (and others), this project ultimately emphasizes the entangled and material value that operates across diverse experiences and processes of becoming. As women turn themselves over to their maternal animality, they rupture patriarchal expectations of the female body to facilitate new ways of being and thinking that refuse capture and reclaim bodily autonomy in the fraught political climate we continue to simultaneously live in and learn from.

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