

Alligator Earrings and the Fishhook in the Face

Tragicomedy, Transcorporeality, and Animal Drag

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Abstract This article considers the performances of “animal drag” that appear across the affiliated US media projects of *Jackass* (the television program and film franchise) and *Wildboyz* (the television program). Drawing on transgender studies scholarship, as well as recent work in affect theory, animal studies, and environmental studies, Nicole Seymour argues that these performances—which include, for example, a human inserting a fishhook in his face before being thrown into shark-infested waters—constitute an extension of this media corpus’s general investment in affective interconnectivity. As Seymour shows, such performances ask us to feel along with the performers, which includes feeling along with them *as animals*. Paying attention to the comic as well as the tragic resonances of animal drag, the article outlines the ethical role that nonserious affective modes can play in probing the trans-, or intersectional and interdependent, nature of human and nonhuman life.

Keywords affect theory, *Jackass*, *Wildboyz*, reality TV, material ecocriticism

In a segment titled “Duck Hunting,” from the 2010 US film *Jackass 3D* (dir. Jeff Tremaine), several white, cisgender male performers are catapulted into the air over a lake and then shot at with pellet guns brandished enthusiastically by another group of white, cisgender male performers decked out in macho hunting gear in a boat below. While the physical aspects of this stunt—its spectacular kineticism, violence, and comedy—command the viewer’s attention, some of us may be drawn to its finer aesthetic details, namely, the costumes worn by the “ducks.” These costumes tread several lines. They are not strictly mimetic, yet neither are they completely abstract, consisting of blue and yellow rubber fins for feet, “tighty-whitey” underwear briefs, life vests covered in fluffy white feathers, and white baseball caps with yellow coloring under the bill. We might then say that these costumes function as “drag” in two simultaneous senses: first, in the more familiar gender/sexuality sense, in how they feminize, aestheticize, and

otherwise queer the bodies of these human performers (the feathered vests evoke feather boas, while the tighty-whiteys draw attention to their genitals) and, in the species sense, in that they animalize those bodies.

Here, I draw on Esther Newton's (1972: 103) influential formulation of drag as an ironic, humorous, subcultural performance that "questions the 'naturalness' of the sex role system *in toto*,"¹ including the notion of maleness and femaleness as polar opposites. "Animal drag," then, questions the "naturalness" of what we might call the *species* role system, which is organized around the supposedly opposing poles of humanity and animality. This system, as the "Duck Hunting" segment subtly hints, is propped up by human—and, not coincidentally, *gendered*—rituals such as hunting, meat-eating, and taxidermy: "Humanist employment[s] of animality [that] confirm humanity" (Hansen 2008: 88). Indeed, if we follow Newton's (1972: 3) point that "'drag' has come to have a broader referent [than wearing the clothes of the so-called opposite sex]: any clothing that signifies a social role, for instance, a fireman's suit or farmer's overalls," we could say that *both* the hunting gear *and* the duck costumes found in this segment function as drag, gesturing toward the different "social roles" occupied by various types of human and nonhuman animals.²

The duck costuming in this segment, insofar as it constitutes more than one type of drag simultaneously, chimes with recent scholarly observations on the interrelationship of species and other ontological categories. Anna M. Giannini (2012: 37), for instance, claims that "animal acting resembles a type of drag performance that excessively plays with common-sense notions of what is human and what is animal"; she proceeds to consider not just the *resemblance* but the *interrelationship* between species performance and gender/sexuality performance in texts such as Marc Acito's play *Birds of a Feather* (2011), inspired by the "gay penguins" of Central Park Zoo. And Sara Salih (2007: 96) has observed the "mutual dependence of notions of race and notions of the human and animal," arguing that "race-thinking is a form of speciesism that is highly invested in notions of the animal and the human." What we have in the short segment "Duck Hunting," then, is a multilayered performance of the imbrication of species, gender, sexuality, race, and class,³ and, more specifically, an animal drag that pointedly retains the gender/sexuality and queer implications of the term *drag*.

This article traces the appearance of animal drag across the popular affiliated US media projects of *Jackass* and *Wildboyz*. Bringing daredevilry and circus freakshow elements to the reality TV genre, *Jackass* premiered on MTV in 2000. Though it lasted only for three seasons (2000–2002, seventeen total episodes; released on DVD, 2006), it has successfully spun off four feature films, all directed by Jeff Tremaine: *Jackass: The Movie* (2002), *Jackass Number Two* (2006), *Jackass 3D*, and *Jackass Presents: Bad Grandpa* (2013). *Wildboyz*, a nature-themed

spinoff featuring regular *Jackass* performers Steve-O and Chris Pontius, ran for four seasons on MTV and then MTV2 (2003–6; released on DVD, 2006). *Wildboyz* maintains *Jackass*'s focus on daredevilry and its nonnarrative, segmented format but trades the latter's largely urban and suburban US settings for rural and urban locations in countries such as Australia and Kenya, where the performers encounter nonhuman animals, landscapes, and locals. The species-and-gender/sexuality angles of *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* have gone mostly unmentioned—and are occasionally misread, as I argue later—in both the popular media and academic criticism.

Much of the *Jackass/Wildboyz* animal drag is comic, such as when performer Preston Lacey, dressed up like a female cow, with artificial teats secreting real milk hanging near the back of his buttocks, scrambles to get away from a pair of hungry calves. But the *Jackass/Wildboyz* corpus also features performances that, like “Duck Hunting,” bear a tragic resonance that coexists with comedy. In such instances, it is not that nonhuman morphology is simply placed on the human body. Rather, animality is viscerally, painfully, and transformatively encountered or enacted by the human body, initiating for the performers what Mel Y. Chen (2012: 136) has called “slides down the animacy hierarchy.” At the same time, these performances invoke drag practices historically associated with queer and trans* communities.⁴ For example, in *Jackass Number Two*, Johnny Knoxville navigates a children's ball pit filled with anacondas to the tune of Josie Cotton's “Johnny, Are You Queer?” (“Anaconda Ball Pit”); in that same film, a human male performer clad in a campy sailor costume helps another performer clad only in a Speedo insert a fishhook through his face (“The Fish Hook”); in the second season of *Wildboyz*, a half-naked human male performer wears caimans (small relatives of the alligator) as “earrings,” subjecting his lobes to actual piercing by the animals' teeth (season 1, “Florida”).

This tragicomic type of animal drag represents a specific application of the *Jackass/Wildboyz* corpus's *raison d'être*, which could be characterized as an experiment in affect, an investigation of how bodies respond physically and emotionally to other bodies and matter—in this case, how they respond across species and gender/sexuality boundaries. When human performers stop responding to nonhumans in the ways that they, as white, straight, cisgender men are “supposed to” (e.g., combative, reverent, phobic, sadistic, insular), they likewise stop comporting themselves in the gendered and sexualized ways that they are “supposed to” (e.g., stoic, sober, macho, masterful, normatively gendered). This corpus thus indicates not only how the animal, the queer, and the trans* must all be abjected for certain humans to be recognized as humans but also how the “acrossness” or interdependence of human life (that is, the trans-) must be abjected, too.⁵ I theorize how the corpus vaunts two affective elements routinely

abjected in human encounters with the nonhuman and from scholarship on such encounters—humor and “grossness”—arguing that these elements have relevance for contemporary questions of animal and environmental ethics.

My readings are informed primarily by transgender studies scholarship, as well as by recent work in affect studies, animal studies, and environmental studies. I take up recent theorizations of the larger potentialities of the term *trans-*, as (partly) decoupled from *gender* and as both verb and adjective. As Chen (2012: 136) declares, “*Trans-* is not a linear space of mediation between two monolithic, autonomous poles, as, for example, ‘female’ and ‘male’ are. . . . Rather it is . . . more emergent than determinate.” Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore (2008: 11) similarly state that the hyphen in *trans-* “marks the difference between the implied nominalism of ‘trans’ and the explicit relationality of ‘trans-,’ which . . . resists premature foreclosure by attaching to any single suffix” such as *gender*. Other like-minded scholars have retained the connotations of movement originally implied by the prefix *trans-* (“across,” “beyond”). For example, animal studies and environmental studies scholar Myra J. Hird (2008: 231) observes that “the concept of *trans* . . . works equally well both *between and within* matter, confounding the notion of the well-defined, inviolable self [that has undergirded] Western culture” (my emphasis), whereas queer historian Don Romesburg (2013: 484) observes, adopting a phrase from Lucas Crawford, “‘*trans moves us*’ in both spatial and affective ways” (my emphasis). These ideas and terms help account not just for the intersectionality and relationality of the performances in *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* but for their *moving* qualities: how they demonstrate and enact affective connections between different bodies of the same species, as well as across the species divide.

The Affective Operations of Tragicomic Animal Drag

Jackass and *Wildboyz* are about nothing if not affect, if we understand that term to mean “instinctive biological response[s] to a stimulus” (Warner and Hurley 2012: 104). Segments focus not just on the feat being performed—anything from placing a leech on one’s eyeball (“The Leech Monocle,” *Jackass Number Two*) to skateboarding into a pile of elephant dung (*Wildboyz*, season 3, “Keyna”)—but on the performers’ animated and effusive *responses* to that feat: they scream, hop, hobble, squirm, writhe, run, bleed, vomit. On-screen audiences, in turn, are animated in their own ways. When Bam Margera superglues his hands to the hairy chests of two performers in *Jackass 3D*, then rips them away, the onlookers go bug-eyed, then begin crowing with laughter. Puns intended: I mean to highlight how visceral reactions, as they have been linguistically conceived, often align us with nonhuman animals—not to mention that our “instinctive biological response[s]” to stimuli mark us as (human) animals.

Lest one imagine *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* as mere exercises in schadenfreude, it must be noted that the on-screen audiences, present in almost every episode, demonstrate sympathy or empathy in addition to laughing; they express concern for and even experience versions of the same physical reactions as the performer in question.⁶ After being shot in the abdomen with a beanbag in *Jackass: The Movie*, for instance, Johnny Knoxville tells the crew, “That really hurt”; someone identified in the closed-captioning as “Cameraman” rejoins offscreen, “That looked like it hurt. Oh, fuck, dude.” Similarly, after helping Steve-O break the fishhook all the way through his cheek in *Jackass Number Two*, Chris Pontius tells him, “It hurt me to do that to you.” And in the *Jackass 3D* segment “Sweatsuit Cocktail,” Lacey exercises while wearing a plastic bag that collects sweat, which is then transferred into a cup; as Steve-O moves to drink from the cup, someone announces, “We’re losing Lance,” and the camera pans to show cameraman Lance Bangs shaking uncontrollably. Steve-O, who has already begun gagging, chugs the sweat and immediately begins to vomit. Bangs then begins throwing up on his camera, colorfully extending the chain of transcorporeal affect.⁷

More important for my argument, what viewers experience during many *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* segments are affective responses not bound to species: responses that are not just transcorporeal (and transgender) but transspecies. In *Jackass Number Two*’s “The Fish Hook,” Steve-O stares at the camera in helpless agony, his pierced face, open mouth, and bulging eyes invoking the piscine visages normally associated with such scenarios. Viewing his plight, I wince and shudder just as he does. What I feel for Steve-O the human cannot be separated from his present status as less-than-human—as a fish, as bait—as he is pierced and then thrown overboard into the water where a mako shark swims. In other words, the segment demands that we imagine what it would feel like to have a fishhook in our own faces. To feel as Steve-O does, however inexact it may be in quantifiable terms, is also to feel as a fish and, perhaps, to feel as a seabird, dolphin, whale, or turtle, considering that fishing hooks and nets also plague and often kill these creatures as “bycatch” (see *Der Spiegel* 2014).

Such instances of animal drag manage to stage nonhumanness *more* effectively by *eschewing* the trappings of animal morphology; the less the Jackasses and Wildboyz attempt to physically resemble nonhuman animals, the more affecting their performances of animality tend to be. We might consider here Eva Hayward’s (2012: 177) ruminations on cross-species identification:

The trouble with identification . . . is that it is a misalignment of empathy with the possibility of familiarity. Identification relies on extending empathy across similarity to dissimilarity, providing the identifying human with the authority of encounter. As such, the organism can only receive the benefits of empathy if we

can identify with it. This might work well for charismatic megafauna—dogs, horses, cats, dolphins—that we can map our bodies onto, but for organisms like jellies [jellyfish] or coral or octopuses, the overwhelming bodily differences make identification a politics of erasure rather than empathy.

What is so striking about the “The Fish Hook,” then, is how it anticipates and circumvents the problem of identification, enacting a nonanthropocentric cross-species empathy while employing little more than the human body. Rather than attempting to present the nonhuman body as familiar, the stunt begins with and then defamiliarizes the normative human body.

The affective operations of “Alligator Earrings” are different from, and somewhat more complicated than, those of “The Fish Hook.” Pontius sits on the ground, bare chested, as professional animal handler Manny Puig approaches from behind, carrying a caiman in each hand. Pontius addresses the camera, declaring, “One of the most popular fashion accessories in Southern Florida are alligator earrings. And the bigger the better!” The camera then zooms in on his face as the caimans, raised closer to each earlobe, finally clamp down. Pontius grunts and growls. Then the camera moves out, revealing Pontius with his elbows bent and arms raised to the level of his shoulders in a coy posture. “Some people will do *anything* for fashion!” he tells us. Once the caimans have been removed and Pontius has shown us his bloody earlobes, he holds one creature in each hand and drawls campily, “Their mouths are full of *blood*. These boys are going to become *maneaters*!”⁸ The segment ends with Pontius pouting at the camera, then chuckling.

The pain that Pontius experiences is not that of being treated like a nonhuman, as is the case with Steve-O in “The Fish Hook,” but the segment similarly stages multiple kinds of trans-ing, including gender/sexuality. In addition to his stereotypically fey posture and gestures, Pontius is feminized on several levels. The close-up shots, for example, reveal that he is wearing his hair in a braid. His “earrings” are extravagant and excessive: not just long—grazing his shoulders and reaching down past his elbows—but luxurious, composed of rare animal material. The material crossing of species boundaries (the caiman’s teeth entering human flesh) here coincides with a material, discursive, and performative crossing of gender/sexuality boundaries.

Interestingly, the scene shows the *human*, and not (just) the *nonhuman*, as suffering from the former’s exploitation of the latter. This reading, which may be a stretch, is perhaps warranted when we consider, first, the additional facts of the caimans’ natural posture—they lay inert, seemingly dead, like so many trophies one might brandish or wear; second, the parody of consumerism that seems to inhere in Pontius’s “the bigger the better!” quip; and, third, such extratextual

information as Pontius's public status as a committed vegetarian. (Steve-O, for his part, has described himself as "a proud vegan, whistle-blower, and animal rights activist" [Spitznagel 2010].) We might also note that Pontius's playful statement, "These boys are going to become maneaters," highlights human/nonhuman interconnectivity and makes vivid the agency of the nonhuman, even going so far as to position humans not as masters but as mere food, an idea I discuss further below.

A more conceptual, literally stripped-down example of animal drag recurs throughout the *Jackass/Wildboyz* corpus: a performer covers a part of his body, usually one that is sexually fraught for straight men (crotch, buttocks), with raw meat or other edible, organic substances and invites various animals, including alligators, pigeons, wolves, and vultures, to take a bite. While the edible substances are not technically part of their bodies, these stunts depend on the performers' and viewers' recognition that the performers, as fleshy humans, are in fact reducible to meat. Scenes such as *Jackass: The Movie*'s "Alligator Tightrope"—in which Steve-O attempts to cross an alligator pit via a tightrope, wearing only thong underwear, with raw chicken hanging from his buttocks—would not be a white-knuckler if we did not think that, as far as the alligator is concerned, there is no clear line between Steve-O and the chicken. Steve-O is further animalized in this performance insofar as he is unable to actually walk a tightrope and thus is reduced to clinging to the line upside down, dangling like a sloth, monkey, or bat. In a similar acknowledgment of animality, Johnny Knoxville, after scrambling up a post to escape an attacking dog in *Jackass 3D*, laments, "Oh, my ass meat!" In such instances, the performers are "dragging" as animal not just through their costuming (or lack thereof) but through their vulnerable, threatened positionality. They position themselves as objects of pursuit and consumption, not as voracious pursuers and consumers, as would befit their social role as white, straight, cisgender men, not to mention *humans*.

An Ethics of Grossness? The Propositions of Tragicomic Animal Drag

I want to consider *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* as unlikely sources of ethical precepts. Animal studies and environmental studies scholars have recently highlighted the ethical possibilities inherent in recognizing that processes of transcorporeality and transspeciesism *are always already taking place*, that our bodies constantly interact with other bodies, human and nonhuman. Karen Barad (2007: 384), for instance, tells us that "ethics is about mattering, about taking account of the entangled materialization of which we are part," while Stacy Alaimo (2010: 2) argues that "potent ethical and political possibilities emerge from the literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature." As she elaborates, "Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the

human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (2). *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* incessantly cite and enact such entanglement and enmeshment, although they leave the “taking account” of it largely up to the viewer. They challenge the historical precedent by which “Western ethics links moral agency with transcendent disembodiment”—usually only imparted to white, straight, cisgender males—“and lays great stress on autonomy” (Dickenson 1998: 212).⁹ The animated reactions I have described above—squawking, squirming, writhing, vomiting, as well as empathizing—clearly point to a *lack* of transcendent disembodiment and autonomy.

The spirit in which the Jackasses and Wildboyz undertake these processes should also be noted: the performers demonstrate a strikingly open, hyper-receptive—even critically passive—approach to trans-ing. In fact, while Rosi Braidotti (2009: 526) suggests that a “bioegalitarian turn is encouraging us to relate to animals as animals ourselves,” we might say that these performers take up but then go *beyond* that bioegalitarian turn, to perform a kind of anti-human(ist?) masochism. The animalistic Jackasses and Wildboyz regularly allow other animals to “have their way” with them, be that biting, stinging, charging, humping, licking, or clawing. Whereas Gregg Mitman (2009: 59–60) has established the parallels between *filming* nonhuman animals and *hunting* them in his study of wildlife/nature programming, the *Jackass/Wildboyz* corpus pointedly reverses the hierarchy: there, it is the white, male humans who are hunted, or fished, as the case may be.¹⁰

The implications of such goings-on cannot be fully appreciated without recognizing how these texts make fellow-feeling, or *being moved*, a central part of the performance. *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* show us not only how the performer in question reacts to a stimulus or physical experience but also how fellow performers, as well as on-screen audiences, react and feel. By thus multiply enacting visceral, empathetic connections to the lived experiences of human and nonhuman others, *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* encourage, and maybe even *condition*, offscreen viewers to make the same connections. Indeed, for rather verbally inarticulate texts, peppered with “dude,” “bro,” and “holy shit,” *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* seem to deal in what Bruno Latour (2004: 210) has termed the “articulate subject”: “Someone who *learns* to be affected by others—*not by itself*” (first emphasis mine). As Latour insists, “A subject only becomes interesting, deep, profound, worthwhile when it resonates with others, is . . . moved, put into motion by new entities whose differences are registered in new and unexpected ways. Articulation thus does not mean the ability to talk with authority . . . but being affected by differences” (210). Considering how these texts pointedly model affective

interconnectivity for audiences who will have their own affective reactions, one might say that they not only depict but potentially *produce* articulate subjects.

But while this corpus encourages us to feel along with its human performers—which often entails *feeling along with them as animals*—it does not boast the serious, sentimental, and sanctimonious sensibilities found in other texts dedicated to similar ends, including animal rights and environmentalist discourse and art. We are moved (we trans-), but not in the typical sense implied in deeming a visual text “moving.” This is not to say that *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* necessarily want us to find something funny in animal suffering, but, rather, that they show the range of reactions and feelings, including humor, that can be found in our transcorporeal and transspecies encounters. I find here both an ethical possibility and an affective innovation. Such humor, I propose, does not undo or even oppose empathy but instead exists as a necessary component of it. It emerges from the rueful, perhaps sheepish realization that we are not “well-defined, inviolable sel[ves]” (Hird 2008: 231), unaffected and unaffecting.

The animal drag of *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* forces viewers to confront the reality that transcorporeal and transspecies encounters are often disgusting or even just mundanely “gross.” This move matters if scholars and activists are right to say that recognizing how we *are* animals, and how we *are* the environment, is necessary for an ethical orientation toward animals and toward the environment. Consider Harold Fromm’s (2009: 95) recent reminder that “the ‘environment’ . . . runs right through us in endless waves, and if we were to watch ourselves via some ideal microscopic time-lapse video, we would see water, air, food, microbes, toxins, entering our bodies as we shed, excrete, and exhale our processed materials back out.” This is a far cry from Freud’s account of the origin of humans, what Cary Wolfe (2003a: 2) describes as “an act of ‘organic repression’ whereby they begin to walk upright and rise above life on the ground among blood and feces.” The bloody, feces-strewn corpus of *Jackass/Wildboyz* not only revels in what is normally repressed but serves as that “ideal video” that Fromm has in mind. It may thus allow us to reflect, more broadly, on how privileged humans normally attempt to insulate themselves from interactions with the gross or the nonhuman, unless those interactions are regulatory or disciplinary, and from trans-ing processes in general. The disavowal of these aspects, one might argue, keeps us from comprehending the full scope of the living world and from grappling with our zoophobia and ecophobia and their destructive results.

The “gross” reality that *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* gleefully make visible is similarly elided in scholarship otherwise attuned to the trans-, the animal, and the material. Consider, for instance, how animal studies and transgender studies scholar Hayward (2012: 172) describes her encounters with jellyfish in gorgeously ethereal terms: “Their supple bodies glow, endlessly malleable; my own language

turns poetic rather than descriptive. . . . And just for a moment, immersed in this liquid light and aurally wet space, in my flesh, I imagine myself breathing in water. I am *moved deeply* and touched throughout” (my emphasis). Similarly, the editors of *Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* describe the bodily signification of environmental toxicity as “an intimate form of untranslatable, *essentially poetic*, ecological knowledge” (LeMenager, Shewry, and Hiltner 2012: 4, my emphasis).¹¹ *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* are perhaps the least “poetic” texts we can imagine, and yet they also move us and also engage with questions of bodily porousness and signification. The nausea-inducing spectacle of Steve-O covered in dog feces after experiencing the “Port-a-Potty slingshot” in *Jackass 3D* comes to mind, as does the “Bobbing for Jellyfish” segment of *Jackass*, wherein Steve-O puts his head in a tank filled with jellyfish until his face and scalp have been stung, then pours urine all over his face and head and subsequently vomits over the side of the boat. Such segments, though spectacular in their tragicomedy, remind us of the real character of most of our daily encounters across bodies and species: not transcendent but mundane, not profound but funny, not poetic but gross, not ethereal but earthy.

The tragicomic monkeyshines of *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* inspire an expansion of our tonal and topical range of inquiry into cross-bodily or cross-species trans-ing. In addition to privileging the poetic, recent scholarship in this area has tended to focus on negative matters such as danger and injustice, to the exclusion of more ambivalent or ambiguous ones, and to focus primarily on female bodies. “The space-time of trans-corporeality,” Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (2008: 14) write, “is a site of both pleasure and danger—the pleasures of desire, surprise, and lively emergence, as well as the dangers of pain, toxicity, and death.” But, as they continue, “Alaimo focuses . . . on toxic bodies.” The editors, as do many of their contributors, also take (implicitly cisgender) women’s bodies as the interconnected, violable, porous, or otherwise “trans-” ones.¹² I want to insist that the pleasures as well as the *pleasures-and-dangers* (where we might locate tragicomedy) of transcorporeality deserve attention, as do the material and affective realities of male bodies, including privileged ones.

Consider, for instance, what researchers have recently termed the “white male effect”: the greater acceptance and dissimulation of risks among white males. As Aaron M. McCright and Riley Dunlap (2011: 1164) summarize, “White males feel less vulnerable to many risks than do females and non-whites because of their dominant position in the social structure”; as the researchers go on to show, the white male effect gives rise to phenomena such as climate change denial. Of course, not all interactions across bodily and species boundaries count, or should count, as “risks” (although clearly many of the *Jackass/Wildboyz* stunts do). My point here is that privileged male bodies are regularly constructed as invulnerable,

inviolable, insular, and individual, to the detriment of themselves as well as nonhuman or dehumanized others. In the context of this reality, cultural texts that showcase how bodies intersect with and affect other bodies and matter, including across species boundaries—and that are popular, widely circulated, and highly appealing to white, straight, cisgender male audiences—clearly deserve attention.

Rereading *Jackass* and *Wildboyz*

While the animal drag found in *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* often flirts with the tragic mode, it never fully slips into it, for reasons that must be explicitly acknowledged. Primary is the performers' relative privilege: all of the Jackasses and Wildboyz are men, and the majority are readable as white, heterosexual, cisgender, and, to a lesser extent, abled and normatively embodied.¹³ Those statuses make the performers' transgressions of the human boundaries around corporeality and gender/sexuality both funny and recuperable: they are voluntary, impermanent, and therefore not likely to subject the performers to oppression. Steve-O being covered in feces, for instance, does not break our hearts like the recent, horrific real-life "prank" in which the same was done to an autistic teenager; the white Wildboyz' appearance in gorilla suits in the "Russia" episode invokes none of the racist animal associations that have historically been wielded against African-Americans. (Whether the Boyz' choice of *white* gorilla suits constitutes a recognition or an evasion of such associations is certainly a matter for debate.) My intent, then, is not to obscure the advantages that allow these performers to make a show of violently casting off those same advantages but rather to consider the potential implications of this casting-off.¹⁴

If the Jackasses and Wildboyz' transgressive trans-ing is recuperable—albeit immortalized on film, broadcast worldwide, and endlessly circulated throughout cyberspace—we must note that their encounters with the nonhuman are not always so ephemeral. Consider Steve-O's account of his reluctance to participate in a scene in which a ram would, well, ram him, in *Jackass 3D*; as he told *Vanity Fair*'s Eric Spitznagel (2010):

When the movie started, I said, "I don't want to work with animals. That's not what I'm about." But then I did the ram scene anyway, and I justified it in my head, like, "O.K., this is for work. I've got to put my own personal beliefs aside." So I got into the pen and my instincts took over. The ram charged towards my nuts, and I put my hand down to block it. That happened a bunch of times, and as a result the tendons in my right hand are totally messed up. . . . I feel like it's a permanent reminder that I compromised my beliefs [around animal rights].

When Spitznagel responded, “I wouldn’t feel bad. The ram has PETA on its side. There isn’t an advocacy group for your nuts,” occasional PETA spokesperson Steve-O conceded jokingly, “Yeah, right, exactly. PETA is not pulling for my balls at all.” In the absurdist world of *Jackass* and *Wildboyz*, nonhumans and humans alike act on “instinct,” demonstrating their shared animality; privileged humans, rather than degraded animals, willingly take on the position of the threatened and vulnerable; and the bodies, needs, and impulses of nonhuman animals literally run up against the maintenance of straight, white, cisgender, masculine human sovereignty—or, at least, against the “balls” that stand in for it—affecting the performers physiologically and psychologically and sometimes leaving a lasting trace in the form of bruises, scars, permanent injuries, or even subsequent political engagement.

My readings thus share the awareness of positionality found in the relatively small extant scholarship on *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* but depart from that scholarship’s tendency to insist on the antiprogressive character of these texts. For example, in his reading of *Jackass* the TV program, Jason Kosovski employs David Savran’s (1998: 176) concept (by way of Freud) of “reflexive sadomasochism”:

an increasingly powerful mechanism for the production not just of male subjectivity [beginning in the 1970s] . . . but of a[n American] culture and economy whose jurisdiction over both the First World and the Third . . . was to become ever more precarious. . . . No longer having others on whom to inflict his power and his pain with impunity, the male subject began to turn against himself and to prove his mettle by gritting his teeth and taking his punishment like man.

Kosovski (2007: 20) uses this concept to argue that “violence, often self-directed and always sanctioned by participants, allowed the *Jackass* cast to deflect the erotic and homoerotic status inherent in their objectified, nearly nude performances.” By this logic, the cast also deflects the trans-ness of their performances. But such a reading does not account for the particulars of sensibility at work in *Jackass* and *Wildboyz*—the delight the performers take in their own trans-ing and dragging—nor their generic and formal specificities. There is quite a difference between, say, the grim, terroristic violence of a real-life Timothy McVeigh or the stoic, heroic violence of a cinematic *Rambo*—cited by Savran as paradigmatic examples of self-styled white male “victims” who engage in reflexive sadomasochism—and a nonnarrative reality text like *Jackass* or *Wildboyz*, in which violence is “self-directed,” not to mention largely comedic.

Accounts such as Kosovski’s ignore the fact that the Jackasses and Wildboyz are regularly shown to be unable to withstand the violence inflicted on them. If the new measure of a (white, straight, cisgender) man, per Savran, is the ability

to grit one's teeth and take one's punishment, the Jackasses and Wildboyz fail flagrantly at this task. Steve-O's (2011: Kindle locations 3127–3131) autobiographical commentary may allow us to further understand this point:

People always seem to think because of the pain I've put my body through over the years that I must have a really high tolerance for it. In fact, the opposite may be true. . . . That's what makes the stunts worth watching. It would be far less entertaining to see a bunch of guys who could do all this shit without flinching. I think it's the very fact that we're no tougher or stronger than anyone in the audience that makes our stuff compelling. We're just stupid enough to do it.

Steve-O's comments, delivered in an antihierarchical spirit—"We're no tougher or stronger than anyone in the audience"; "We're just stupid"—suggest that the pleasure of *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* emerges from the performers' *failures* of masculine, and human, mastery.

While other scholars have allowed more for the queer elements of *Jackass* and *Wildboyz*, they also find harsh renunciation of the performers' transgressions.¹⁵ Cynthia Chris (2012: 162), for example, in describing a *Wildboyz* episode wherein Chris Pontius allows a kinkajou to lick his nipples and face, states, "[Pontius] addresses the camera with chagrin: 'I feel kinda' weird. I don't know if it's because I made out with an animal or because I made out with a male animal,' then grins mischievously to end the scene." Chris argues that Pontius's contact with the kinkajou "produces a kind of woozy revulsion that . . . nears a version of 'homosexual panic,' the sudden urge to disavow oneself from implication in same-sex desire, sometimes turning violent" (162). But the "violence" found in the program, as I have noted, is that posed to the performers' human bodies from nonhuman animals and inanimate objects, and that violence produces either comedy, empathy, or both. Pontius's sense of "weirdness," for instance, never threatens to lead to his punishing himself or others but rather produces a simple, "mischievous" grin. In contrast, "homosexual panic," like "trans panic," funnels ruthless violence toward the other, even if internalized self-hatred is a contributing element. In fact, "homosexual panic" and "trans panic" continue to function as valid legal defenses for those committing particularly heinous homophobic or transphobic murders, including those involving "overkill," or excessive violence after the point of death (see Rowe 2009)—making Chris's association of Pontius's good-natured reaction with "homosexual panic" highly questionable.

Indeed, I would argue that the *Wildboyz* and *Jackass* corpus *parodies* panic, including a broader sense of "trans panic," or what one might experience when one transgresses corporeal, gender, sexuality, or species boundaries. In an outtake from the "Brazil" episode of *Wildboyz*, for example, Pontius tells the camera, teeth

comically clenched and with mock-intense delivery, “We’re really not gay. We’re just acting.” Steve-O immediately follows up with, “Gay.” The grammar and timing here invoke both the general performativity of genders and sexualities and the program’s specific queer and trans*/trans-implications, regardless of the performers’ “real” identities.¹⁶ I would then argue that Pontius’s aforementioned musing—“I don’t know if it’s because I made out with an animal or because I made out with a male animal”—should be understood as a performance that signals through comedy the “interrelatedness and mutual inextricability of various ‘trans-’ phenomena” (Stryker, Currah, and Moore 2008: 12).

Conclusion

In this article, I have offered new readings, as well as some rereadings, of the *Jackass* phenomenon and its spinoff *Wildboyz*. I have taken this corpus as a cultural site that lends itself to what Una Chaudhuri (2003: 647) calls “critical zoo-esis”: responses to “the traditional ontological distinction, and consequent ethical divide, between human and nonhuman animals” that enact “the deconstruction of that distinction, and the interrogation of that divide” (Chaudhuri 2003: 647, quoting Wolfe 2003b: xx). These texts present human figures who move across, or trans-, bodily, gender, sexual, and species divides in ways that are both painful and funny—ways that palpably move or affect them and those around them, as well as those viewing across time and space. Specifically, I have looked at how, through various practices of “animal drag,” these performers subject themselves to violence *as* nonhumans or *from* nonhumans and thus stage empathetic engagements across the aforementioned divides. Meanwhile, the manifestations of their ingrained phobias around trans-ing—through such physical responses as vomiting, sweating, or screaming (as well as through rarer dramatic displays such as Steve-O walking off-camera during a *Wildboyz* segment that called for him to play the female role in a staging of a *Kamasutra* sex pose with Pontius)—provide a realistic account of how humans of multiple different statuses rarely want to admit certain truths: that we are animals, that our bodily boundaries are not secure, that our gender and sexual identities are malleable.

I have also insisted that the humor and grossness of *Jackass/Wildboyz* matter. The good-natured, counterphobic vision of trans-ing performed in this corpus—one that not only admits how gross and mundane trans-ing can be but embraces that grossness and mundanity—may offer a model for animal and environmental ethics. The Jackasses and Wildboyz regularly *incorporate* rather than *abject* the other, while simultaneously engaging in self-abjection. At the same time, the elements of humor and grossness found in this corpus help create an absurd, antiheroic tone, ensuring that we are not moved to praise the performers

for bold sacrifices, which might render them the animal rights or environmentalist version of the “male feminist.”

Throughout, I have suggested that the Jackasses’ and Wildboyz’ readability as a priori–privileged figures is crucial: it is what makes their undermining of masculine human sovereignty, their self-abjection, so striking and so relevant to our contemporary moment—in which continued white male supremacy, escalating environmental devastation, and human and animal suffering are intertwined—not to mention so pleasurable to watch. But these points raise the question of where the *Jackass/Wildboyz* corpus leaves *normally* abjected practices and beings. Put differently, does the incorporation of the animal, the queer, and the trans* actually threaten to invisibilize those things? I would argue, first, that the corpus positions the normally abjected differently, much closer to the surface. This may explain how the queer and the trans* erupt onto the scene so regularly and randomly, whether in the form of unmotivated drag, such as Chris Pontius wearing a bikini top for no apparent reason during a *Jackass* Jet Ski stunt, in the form of cameos by queer icons such as Rip Taylor and John Waters, or in the form of nonnarrative campy spectacles, such as the elaborate Busby Berkeley–style song-and-dance routine that ends *Jackass Number Two*. It may also explain the corpus’s surprising engagement with issues such as disability, agedness, and infirmity, positions of abjection that have yet to be explored in scholarship on these media texts.¹⁷

But what still deserves ongoing consideration is how queer and trans* cultural forms, borne of abjection, function *on their own*, outside a corpus whose star bodies cannot be fully abjected, despite their mighty efforts. The emergence of the interdisciplinary field of queer ecology, and the increasing interest among transgender studies scholars in issues of animality, indicate new paths for such consideration. Thus, while we cannot and should not confuse the Jackasses or Wildboyz for, say, drag queens, much less for queer or trans* individuals, their sustained flirtation with queer and trans* practices such as drag highlights the potentialities of such cultural forms: how they draw attention to the strict binaries and boundaries that structure life by flagrantly, gleefully crossing them. This corpus, then, reminds us of how urgently we need performative, camp, queer, and trans* cultural forms to address questions of the animal and environment.

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Notes

1. Newton (1972), as Judith Butler and others would later, stressed the “unnatural” character not just of the drag queen’s femininity but of gender itself. To wit: “It seems self-evident that persons classified as ‘men’ would have to create artificially the image of a ‘woman,’ but of course ‘women’ create the image ‘artificially’ too” (5). Newton did not invent the term *drag*; it has been traced back to at least the 1870s, referring to homosexual, cisgender men wearing women’s attire (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “drag, *n.*” accessed January 15, 2015, www.oed.com).
2. Indeed, the Jackasses and Wildboyz regularly dress in all manner of drag across the entire corpus.
3. For example, the duck “hunters” and their associated trappings (vests, hats, guns) suggest that a certain kind of working-class white masculinity, and *humanity*, is produced through rituals such as animal hunting. At the same time, the hunters’ performance reifies what Jack Halberstam (1997: 104), in work on drag kings, calls the “(often obscured) theatricality of masculinity.”
4. Many scholars and activists have recently adopted the use of *trans**, with the intent of including not just transsexuals and transgender individuals but also agender, gender-queer, and other gender-nonconforming persons. See Sam Killermann’s “What Does the Asterisk in Trans* Stand For?” (2012).
5. It is worth noting that *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* take up various other categories of abjected difference, including disability, fatness, and old age. Multiple (male) body types are represented among the performers, from wheelchair users to muscular skaters to obese men to little people, and related jokes tend to focus on how others outside the crew perceive such diversity. Other segments expose public disgust for aged and infirm bodies.
6. As Newton (1972: 37) once observed, “There is no drag without an actor and his audience”; *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* take that point seriously, insisting on having on-screen audiences to supplement the offscreen ones.
7. Stacy Alaimo has recently introduced the concept *transcorporeality* to discussions in feminist theory, environmental studies, and the so-called new materialism. See, for example, her monograph *Bodily Natures* (2010), in which she declares that “the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” and that “the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (2).
8. We might note that Pontius’s comment—“These boys are going to become *maneaters!*”—implies both that the caimans will literally desire to eat men and that, metaphorically, they are akin to women who have several sexual partners.
9. Dickenson is summarizing one of the major points of Margrit Shildrick’s *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism, and (Bio)Ethics* (1997).
10. Of course, these encounters are planned, staged, edited, and ultimately controlled by humans. But they still hinge on the element of unpredictability, thanks to animal agency. We must also consider the possibility that some of the animals depicted on-screen are

- frightened or even traumatized by their encounters, though this possibility is never depicted or discussed on camera.
11. Here, the editors are referring to Alaimo's work on transcorporeality.
 12. In *Material Feminisms*, editors Alaimo and Hekman (2008: 4) declare, "We need a way to talk about the materiality of the body as itself an active, sometimes recalcitrant force. . . . Women *have* bodies; these bodies have pain as well as pleasure." But *men have* bodies too—just as they have genders—and those bodies have pain as well as pleasure, as the *Jackass/Wildboyz* corpus so clearly shows.
 13. The *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* performers include persons of diverse body sizes and shapes, which may (or may not) complicate our understanding of privilege as it functions in the corpus.
 14. I hereby align my work with that of scholars such as Jack Halberstam (2011), who, despite dismissal of *Jackass* elsewhere, has demonstrated how lowbrow, "dude"-oriented texts might be productively interpreted, if not celebrated.
 15. Exceptions certainly exist. For example, queer media scholar Ken Feil (2014: 183) argues that "omitting the queer reception of *Jackass* from the equation . . . actually reinstates the hegemony of hetero-masculinity."
 16. We might also note here that *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* regularly feature queer and trans* cultural symbols, references, and figures and that Steve-O and Knoxville have publicly opposed homophobia and interacted with queer communities.
 17. See note 5.

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