

ANIMAL DRAG: SEX, RACE, AND THE THEATRICAL ANIMAL

by

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For Christine Archuleta

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Examining ideology and human identity as communicated through animal characters is key to understanding how animal performances both shape and perpetuate cultural norms. However, there has been little theoretical inquiry into human performances of animals, and all too often animals are interpreted in apolitical terms. How do we interpret human identity through the performative excesses of animal acting? Where does performing “animal” begin and performing “human” end? Is it really possible to separate the two? In order to explore these issues I consider the performance of animal characters in a variety of theatrical genres and performance contexts from children’s theatre to the sexual subculture of pony play, including the musical *A Year With Frog and Toad* (2003), Mark Medoff’s *Prymate* (2005), Stephen Svodoba’s *The Penguin Tango* (2006), Marc Acito’s *Birds of a Feather* (2011), Rebecca Wilcox’s book *The Human Pony* (2008), and the documentary *Born in a Barn* (2004). By looking at humans performing animals in a range of contexts, I uncover similarities in the practical conventions of animal performance and trends in the construction of human identity through animal performances. The central question of this project is how human identity is constructed through animal characters in the contemporary United States.

The first goal of this project is to develop terms that distinguish various types of animal acting and take into account the varying degrees by which particular animal performances foreground the human body. I establish a spectrum that includes various forms of animal acting

from performances that involve no animal costumes or animal-like qualities to performances that involve full-body animal suits.

The second goal of this project is to examine how animal characters are raced, gendered, and sexualized in performance. I interrogate the intersections of animality with human identity in performance, questioning why certain portrayals of animality correspond to particular constructions of human identity. I contend that performances of animal characters have little ability to challenge the human/animal divide as they have more to do with communicating assumptions about human identity than with animals themselves.

Introduction

The Theatrical Animal

In my early days as a performer I was called on to portray an animal on several occasions. One of the first plays I did was about the circus and I was cast as a woolly mammoth. I remember walking hunched over, torso swinging back and forth, my head pulled down by the weight of the laundry hose fastened to my face as I strained to produce an elephant sound by forcing air through my tightly closed lips. My second animal role was a hippopotamus in a collection of vignettes based on Shel Silverstein's children's poems. Again, I remember being hunched over wearing a clunky hippo head and coming up with a bellow that I thought such an animal would produce. Then there were the paid animal gigs: the Village Inn bear, the rapping dog, and the Chuck E. Cheese mouse. My first paid animal job was as Bucky Bear, the mascot of a local restaurant chain. I wore a giant heavy fuzzy suit and entertained families on Sunday mornings. The suit was oppressively hot and my boss was not keen on giving me breaks, leaving me rather miserable through my sweaty eight-hour shift.

Being a fuzzy animal proved to be an interesting sociological study. In general, my presumed target audience, children, approached me tentatively with parents urging them to hug me. Some children were downright terrified upon my sight and burst into tears. Adults often politely acknowledged my presence but then quickly, and at times nervously, averted their gaze, suggesting I was not there to entertain them. Groups of teenage girls fresh from sports tournaments mobbed me giggling and squealing, "We love you Bucky!" Teenage boys loved to prove I am "not real" by peering into the screen across my bear mouth and trying to make eye contact with me. Often this peering would be accompanied by the phrase, "I know you're not real." This sense of me not being real pervaded my physical encounters. My stuffed-toy

appearance obscured my human body, and I was accordingly treated as if I did not feel anything. Children punched me in the gut; adult men manhandled my arms, and I distinctly remember an elderly man kicking me in the shin, all gestures indicating my unreality.

There is something about the very act of humans performing animals that suggests the “not real” more so than humans performing humans. Humans performing animals is often taken as phony and usually, but not always, campy. While audiences may momentarily believe the actor in the business suit playing Willy Loman to be the character, there is practically no chance of that happening in response to an animal character. The audience may accept that the laundry hose attached to my face signifies trunk, but there is no chance that I will be believed to be a woolly mammoth. Whether it is through contorting the body or wearing additional appendages, animal performers signify beyond the commonplace. Although not all animal performances demand extravagances of movement and costume, they all demonstrate the gap between humans and the species they seek to represent, forcing audiences to recognize the limitations of what the human body can and cannot mean in performance.

Human identity complicates the performer’s ability to embody an animal role. Humans performatively constitute race, gender, and sexuality through what Judith Butler describes as a “*stylized repetition of acts*” (*Gender Trouble* 191). These acts, in combination with the audience’s interpretive lens, naturalize identity categories. Performers cannot help but transmit gender and race, and an audience cannot help but read gender and race onto a performer’s body. In this way, performer and audience mutually constitute categories of identity. However, another facet of identity emerges when considering the performativity of the human body, and that is the category of humanness itself. Animal studies scholar Sara Silah theorizes that, “humanity as such is produced in a field of vision in much the same way that gender and race are performatively

constituted” (103). In this sense, an animal performer’s humanity comes to the forefront of the performance, reminding audiences that he or she is human first and playing animal second.

When I was a woolly mammoth, for example, audiences could not help noticing my identity as a human, white, twenty-something woman, just as I could not help but construct my woolly performance within those limitations, or, to spin it more positively, with those tools.

This dissertation aims to explore the presence of human identity in animal performance. The issue of how animal characters construct human identity is key to understanding how animal performances both shape and perpetuate cultural norms. However, there has been little theoretical inquiry into human performances of animals, and all too often animals are interpreted as apolitical beings. This project begins with the premise that animal characters have little to say about animals themselves and very much to say about the politics of human identity. In exploring this issue, I look at animal performances in a range of contexts from children’s theatre to the sexual subculture of pony play, uncovering similarities in the practical conventions of animal performance and trends in the construction of human identity.

Humans performing animals, which I refer to as “animal acting,” is a ubiquitous part of U.S. performance culture. Theatre for young audiences (TYA) constitutes a nexus for animal acting, with titles such as *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* and *Go, Dog Go!* reigning supreme. Animal acting occurs at sporting events and theme parks where giant fuzzy animals entertain children and adults alike. For example, each weekend of the football season, Bucky Badger, the University of Wisconsin mascot, entertains the crowd by doing pushups for each point the team scores. Beyond the realms of children’s and popular entertainments, animal acting has a prominent presence on the Broadway stage in the form of the award-winning and long-running feline musicals *Cats* and *The Lion King*. Well-established playwrights such as A.R. Gurney and

Edward Albee have incorporated animal characters into their plays and newer playwrights such as Rajiv Joseph and Kenny Finkle have done the same.

Despite the growing prominence of animal acting in American theatre, the phenomenon is rarely discussed. TYA scholarship lacks discussion of animal acting, even as that appears to be the most common convention in the art form. There is also a dearth of information on how to act the animal with regard to theatrical training in general. My actor training doing scenes from *Oleanna* and *Angels in America* certainly did not prepare me to play a hippo. American actor trainers do not treat animal acting as an end unto itself; rather they treat it as a phase in creating realistic human performances. This is the case with the popular Method acting animal exercise, developed by Maria Oupenskaya at the American lab and taken up by Lee Strasberg (Brestoff 108). The exercise involves observing an animal, moving like the animal, and then transforming into a human character that retains characteristics of the animal (109). The exercise leads to a realistic human rather than animal character, and actors are left with no explicit training on how to develop an animal character.

In American theatre animal characters are used for a variety of reasons. In A.R. Gurney's *Sylvia* and Edward Albee's *Seascape*, animals are used as comedic devices. In both of these plays actors have the opportunity to behave in ways uncharacteristic to human beings. The dog in *Sylvia* jumps on the couch and the lizards in *Seascape* crawl across the sand. Further, both plays humorously draw attention to the bodily functions of the animal by including references to urinating on the floor, copulating in public, and laying eggs. These plays exploit the gap between human and animal for comedic effect. In theatre for young audiences animals are also likely to be used for comedic effect but are also used to teach lessons. For example, the popular play *Lily's Purple Plastic Purse* imagines what it would be like if animals lived as humans, providing

opportunities for cute jokes such as mice learning about cheese at school and baking cheese snacks. Within this silly context, the main mouse character, Lily, learns a lesson about treating others with kindness even when upset. Another use of the animal character is to facilitate spectacle as in *The Lion King*. In this case, the animal provides opportunities for costume and makeup designers to create the fantastic and for actors to display their virtuosity through animal-like movements. Animal characters are also used as representatives of human brutality. In Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, for example, the gorilla kills Yank, symbolizing the hopelessness of the class disparities he must face. In Rajiv Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* the tiger bites a soldier's hand off, symbolizing the harsh conditions of the Iraq war. However, animal characters have also been used to make statements concerning what actions are natural for humans to do.

Playwrights use animal characters to advance a variety of ideological positions regarding animal rights, nature, and human sexuality. I am interested in animal acting to the extent that it relates to how performances construct human identity. I want to draw attention to the ways in which animal performances work with categories of representation. What relationship do animal characters have to the ideologies of the plays and performances in which they occur? How are animal characters performed and for what purposes? How are animal characters raced, gendered, and sexualized in particular performance contexts and what impact does animality have on how these identities are constructed? The last question is often overlooked in relation to animal characters, particularly in light of the development of critical animal studies in humanities research. Recent scholarship on human-animal relationships in the humanities tends to focus on what animal representations mean for animal rights activism rather than on issues of human identity. In relation to theatre I plan to move the conversation toward issues of human identity,

not only because human bodies activate animal characters onstage, but also because animal characters convey assumptions about human identity categories. In many cases, production choices reveal assumptions of whiteness, heteronormativity, and conventional gender roles embedded in animal plays.

An example of problematic assumptions regarding identity occurs in Gurney's *Sylvia*, in which human identity plays an integral role in facilitating the comedy of the dog to which the title refers. The play centers on an affluent couple in New York, Greg and Kate, whose lives are disrupted when Greg brings Sylvia home. In the play, Sylvia, originally played by Sarah Jessica Parker, is highly sexualized as a white woman, an identity essential to the comedic elements of the play. Gurney describes the character as "pert and sexy" (7). Greg sexualizes her by smacking her butt with a newspaper (7) and checking out her butt with another man at the park (20). The play relies on Sylvia's identity as a white heterosexual woman in order to create a love triangle between Greg, his wife, and the dog. Sylvia must be white like Greg, otherwise her position as an owned animal would recall racial oppression, threatening the humor of the piece. There is a clear power dynamic in which Greg has the upper hand over Sylvia that indicates she is a woman subjugated to her male master. Despite the problematic politics of the piece, the play was the most produced in the U.S. from 1996-97 ("Top Ten").

There has been little scholarship on *Sylvia*, and what is there misses the problems the play raises for a feminist standpoint. In her essay "Gurney's *Sylvia*: What Oft was Thought," JoAllen Bradham does not discuss human identity in relation to the animal character, but rather focuses on the dog's animality. Bradham contends that the play taps into an essence of animality characterized by "freedom, sensory response, unquestioning love, and nonrational enjoyment of life" (149). Bradham's description of how Gurney constructs Sylvia's animality is accurate.

However, her analysis is a symptom of thinking about animality in a way that is evacuated from its connection to human identity. Audiences may have enjoyed Gurney's comedic rendition of a woman masquerading as animal, but that enjoyment emerges at women's expense.

The field of critical animal studies provides few tools for analyzing an animal performance such as the dog in *Sylvia*, as animal studies focuses on the issue of "speciesism," that is, discrimination on the basis of species. In his article, "The Rise of Critical Animal Studies: Putting Theory into Action and Animal Liberation into Higher Education," Steven Best characterizes critical animal studies as a field concerned with "the critique of human supremicism, Western dualism, and the human exploitation of nonhuman animals" (10). Best contends that only scholars who are concerned with animal rights activism including "veganism and animal liberation" should be considered part of critical animal studies (21). Further, Best views animal studies as the newest frontier in academic studies of identity politics, expressing the wish that "animal studies will take their place alongside Women's Studies, African-American Studies, Chicano/a Studies, Disability Studies, and Queer Studies" (10). Recent scholarship on human-animal relationships in the humanities tends to focus on what animal representations mean for animal rights activism or what animals "mean to themselves" (Armstrong, "What Animals Mean" 3) rather than issues of human identity.

While animal studies takes up animal rights as its main cause, I re-envision that field, drawing attention to the ways in which animal performances complicate categories of representation and identity by focusing on the extent to which animal performances foreground the human body. Humans performing as animals create various permutations on human identity categories, permutations that reveal and enable troubling trends as well as challenge established understandings by placing human bodies in nonhuman contexts. By looking at animal acting in

both TYA and adult theatre, I intend to broaden the field of critical animal studies beyond its emphasis on the politics of animal representation as it relates to nonhuman animals.

In theatre studies little has been written about the ways in which animal performances construct human identity. However, in posthumanist performance studies there has been a tendency to romanticize our connection to animals. In his introduction to a special issue of *Performance Research*, “On Animals,” Alan Read asks, “What might it mean to practice, think, and write theatre beyond the human?” (iii). Many of the essays in the issue describe different modes of performance by which humans can transcend the gap between human and animal. Alfonso Lingis, in his essay, “Quadrille,” parallels the sexual displays of humans and animals, comparing the glamorous costumes and movements of knights to the courtship rituals of various species (2). In Lingis’s view, sexual display constitutes a shared arena of performed behavior in humans and animals. In drawing attention to these shared behaviors, Lingis suggests the human/animal binary is not as strong as it seems. Another essay that deconstructs the human/animal binary is “Animals, Angel and Performance,” in which Jean-Marie Pradier, referring to Eugenio Barba and Grotowski’s work, argues performance can “bring into contact ... what is animal and what is specifically human” (13). According to Pradier, “The fundamental value of live performance perhaps resides in the fact that it can restore the organicity of the spectator by bringing into perception our bios, the vital flux that connects us to other species and to the cosmos” (21). For Pradier, performance sequences such as those developed by Zeami in Noh theatre have the ability to connect with the “pre-human body’s reaction” (21). Phillip Zarilli has also found that certain modes of performance connect with animality. He finds that Indian kalarippayattu training poses “embody both the external and internal essence of the animal” (49) and can induce “an animal-like state of ‘instinctual’ awareness, loss of voluntary control and of

any social/personal inhibition” (52). A sense of bodily animality has also been discussed in relation to performances involving actual animals. In his essay on the equestrian performance company Théâtre Zangaro, David Williams imagines how human and animal can merge in performance through the personal accounts of the rider Bartabas. He writes, “For Bartabas, human-horse interactions represent the possibility of a conjunction of two very different ontologies and epistemologies—one sensory-motor perceptual, the other intellectual—and, in riding, the temporary assemblage much greater than the sum of its parts: equestrianism as a becoming-centaur for both rider and horse” (33). Through the symbiosis of their differing perceptual functions, horse and rider become one. In all of these accounts, the human body in performance functions as a channel for connecting with animality through either internally or externally generated means.

The theme of deconstructing the human/animal binary through performance also emerges in a special issue of *TDR* focused on animals. In an essay on animals in philosophy, Martin Puchner begins with the premise that “the treatment of humans and the treatment of animals are intimately connected” (21). Yet Puchner finds that most of philosophy has been anthropocentric, with the exception of Giorgio Agamben who works to deconstruct the human/animal distinction. Through a performance process of “negative mimesis,” Puchner believes the human can be decentered from philosophy (21). Puchner’s concept of negative mimesis differs from the performance methods outlined above in that it does not involve accessing animality by means of the human body. Of performances of negative mimesis Puchner argues, “they invert the perspective of representation; they mark the gap between humans and animals; they demonstrate the extent to which the very distinction between animals and humans is a product of projection and representation” (21). Puchner cites Samuel Beckett’s *Act Without Words I* as an example of

negative mimesis. In the piece the performer does not actually play an ape, but is rather treated as an ape, placed in circumstances that force him to use various tools to get what he needs (30). In this instance, the theatrical framing is as implicated in the deconstruction of the human/animal binary as much as the performer himself. The tools dropping from the sky contribute to the sense that the performer is an animal being subjected to outside forces. It is showing the lack of an animal, rather than acting animal, that constitutes negative mimesis.

Another emergent theme in theatre studies considers the ethics surrounding the symbolic use of animals. In general, scholars in the fields of theatre and performance studies disparage anthropomorphic animal representations. Una Chaudhuri raises the issue of “How to perform the animal out of facelessness ... without burdening it with an *oppressive* [emphasis mine] and necessarily anthropomorphic faciality? (“(De)facing” 16). Essentially, Chaudhuri asks how we can face the animal as an “other” without assimilating that “other” into our own self-view. Similarly, Steve Baker discusses “postmodern conceptions of the animal which try to avoid forcibly rendering it meaningful in human terms, thus *reducing* [emphasis mine] its otherness to sameness, and wonder to familiarity” (“Sloughing” 79). Terms referring to oppression and reduction suggest that anthropomorphizing the animal does it a disservice, robbing it of its potential to signify beyond the human.

Beyond the simplifying effect of anthropomorphization, animal representations can also symbolically function in more insidious ways by eliding our maltreatment of them. Kristin Dombek makes this argument regarding the representation of animals as cute. Dombek argues, “the cute animal might exist precisely in order to cover over—and even cleanse us from—the many ways in which we put real animals to use, both symbolically and materially” (147). Coming from an animal rights perspective, Dombek points out the disparity between how we

represent animals and how we actually treat them. Dombek is not the only scholar to draw attention to the contradictory ways in which animals are treated in society as Chaudhuri also raises the issue of the fact that many “perform” as animal lovers at the same time as they eat them (“(De)facing” 10). This dissertation is not concerned with the problems anthropomorphism creates for animals or contradictions in how we represent animals versus how we treat them. Rather, this dissertation looks at how animal representations impact our understandings of humans, shifting the focus from the general concern of animal studies scholars with animal ethics.

The concern of animal studies scholars within theatre studies with performances that deconstruct the human/animal binary as well as the critique of anthropomorphic animal representations reflect a posthumanist desire to decenter common sense notions of the human as primary subject. Chaudhuri notes that the posthuman has generally referred to machines, but she names animals as a key element of posthumanist thought, claiming, “Animals are a conduit into those ‘excluded sites’ from which, according to the emergent discourse of posthumanism, the definition of humanness is carved” (“Animal Rites” 509). According to Chaudhuri, these excluded sites include, “the lunatic, the child, the freak, the woman, and the deviant” (“Animal Rites” 507). For Chaudhuri, the stakes of challenging the primacy of the modern humanist subject are high, not only because of animal rights, but also because of human rights, as she implicates how we treat animals in how we treat humans: “animals have been forced to play a part in the construction of biologisms and racisms that have naturalized and justified ethnic cleansing from Auschwitz to Bosnia” (516). In this sense, the human/animal binary not only victimizes animals, but humans alike (“Animal Rites” 516).

In her work Chaudhuri has done an excellent job of carving out a space for posthumanist animal discourse within theatre studies. Chaudhuri has importantly implicated animals in the construction of human identity. She asserts, “From its liminal position on the margins of human life, the non-human animal participates, willy nilly, in the construction of such human categories as the body, race, gender, sexuality, morality, and ethics” (“Animal Geographies” 647).

Chaudhuri further observes, and rightfully so, that the notion of “animality has been deployed successfully to oppress *human* groups” (“Animal Geographies” 647); however her scholarship does not focus on that issue in animal performances. Chaudhuri’s scholarship on animals aligns most closely with critical animal studies scholars that seek to advance the position of animals by challenging the human/animal binary. Chaudhuri proposes that performance is a unique vehicle for bridging the perceived ontological divide between humans and animals in her essay, “‘Of All Nonsensical Things’: Performance and Animal Life.” She contends, “If language is indeed a barrier, then the quest for a deeper, richer mode of understanding the animality we share with nonhumans might logically lead one to the embodied arts of performance” (520). Her analysis of animals in theatre encompasses a wide range of animal representations, from the offstage representations in Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away* and Edward Albee’s *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* to more metaphoric uses of the animal such as in Albee’s *Zoo Story*. A key theoretical contribution Chaudhuri has made to animal studies in theatre is the concept of “zooësis,” which refers to “the myriad performance and semiotic elements involved in an around the vast field of *cultural animal practices*” (“Animal Geographies” 647) or “the discourse of animality in human life” (“Animal Geographies” 647). Chaudhuri focuses on how the human/animal binary can be challenged in performance through what she calls “critical zooësis,” a phrase that refers to “the deconstruction of [the human/animal] distinction” (“Animal Geographies” 647). In tracing

critical zooësis through modern and postmodern theatre, Chaudhuri has paved the way for scholars to analyze how animal theatre can challenge humanist notions of the subject.

However, Chaudhuri's posthumanist inclinations have led to some wishful thinking as she expresses a desire for audiences *to look beyond human identity*, even in regard to animal performances that recall the rhetorical deployment of animality for oppressive purposes ("Animal Acts" 39). In the case of Mark Medoff's *Prymate*, in which African-American actor André De Shields played an ape, Chaudhuri laments that audiences could not "get past the actor's race" ("Animal Acts" 39). I deal with the troubling suggestion that audiences should get past an actor's identity in order to access the animality of the performance in chapter three. For me, De Shields's performance of an ape raises questions about the ways that audiences read race, gender, and sexuality into actors' performances of animal characters, pointing to how human identity can present a stumbling block in performances that aim to deconstruct the human/animal binary.

My project aligns more closely with Steve Baker's book *Picturing the Beast* (1993), which considers how animals are used symbolically and rhetorically in a variety of cultural representations from print media to Disney films. Baker asserts, "Western society continues to draw heavily on symbolic ideas involving animals and that the immediate subject of those ideas is frequently not the animal itself, but rather a human subject drawing on animal imagery to make a statement about human identity" (ix). Baker further claims that many animal representations function at the level of "stereotype" and "common-sense consciousness," arguing, "The viewer is not invited to consider their historical production, nor to call into question the certainty of their vacuous meanings as they circulate in the space of representation" (28). Animal characters, as representatives of "the natural," make useful symbolic tools for

conveying common-sense ideologies about human identity. Inherently, animal performances engage with ideological assumptions about what is human and what is animal, and, in doing so, they also perpetuate assumptions about human identity categories such as race, gender, and sexuality. These assumptions about human identity intersect with conceptions of the animal and manifest in play texts, performance, and production choices.

In general, I view claims of performers transcending the human/animal binary with skepticism. It seems that such claims rely on a notion of a universal human subject accessing an equally universal animality without attending to the ways in which the particularities of human identity in performance can prove alienating. The kind of human represented matters, and the human subject takes precedence over the animal representation. Indeed, it is my contention that human performances of animals, on which I focus my project, establish the limitations of critical zooësis. Human performances of animals have little ability to bridge the perceived ontological divide between humans and animals, even if such performances take place in plays that ideologically seek to question or break down that boundary. True challenges to the human/animal ontological boundary might even be impossible in human performances of animals because the human body is inerasable. No matter how realistic a human performance of an animal may seem, the presence of the human body, with its size, skin, and patterns of movement, puts human identity at the forefront of the performance. In effect, human performances of animals draw attention to the differences rather than the similarities between humans and other animals. Performances in which humans masquerade as animals hinder rather than help the posthumanist decentering of the human subject to which animal studies scholars aspire.

In many cases, humans performing animals constitutes a form of drag¹ that emphasizes the human/animal duality.

However, animal acting is done in a variety of ways; therefore my goal is to develop a taxonomy of animal acting that takes into account the diversity of theatrical conventions involved in constructing such performances so that I may analyze the ways in which animal performances construct human identity. I intend for my categories to distinguish the degrees to which performances intend to signify animality in relation to the humanity of the actor. In order to create my taxonomy, I have developed a list of criteria to distinguish types of animal acting in a range of performance contexts, both theatrical and nontheatrical. Each category focuses on how a performance attempts to signify animality. Although humans are indeed animals, human performances of other species often incorporate overt signifiers of the animals being performed. Therefore, I construct my criteria around the question of whether particular aspects of a performance attempt to communicate “human” or “animal.”

My primary approach is the close reading of plays and performances as well as a manual and a documentary on pony play, a fetishistic activity related to sadomasochism in which participants role-play as horses and trainers. I supplement my play and performance analysis by consulting reviews in order to develop a picture of the way performances were constructed and interpreted. Questions that structure my analysis are: 1) What type of animal acting does the author require (or did I see performed)? 2) What markers of human identity are present in the animal characters? 3) How are animal characters raced, gendered, and sexualized, versus other characters in the performance? 4) How have reviewers and scholars responded to or ignored the dimensions of human identity present in animal performances? The components of performance

¹ My use of the term “drag” to evoke the masquerade aspect of humans performing animals follows Manon van de Water’s use of the term to describe adults performing children in theatre for young audiences (“Adults Performing Children” 116).

I consider are the name of the character, costume and makeup, language, movement, activities, and subjectivity. I also consider what kind of acting is required based on Michael Kirby's scale from his essay "On Acting and Not-Acting."

While examining play texts, I note what the playwright stipulates regarding the casting, costuming, acting styles, and stage directions of the animal characters as most playwrights include specific directions about how they wish to have such characters performed. When playwrights do not provide specific information about the gender, race, and sexuality of their characters I analyze the relationships, language, circumstances, setting, and actions of the characters in the text for evidence of assumptions about character identity. However, since most of the plays I am discussing have been produced, there is information available about how the identities of the characters have been interpreted and performed. In most cases, I discuss choices made for professional stagings of the plays.

Chapter one, titled "On Animal Acting," establishes a taxonomy of human performances of animals, or varieties of animal acting dominant in Euro-American culture. The chapter takes on a similar task as Michael Kirby's foundational essay, "On Acting and Not-Acting." However, it focuses solely on the issue of humans acting animals. The chapter outlines categories of animal performance and places them on a continuum with references to specific performances.

Chapter two, "*A Year With Frog and Toad* and the Discourse of Value" focuses on the musical *A Year With Frog and Toad* (2002), based on three of Arnold Lobel's children's books, which, after receiving three Tony nominations, has become one of the most frequently staged productions for young audiences. The musical follows the relationship of Frog and Toad as they engage in leisure activities through the four seasons of the year, occasionally hampered with mild conflicts that highlight their differences in personality. In this chapter, I discuss productions

of the musical at Milwaukee's First Stage Children's Theatre, University of Wisconsin-Platteville, and the national tour at the Overture Center in Madison, WI, all of which utilize what I call "nominal animal acting." Citing common production choices as well as reviews and study guides, I analyze the play's assumption of white male normativity, as well as the sexual dynamics of the musical, arguing that the presumption that children are asexual and apolitical beings undergirds the musical, thereby robbing it of its queer potential. To do so, I contrast reviews of the production that allude to its queerness as well as my own queer reading of the musical with its aura of safeness for child consumption.

Chapter three, "Acting the Black Male Ape," looks at an aspect of dehumanization via the animal through analyzing reviews and controversy surrounding the failed Broadway production of Mark Medoff's *Prymate* (2005) in which André De Shields, a prominent African-American actor, played a gorilla through what I call "corporeal animal acting." I look at responses that viewed De Shields's casting as an affront to African Americans, who have historically been viewed as apelike in white supremacist ideology. I also analyze Chaudhuri's response to the production that calls for audiences to look beyond De Shields's race to his portrayal of animality. Contrary to Chaudhuri, I argue that the casting of De Shields as a child-like gorilla who sexually accosts white women affirms racist constructions of black men. The problematic depiction of a black man in the Broadway production is only one example of the way in which the play projects feared behaviors of humans onto animals as a way of promoting hegemonic versions of normative identity.

Chapter four, "Queer Uses of the Animal," considers plays that use animals to denaturalize homosexuality and heterosexuality as essential identity categories. I analyze *The Penguin Tango* (2006) by Steve Svodoba and *Birds of a Feather* (2011) by Marc Acito, plays

inspired by real life stories of same-sex coupled penguins that have been popular in the media. Stories of these so-called “gay penguins” have been used by gay rights advocates to argue for the naturalness of homosexuality while gay rights opponents have disparaged the penguins’ representation in the news and children’s books. Both plays engage with contemporary discourses surrounding the naturalness and appropriateness of homosexuality by staging debates about these issues. Rather than taking stories of gay penguins at face value and using them as emblems of tolerance as has so often been done in the media, these plays operate at a level of meta-awareness about the ways in which penguins are being used as political tools in the culture wars about homosexuality. Situating both plays within contemporary discourses regarding homosexuality in animals, I argue that the plays queer the gay penguin discourses that attempt to assign stable sexual identity labels to animals. In both plays animals are not used as symbols of “the natural,” but rather they self-consciously queer human assumptions about penguin sexuality, essentially mocking the imposition of human sexual norms onto penguin narratives.

Chapter five, “Playing Pony,” investigates the conventions and performance practices of pony play as represented in Rebecca Wilcox’s manual *The Human Pony* (2008) as well as the documentary *Born in a Barn* (2004). The purpose of venturing outside the formal theatrical context is to develop understanding of the larger range of meanings animal performances carry in relation to human sexuality. In contrast to formal theatre productions, pony play focuses on the performance process and experience of the participants rather than public performance. Analyzing pony play provides a unique opportunity to look at animal performance from the perspective of the performers. By examining personal accounts from players about their experiences of being ponies, I argue that they construct essential animal identities for themselves, free from the constructs of the human world. At the same time as players maintain a

sense of essential animality, their performances take place within a highly sexualized context that focuses on the erotics of the human body. The accoutrements of pony play are often sexualized and foreground the performer's skin, making the practice ripe for analysis of the tensions between essentialist animality and human sexuality.

Ultimately this project tracks the various ways in which animality intersects with and impacts human identity onstage. I demonstrate how particular conceptions of animality shape constructions of human identity in animal performances. This research opens up discourse on how conceptions of the animal are used both to perpetuate and challenge norms.

Chapter One

On Animal Acting

The purpose of this essay is to establish a taxonomy of human performances of animals, or varieties of animal acting, dominant in United States performance culture. This essay echoes the spirit of Michael Kirby's essay "On Acting and Not-Acting," which theorizes acting and categorizes human performances of human activities, but does not address the issue of humans performing animals. I am interested in animal acting to the extent that it relates to how performances construct human identity. All animal acting is done differently; however there are identifiable ways in which forms of animal acting can be categorized. Kirby's essay is useful as a model for such an endeavor, as it categorizes various forms of acting from "Not-Acting" to "Acting" based on actors' behaviors. Kirby takes into account the ways in which costume pieces, props, and location work with actors' behaviors to generate meaning for audiences. Following Kirby, I categorize forms of animal acting based on performers' visual, behavioral, and linguistic qualities in order to develop a vocabulary for discussing animal performance in the contemporary U.S. context. I also discuss the various ways in which humans and animals have been distinguished, as any interpretation of animal acting must take presumptions regarding the separation of humans and animals into account.

My choice to create a taxonomy has been inspired by Michael Peterson's essay, "The Animal Apparatus: From a Theory of Animal Acting to An Ethics of Animal Acts" in which he uses Kirby's theoretical terms to discuss performances by actual animals. After Peterson, Chaudhuri briefly outlines a taxonomy of animal performances in her essay, "'Of All Nonsensical Things': Performance and Animal Life," which includes actual animals, performed

animals, and invisible animals (522-23). However, I intend to develop a more detailed and extended discussion focusing specifically on how humans perform animals.

I establish basic categories through which animal performances can be distinguished from one another in order to add specificity to our understanding of the broad realm of animal acting. All animal acting operates at a level of excess, but, as my categories will show, there are varying degrees of excess involved in different animal productions. Due to its performative excesses, animal performance constitutes a big risk in the theatre. On the one hand, animal performance can be extremely successful. Two of the most popular and award winning musicals ever to hit Broadway involve feline casts: Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Cats* (1982) and Disney's *The Lion King* (1997). On the other hand, animal performance can be deeply wrong. Two plays involving single animal characters, Mark Medoff's *Prymate* (2004) and Arthur Bicknell's *Moose Murders* (1983), are considered the absolute worst plays ever to hit Broadway (Plemmons). Animal performance can enable or inhibit the perceived level of success of a theatrical performance. It can be a huge success or a miserable failure.

Animal acting is contingent upon a variety of factors that include, but are not limited to, how the acting is scripted (whether by play texts, expectations in pony play scenarios, or standards in family entertainment), how playwrights write animal characters, and the type of costumes involved. In order to create my taxonomy, I have developed a list of criteria in order to differentiate between types of animal acting in a range of performance contexts, both theatrical and nontheatrical. Each category focuses on how a performance attempts to signify animality. Although humans are indeed animals, human performances of other species often generate overt signifiers of the nonhuman species being performed. Therefore, I construct my criteria around

the question of whether a particular aspect of performance attempts to signify a nonhuman species.

1. Is the actor appearing under a name that signifies an animal character? The majority of animal performances involve this element, but not all. In fact, as I will discuss later, some animal characters exist solely at the level of nominal signification.
2. Is the performer made to signify “animal” through the addition of costume and/or makeup? In many instances, the degree of animal acting on the part of the performer is contingent upon the type of costume he or she wears.
3. Does the performer use human language to communicate? Does the performer attempt to make animal sounds? Or does the animal character require silence?
4. Does the performer move like a human? Does he or she attempt animal-like movements? Beyond the issue of stage movement, does the character engage in characteristically human activities (reading the paper, drinking coffee), or animal-like activities (walking on a leash, urinating in public)?
5. Does the performer attempt to communicate his or her subjective experience of the world as more human or animal-like?
6. What type of acting is required according to Kirby’s scale?

The issue of subjectivity overlaps with the categories of speech and action, as those are the primary ways a performer communicates subjectivity. Nevertheless, I create a separate category for subjectivity because certain playwrights attempt to communicate animal subjectivity through human language or movement. It is obviously a daunting and possibly impossible task to attempt to distinguish between the subjectivity of a being that communicates with human language and a being that has no access to human language. However, Giorgio Agamben has

found some relevant ways to distinguish between human and non-human animal subjectivity in the work of Jacob von Uexküll. Uexküll contends that animal worlds are constituted by what he terms “carriers of significance,” defined as “the only things that interest the animal” (Agamben 40). In this framework, it is impossible for one species to see the carriers of significance of another species in the same way, or to see the world from another species point of view (42). Agamben explains how one object can constitute multiple carriers of significance depending on the species that views it:

Even a minimal detail—for example, the stem of a wildflower—when considered a carrier of significance, constitutes a different element each time it is in a different environment, depending on whether, for example, it is observed in the environment of a girl picking flowers ..., in that of an ant for whom it is an ideal way to reach its nourishment in the flower’s calyx, in that of the larva of a cicada who pierces its medullary canal and uses it as a pump to construct the fluid parts of an elevated cocoon, or finally in that of the cow who simply chews and swallows it as food. (41)

The wildflower stem has a different meaning for each animal, and each animal will be unable to interpret the flower with the meaning of another species. The cow will not view the stem as part of a decoration the way the girl might. The ant will not view the stem as material for a cocoon, and the larva will not view the stem as a travel path the way the ant might.

It is possible to distinguish between performed human and performed animal character subjectivity onstage by examining the carriers of significance within the animal character’s world. For example, in Albee’s *Seascape*, the carriers of significance in the lizards’ world at times indicate animal subjectivity and at others indicate human subjectivity. When the lizards

sniff at Charles and Nancy they indicate animal subjectivity (58). The smell of foreign beings constitutes a carrier of significance in a lizard's world. However, the lizards also indicate human subjectivity. For example, the lizard Leslie gets upset over her partner's attitude (59), which can be considered a carrier of significance in the human world, albeit on an abstract level. Another example of a carrier of significance from an animal's point of view occurs in *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* when the tiger bites off a soldier's hand. The tiger eats the hand (Joseph 154), indicating an animal subjectivity. From the tiger's perspective the human hand carries significance as something that can be eaten. Animal subjectivity is indicated through actions that radically stray from what would be considered normal human actions.

Here I want to note that nearly all animal acting is hyperbolic, nominally, visually, or vocally. For this reason, my taxonomy should be considered a system for measuring forms of performance that inherently require excessive representational artifice as in certain forms of acting as well as drag.

Traditionally, drag refers to cross-gendered performance. Laurence Senelick notes that the term "drag" was used to describe male impersonations of women as far back as 1850 (302). In the contemporary era, the term "drag" primarily refers to cross-gendered performances which toy with the ontological boundaries of the sexes, sometimes in ways that reinforce those boundaries and sometimes in ways that challenge them. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "drag" as "feminine attire worn by a man" and includes an additional entry defining a "drag king" as "a woman who dresses up as a man" or a "male impersonator." The definitions of drag in the dictionary presume that "man" and "woman" are discreet and stable categories. Like the presumed man/woman binary in the dictionary, the human/animal binary is often treated as common sense. One objective of this project is to consider the ways in which animal acting

resembles a type of drag performance that excessively plays with common-sense notions of what is human and what is animal. Here the term excess is key given that most animal performances in the U.S. depend on audiences assuming an ontological species distinction between the human performer and the animal character. Actors who intend to signify outside of their species identity require a form of excess in terms of costume, voice, or movement. For me, the phrase “animal drag” only refers to those animal performances that toy with presumed ontological boundaries between species by using excessive signifiers. Just as many drag queens perform heightened femininity via costume, voice, and movement, animal drag performers stretch beyond the commonplace in their efforts to signify animality.

An example of what I call “animal drag” occurs in the Broadway production of Disney’s *The Lion King*, in which the main characters sing and dance while wearing costume elements that signify animality, such as animal heads and tails, in combination with what appears to be generic African tribal garb. The royal family in *The Lion King* generally concern themselves with humanistic political struggles that evoke *Hamlet*, but the lion characters perform brief moments of animal-like behavior such as growling, pouncing, and fighting that produce an ontological tension between their human bodies and animal characters. At the same time as *Lion King* excessively performs animal, there is no winking at the audience or acknowledgement of the drag element. The production comes close to the realm of camp defined by Susan Sontag as, “art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much’” (59).

Not every animal character is performed in a drag-like fashion. In contrast to the animal drag style of *Lion King*, Rajiv Joseph, the author of *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, stipulates that the actor playing his tiger character should “wear clothes” and have “[n]othing feline about

him” (146). Joseph’s tiger lacks the excessive signifiers of animality that constitute animal drag, and, in fact, one reviewer critiqued the choice to mute the animality of the tiger remarking that Robin Williams’s “portrayal of the title’s big cat is so consistently understated that it becomes self-effacing” (Vincentelli 36). In this case, the animal character is performed with an anti-excess aesthetic that opposes the over-the-top drag element in *The Lion King*. Perhaps Vincentelli would have been pleased had drag been more present in Williams’ portrayal.

Interpreting animal drag involves more than simply looking at how performances toy with human/animal distinctions. Judith Butler’s tripartite understanding of cross-gender drag is useful for developing a theory of animal drag. She observes, “The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance” (*Gender Trouble* 187). Just as Butler finds three levels of signification at play in traditional drag performance, there are three levels of signification in animal drag. Corresponding to Butler’s stipulation of anatomical sex in traditional drag there is the animal performer’s biological classification as human; corresponding to gender identity there is the performer’s identity in terms of race, gender, and sexuality; and corresponding to gender performance there is the performance of animality. In looking at animal drag, one must take into account biology, identity, and performance. Focusing too much on the type of animality portrayed elides critical issues of human identity. Further, in many cases, the performer’s biological status as a member of the human species strongly clashes with the performed animal species given differences on the levels of physicality and subjectivity. Animal actors cannot help but act human.

Audiences view an actor playing an animal as human rather than as the species the actor represents. This is due to the generally accepted difference between humans and animals and the human capacity to recognize the difference between the two. However, it is important to consider the various ways in which humans have been distinguished from animals rather than taking the human/animal divide for granted. Therefore I discuss various perspectives on the differences between humans and animals in order to shed light on how audiences recognize animal actors as human.

While Western science classifies humans as members of the animal kingdom, there is also an accepted and hierarchical division between humans and other animal species. All humans are considered animals, but not all animals are human. Drawing upon Carl Linnaeus, considered the father of modern taxonomy, Giorgio Agamben provides a useful way of thinking about what defines humans in opposition to animals: “man is the being that recognizes itself as such ... *man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human*” (26). While I would not consider Agamben’s definition of the human as universal criteria for distinguishing humans from animals, his definition resonates in a Euro-American context that accepts a separation between humans and animals, a separation largely based on humans perceiving themselves as human and superior in opposition to other animals.

Still, there are various debates about what defines a human. I view the definition of “human” to be multifaceted as definitions range from the most basic in terms of biology to complex understandings of human capability. Humans can be defined on a biological level as animals classified as part of the species *Homo sapiens*. Indeed the *Oxford Reference Online* defines “*Homo sapiens*” as, “The species to which all human beings belong” (ORO). To be human is to be classified as part of *Homo sapiens* and visa versa. The ORO goes on to list a

range of physical characteristics that constitute *Homo sapiens*: “a higher and more vertical forehead, a round and gracile cranium, small face and teeth, a prominent chin, and a more slender and elongated post cranial skeleton” (*ORO*). The *ORO* offers a more detailed account of what it means to be human in its definition of “human”: “They walk upright, their body is only patchily hairy, their big toes are not opposable, their backbone is more S-shaped than straight” (*ORO*). Of course there are limits to understanding these definitions as universal given that there are humans that deviate from these norms and animals that conform to them. In defining the human one must be aware of exceptions to the rule, as not all humans are able to walk upright. Further, the body can be viewed as socially constructed, and therefore open to change.

H. Peter Steeves discusses the socially constructed nature of the body in his essay about feral children. Steeves argues, “Humanity is the result of specific treatment within one’s community” (245). Using feral children as an example, Steeves points out that walking upright is not a given but rather a learned practice. The feral children in question, Kamala and Amala, had been discovered in the 1920s and walked on all fours instead of upright (242). Steeves claims: “It is not a matter of the body adapting to its surroundings but rather of the body being constructed to fit the society” (243). In Steeve’s formulation, there are no human behaviors that should be taken for granted. There is no essential human identity or behavior, only what society bestows upon individuals. In fact, Steeve’s definition of the human closely resembles Agamben’s: “Being human is being treated by humans as human” (245). Whereas Agamben focuses on self-recognition as the main attribute that constitutes one as human, Steeves focuses on the capacity for one to be recognized by another as human.

Defining humanity becomes a messier task when looking beyond biology and into the realm of capability. Steeves notes many exceptions to capabilities assumed to be unique to

humans such as language and the use of tools, citing several instances in which other animals possess similar abilities (234). For example, some monkeys use tools, and whales can be said to have their own language (234-35). I would argue however, that any definition of human must take into account the existence of both biological and behavioral factors. Being human cannot be reduced to any one set of characteristics because there will always be exceptions to the rules. A gorilla may learn sign language, but the gorilla does not possess anatomical characteristics of *Homo sapiens*, thereby ruling her out as a candidate to be considered human.

Designating an individual as human based on a particular set of anatomical and behavioral characteristics does not fully capture the multifaceted construction of individuals as human. No individual is simply just human. In order to be recognized as human, individuals must conform to particular sets of norms. Humans exist on a spectrum with certain individuals constituted as more human, more worthy of this designation, than others. Here Judith Butler's discussion of "intelligibility" is useful for framing the various ways in which individuals are classified as human through categorical thinking:

When we ask what the conditions of intelligibility are by which the human emerges, by which the human is recognized, by which some subject becomes the subject of human love, we are asking about conditions of intelligibility composed of norms, of practices, that have become presuppositional, without which we cannot think the human at all. ("Doing Justice" 183)

Butler's theorizing raises a key distinction between humans and animals in that humans must conform to social norms in order to be recognized as human. Butler highlights the complex ways in which categories such as race and gender are foundational to how we interpret particular

bodies as human. Simply put, animals have different conditions of intelligibility, as they are not recognized as animals based on their adherence to socially constructed norms.

However animals can be read through human socially constructed norms. For example, sociologist Michael Ramirez lists three ways in which gender impacts human relationships with dogs: “Owners use gender norms to (1) select what they consider to be suitable dogs (2) describe their dogs’ behaviors and personalities, (3) use their dogs as props to display their own gender identities” (373). Ramirez’s work indicates that pet dogs do not escape the lens of gender. While recognizing that animals can be read through gendered and racialized frames, I would argue that gender and race are not foundational “conditions of intelligibility” for animals to be recognized as animals by human beings. In many cases an animal’s anatomical sex cannot easily be distinguished, yet this does not create the sense that the animal is somehow less animal in the way that the lack of clear gender identity creates the sense that a person is less human.

Marla Carlson’s scholarship on those who have undergone extreme body modifications in order to make themselves resemble animals provides insight into the relationship of norms to the human/animal divide. Carlson notes, “Performing an animal identity provides a way out of human norms that have become unduly restrictive and often enough has nothing at all to do with animals” (195). However, one cannot escape a relationship to human norms even as one seeks to shed them. Perhaps crafting an animalistic aspect of the self is attractive because animals do not have to adhere to or shed socially constructed norms whereas humans must always negotiate a relationship to a set of specifically human norms.

Defining the animal is much more elusive than defining the human. In many respects animals are defined as the opposite of human, or that which lacks the human. One of the definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary* throws the image of animal as that which lacks the

human into sharp relief: “any such living organism other than the human being” (*OED*). Even the increasingly popular phrase “nonhuman animal” defines animals as a void. In searching for definitions of the animal, I found few that did not characterize animals as those that lack human characteristics. One of the most positive definitions comes from Aristotle who writes: “The life of animals ... may be divided into two acts—procreation and feeding; for on these two acts all their interests and life concentrate” (6). Aristotle defines animals through indicating the limits of their existence. Animal studies scholar Erica Fudge defines animals as “absent presences; there but not speaking” (*Perceiving* 3). However, Fudge goes on to define animals further by pointing out what they lack: “animals do not speak my language, and they do not write, leave textual traces, other than the traces—vellum, leather, glue—which speak of their objectification” (*Perceiving* 3). According to Fudge, animals can only be understood by humans in relation to humans. She writes, “animal is represented as the antithesis of the human” (4). In sum, animals represent the absence of that which humans are capable of.

In her work on the early modern period Fudge compiles a list of what distinguishes the human from the animal, all conceptions stemming from the notion that humans possess reason while animals do not. The list includes a “rational soul” (*Brutal* 8), free will, the ability to laugh (16), “the capacity to live beyond the present,” (22) and “self-knowledge” (26). Although Fudge discusses the social construction of animals in the early modern period, the qualities of animals she lists, or lack thereof, apply in a contemporary context.

In the collection of essays titled *Animal Rights: Current Debate and New Directions*, edited by Cass R. Sunstein and Martha C. Nussbaum, the issue of what defines the animal in relation to the human centers around whether or not animals have rationality or self-awareness.

The central debate of many of the essays focuses on whether animals should be considered as property or persons. If animals are persons then they should be afforded rights, but if animals are property humans should do with them what they will. Steven Wise argues that animals should be afforded rights on the basis of whether or not they can be considered autonomous beings:

“Whether we call it self-determination, autonomy, or volition, if a being has it, she is entitled to basic liberty rights” (31). Wise goes on to distinguish animals as persons as opposed to property: “Things don’t act autonomously. Persons do. Things can’t self-determine. Persons can. Things lack volition. Persons don’t. Persons have wills” (31). Rather than defining animals by what they lack, Wise attributes characteristics of humans onto animals. In likening animals to human persons, Wise points out that not all humans share the abovementioned attributes: “Most normal adults lack full autonomy. Infants, children, the severely mentally retarded or autistic, the senile, and the persistently vegetative never come close. Were judges to accept full autonomy as a prerequisite for personhood, they would exclude most humans” (31). Wise points out that humans cannot be monolithically constructed as possessing the same qualities. There are obvious limits to using one set of criteria as the yardstick for determining whether individuals are to be treated as persons or property.

Whether or not all humans meet Wise’s criteria for personhood, the criteria he describes functions as the measuring stick for defining animals in relationship to humans. It does not matter whether all humans can be said to possess autonomy because humans will be considered persons on the basis of their species identity as well as their relationship to identity categories. Where autonomy fails, species identity kicks in. The bottom line is that whether or not animals are attributed human characteristics such as autonomy, animals are still measured in relation to

the human. While there may be similarities in capacities between humans and certain animals the human/animal binary holds firm.

In his widely cited essay, “The Animal that Therefore I Am,” Derrida, drawing from Genesis, also defines animals in terms of what they lack: “the property unique to animals, what in the last instance distinguishes them from man, is their being naked without knowing it. Not being naked therefore, not having knowledge of their nudity, in short, without consciousness of good and evil” (5). According to Derrida, animals lack the ability to feel modest. He simply states: “with the exception of man, no animal has ever thought to dress itself” (5). The issue of whether an animal dresses itself is interesting in light of both animal acting and animal drag. The fact that human actors are always dressed in the performances I look at solidifies the human/animal binary. Actors are clothed in animal costumes even when playing animals that are not clothed. The animal becomes that which dresses the human. As such, the animal costume, as a piece of clothing and the representation of an animal, signifies doubly as both an indicator of animality and as an indicator of humanity.

Derrida also mentions that animals lack the ability to name themselves, which humans possess. This recalls Agamben’s notion that humans are those who recognize themselves as humans. In the Derridian frame we have the reverse. Humans are those who recognize animals as animals and thereby give them names: “The animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other” (25). Both Agamben and Derrida demonstrate how the human/animal binary can be upheld by noting the human ability to distinguish between humans and animals with their power to recognize similarity or difference between the self: human, and the other: animal.

Understanding that there is an accepted divide between humans and animals that manifests in audiences recognizing human actors as similar to themselves in opposition to animals is foundational in interpreting animal performances. As such, my categories are based on what lengths plays and productions go to in asking audiences to interpret human actors as animals in the face of outstanding differences between the two. It is important to note that my categories are not mutually exclusive, and that one animal performance may oscillate between categories. I am not placing these categories on a continuum in the manner that Kirby does, but rather pointing to differing modes of operation that constitute various forms of animal acting/drag. Further, unlike Kirby, my categories consider the subjectivities playwrights or performers create rather than simply looking at the mechanics of acting.

However, Kirby's continuum can be a useful tool in terms of understanding how animal performances signify both human and animal. If the human acting and the animal acting can be viewed as separate elements of analysis, it is possible for one performer to operate within two of Kirby's categories at the same time. For example, an animal actor may act human in a "complex" way, which would place him or her on the farthest end of Kirby's spectrum. Kirby defines complex acting as involving multiple elements such as performing actions, showing emotions, physically embodying the character, and relating to the place the play is set ("On Acting" 9). At the same time as the actor acts complexly as a human, he or she may be at the exact opposite of Kirby's scale by *not* acting animal. Kirby defines "not acting" as when "the performer does nothing to feign, simulate, impersonate and so forth" ("On Acting" 3). Robin Williams' animal performance in *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* could be an example of occupying two opposing positions on Kirby's continuum in that it involved complex human acting but was devoid of animal acting.

Of course human performances of animals operate at a baseline of human acting by virtue of the physical limitations of the performers. The lions in *The Lion King*, for example, act while walking upright instead of on all fours because walking upright facilitates human mobility in a way that walking on all fours like a lion does not. Whether the actor dresses up as a frog, bird, or dog, he or she is physically limited enough so that first and foremost the actor will be read as human and only secondly be read as an animal. While Kirby notes the tendency for audiences to separate actor from character (“On Acting”¹¹), human performances of animal characters highlight the difference between actor and character to a greater degree than performances of human characters due to the vast differences between species in physicality and subjectivity. I intend for my categories to distinguish the degrees to which performances intend to signify animality in relation to the humanity of the actor.

Nominal Animal Acting

The first category, as I have mentioned earlier, is “Nominal Animal Acting.” Performances that involve characters that are understood to be animals but contain no signifiers of animality beyond animal names fall into this category. This is a growing trend in professional theatre for young audiences (TYA) in which the majority of performances are based on children’s books. An example of nominal animal acting occurs in the touring production of *A Year With Frog and Toad* in which the title characters wear entirely human men’s clothing and behave like humans throughout the production despite their respective animal character names, “Frog” and “Toad.” For example, Frog and Toad sing musical numbers, wear pajamas and bathing suits, rake leaves, bake cookies, and celebrate Christmas. Further, their subjectivities are entirely human as all of their concerns are bound to “childlike” endeavors and interpersonal conflicts. The notable absence of animal signifiers characterize performances in this category. In

terms of Kirby's continuum, the actors playing Frog and Toad are doing complex acting as humans but not-acting as animals.

Corporeal Animal Acting

The second category is "Corporeal Animal Acting." Performances involving animal characters that primarily behave like animals in terms of sound, movement, and subjectivity but wear human clothing fall into this category. In such performances, the animal signification emerges from the actor's voice and body rather than costume. An example of this is André De Shields's performance of the gorilla Graham in Mark Medoff's *Prymate*. In the performance, De Shields wore entirely human clothing, but he behaved as a gorilla. Medoff stipulates in the script that Graham "is perched on all fours" and that he "scratch[es] at his neck" (5). The initial Broadway performance even involved the use of actor Garon Michael, who has appeared in several primate roles, as a "Primate Behavioral Specialist" to coach De Shields (Murray).

A good example of corporeal animal acting occurs in the 1974 movie based on Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* starring Gene Wilder and Zero Mostel. In the film Mostel transforms into a rhinoceros without the aid of costume or makeup. Mostel speaks human language throughout the scene but gradually replaces words with snorting, bellowing, and panting. In terms of movement, Mostel goes from walking upright to stamping his feet, charging, and hunching over, giving the impression that he now walks on all fours. His subjectivity shifts from human to animal as he eats leaves off plants, wildly destroys his apartment, and roars.

Corporeal animal acting would be considered complex acting as both human and animal on Kirby's scale, especially because the character emerges from the actor's body. Corporeal animal actors negotiate the limitations of the human body in relation to the animal character and

cannot depend on factors outside of themselves such as costume and set to signify animality. There is a clear tension between human body and animal character in corporeal animal acting because the animal character draws attention to the human body's limits. For example, in order for Mostel to perform the rhinoceros he must avoid actually walking on all fours, as a rhinoceros does, because that would severely limit what his human body can do and suppress his ability to signify animality via other means such as stamping and charging.

Theriomorphic Animal Acting

The third category is "Theriomorphic Animal Acting." The term "theriomorphism," as defined by animal studies scholar Steve Baker, refers to "animal imagery used to identify humans" (*Picturing* 121). In this form of acting, animal signification emerges from the actions of the performer rather than from costume. But in contrast to corporeal animal acting, the performer foregrounds human rather than animal subjectivity and engages in a combination of human and animal-like activities. An example of this is Sarah Jessica Parker's performance in the title role of *Sylvia*. Parker wore women's clothing that would not signify animal in a non-theatrical context but her hair, tights, and color scheme hinted at cocker spaniel. Parker walked on two feet and spoke English, but Gurney also incorporated animal-like actions for Sylvia into his text. For example, Sylvia jumps up and down, goes for walks, mates at the park, and urinates on the floor. Intellectually, however, Sylvia's character exhibits human subjectivity when she vies for Greg's attention against his wife. Given Sylvia's human appearance and speech, little tension exists between her animality and her human subjectivity. When Greg contemplates quitting his job, Sylvia thinks about getting one herself: "I wouldn't mind going into advertising. How would you feel about being in one of those Ralph Lauren ads in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*? You nursing a glass of scotch, me curled comfortably on the couch. I could do that, Greg" (28).

Here Sylvia exhibits the subjectivity of a grown cosmopolitan woman rather than a dog as indicated by the carriers of significance in her world, such as her somewhat romantic relationship with Greg, the magazine, and scotch. Although Sylvia expresses human worldly concerns, her treatment of Greg as her owner signifies an attempt on Gurney's part to portray her with the animal-like subjectivity of a domesticated dog. In terms of Kirby's spectrum, the performance of Sylvia requires complex acting for both the human and the animal, although the humanity of the character overshadows the character's animality.

Theriomorphic Animal Drag

The fourth category is "Theriomorphic Animal Drag." I introduce the term "drag" here because at this point animal acting becomes so exaggerated that it moves beyond complex acting into the realm of cross-species drag performance. Animal drag operates at a level of visual excess that is not present in theriomorphic animal acting by creating a visually based ontological tension between human performer and animal character. Further, not unlike some forms of cross-gender drag, animal drag can sometimes depend on audience recognition of that ontological tension. In cross-gender drag, audience pleasure emerges from awareness of performative excess, as in: "I know this is *really* a man pretending to be a woman." In cross-species drag, a similar awareness emerges, as in "I know this is *really* a human pretending to be a dog." The more the performer signifies "animal," the greater the sense of ontological play.

In theriomorphic animal drag performances, costume pieces such as animal ears, noses, tails, claws, and even heads create animal imagery. These animal elements exist in direct contrast to the performer's visible human face, body, skin, clothing, and physical limitations. Such performances foreground either human or animal subjectivity and involve a combination of

human and animal-like actions. Coleman Jennings, a leading scholar of children's theatre, recommends theriomorphic animal drag in TYA:²

Animal characters ... can be effectively communicated by using only a few essential elements to suggest the creature: ears and a tail will convey a mouse, and a white scarf around the head, flowing down the back, will establish the character of the skunk. Actors need not be clothed in realistic animal suits to appear 'correctly' costumed in the eyes of the audience. (4)

An example occurred in First Stage Children's Theatre's production of *A Year With Frog and Toad* when the performer playing the snail dressed like a cowboy but wore a backpack that resembled a snail shell and slowly glided across the stage.

Another example of theriomorphic animal drag occurs in Tennessee Williams's one-act play titled *The Gnädiges Fräulein*, which has a giant pelican character called a cocaloony. The cocaloony exhibits a combination of human and animal like characteristics. The bird resembles a human in terms of size but behaves in an animal-like manner indicating animal-like subjectivity. The carriers of significance in the cocaloony's world are distinctly animal as indicated by the description of the birds in the opening monologue: "they waddle and flap, flap and waddle out toward where the boat is docked to catch the fish thrown away" (6). The cocaloony moves in an animal-like manner throughout the play as Williams describes: "A cocaloony has entered the yard and is stalking jerkily about, poking its gruesome head this way and that with spastic motions, as if looking about the premises for something" (16). The actor playing the bird is to mimic bird-like movements to the best of his or her ability given the physical limitations of the human body. Williams adds another layer of animal subjectivity to the cocaloony character by

² Jennings's recommendation to use less animal costuming hints at the cultural tendency to interpret full-bodied animal suits as unsophisticated. For a discussion of this issue in TYA, see Sylviane Gold's "Spring Theatre: Children's Theatre; Beyond Fuzzy Animal Suits, All the Way to Art."

having it communicate with “AWK” throughout the text (16). Williams’s play creates an ontological tension between the human actor and the bird-like nature of the cocaloony character.

An example of theriomorphic animal drag outside of theatre is the phenomenon of pony play, a fetishistic practice in which one person plays a horse and the other his or her caretaker. In these scenarios, the human in-role as horse wears leather straps, mouth bits, and sometimes butt-plug tails, often leaving human skin exposed (Wilcox 22-25). The caretaker rides, trains, grooms, and feeds the horse, and may even muck out the animal’s stall (*Born in a Barn*). Ponies exhibit their animal subjectivities by expressing pleasure or discontent through neighing, blowing through the lips, and varying degrees of physical resistance. Some pony players participate in equestrian competitions during weekend conferences such as the annual International Pony Play Championships. Other performances of pony play are generated more holistically during weekend retreats in which ponies can spend the day or evening living in stalls. Although some treat play pony as a precursor to sexual activity, there are many who see pony play as an end unto itself (*Born in a Barn*).

In each of these contemporary examples the performer must act in a complex way as he or she negotiates the human/animal binary physically and emotionally.

Morphologic Animal Drag

The fifth category is “Morphologic Animal Drag,” which describes the rare category of people who undergo permanent bodily modifications in order to make themselves resemble animals. Another useful term for this group might be “trans-animal,” because like transgendered individuals, many strongly identify with animals other than human. Examples of permanent body modifications include full-body tattoos, horns, whiskers, filed teeth, and split tongues. Some of

these individuals participate in formal performances such as performance art or rock concerts while maintaining their animal personas in their everyday lives. For example, Dennis Avner, a.k.a. “Cat Man,” has transformed himself to resemble a tiger and makes formal public appearances but mostly lives as a recluse and eats raw meat (Daily Mail; Potts 144-148). In contrast to theriomorphic animal drag, this form of everyday performance has a harder edge that emerges from the extremity of permanent body modification. This is a form of bodily performance that cannot be left behind easily. Still, there is a drag-like tension between humanity and animality, particularly because body modification constitutes a specifically human practice.

On Kirby’s spectrum morphologic animal drag might be considered a form of “non-matrixed representation,” in which “the referential elements are applied *to* the performer and are not acted *by* him” (5). In this case, the referential elements include the permanent body modifications, but the animal performers generally live as humans.

Anthropomorphic Animal Drag

The sixth category is “Anthropomorphic Animal Drag.” Baker defines anthropomorphism as “human characteristics imposed on the images of animals” (*Picturing* 121). This category describes animal drag performances of the mascot variety, which involve full-bodied and often fuzzy animal suits. I call this form of drag “anthropomorphic” because the animal costume, though cartoonish, tends to obscure the visibility of the human body. In turn, the animal body is typically dressed in human clothing, as in the case of Chuck E. Cheese who wears a hat and t-shirt, creating a double layer of drag. Further, the oversize animal costume completely obscures the age, race, gender, and body type of the performer (his or her markers of humanity). The gender of the performer gives way to the gender of animal character. Most of these performances do not involve speech, unless it is imposed from the outside via a recording. The

subjectivity of the animal character is human (often childlike), and his or her actions tend to be human, such as jumping, waving, walking, running, and dancing, though the costume severely limits mobility. TYA practitioners now eschew this type of animal drag in favor of the more sophisticated theriomorphic variety that Jennings recommends. Yet the fuzzy animal costume remains emblematic of children's pop culture as exhibited by restaurants, theme parks, and television shows. The fuzzy animal has also been appropriated to adult contexts while still functioning as a signifier of children's culture. An impromptu performance group in New York City led by Nate Hill, formerly known as Club Animals, involves fuzzy animal suits in their performances of absurd public services (Hill). In one performance a person in a dolphin suit offered free bouncy rides to subway passengers. In a sequence titled the "Candy Crack Delivery Service," the dolphin conducts mock drug deals with candy resembling crack. In another, Hill dresses up as a character called "Death Bear" and visits the homes of people in Brooklyn who seek to be rid of belongings associated with painful past events. Such performances utilize the fuzzy animal suit for ironic purposes.

Anthropomorphic animal drag only requires "simple acting" on Kirby's scale because of the limitations the costume places on the body of the performer. Kirby defines "simple acting" as involving "the smallest and simplest action involving pretense" ("On Acting" 6). Full-bodied animal costumes limit what the performer can do, and the lack of language or sound undercuts the animal's ability to communicate emotion. The animal character is left with few options to communicate any type of pretense. For example, when I was the Chuck E. Cheese mouse I could feign sadness by covering my eyes with my hands and shaking my head back and forth. I could also feign excitement by shaking my torso from side to side.

Anthropomorphic animal drag can also take on a more serious tone than the fuzzy suits that hint at children's culture such as in the case of the gorilla in the final scene of O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*. At the scene's beginning the gorilla exhibits human characteristics by "hunching on the bench in much the same attitude as Rodin's 'Thinker'" (228). As Yank speaks to the gorilla there is a sense that the gorilla understands what Yank says, as O'Neill stipulates: "The gorilla, as if he understood, stands upright, swelling out his chest and pounding on it with his fist" (229). Yank and the gorilla seemingly communicate throughout the scene. Yet in the end the gorilla brutally hugs Yank and throws him in a cage. The act of throwing Yank in the cage anthropomorphizes the gorilla as if he is a human who wishes to change places with Yank. The gorilla becomes human while Yank becomes an animal. In order for the scene to work, the actor playing the gorilla must wear a full-bodied animal suit, which inevitably obscures the race and gender of the actor.

The category of anthropomorphic animal drag is important because it is the only scenario in which the human performer is effaced, a rarity in theatrical contexts. In most cases, the animal is on top of the visible human body. However, the fundamental recognition of difference between categories of animal performance is not the presence of costume, but rather the presence of the human. The different categories of performing animal establish various ways in which the human can be costumed within the animal. The modesty of the actor in its humanity, being clothed, lets us see the animal onstage as excess to the all too present human. Recalling the definition of the animal as that which is not human, the human presence onstage renders the animal absent. At the same time, we do not see the "human" or "animal" in abstraction, as the actor is what we have to look at. The starting point for distinguishing between Bucky Badger,

Robin Williams as a tiger, or Sarah Jessica Parker as a dog, then, is noting whether or not the actor's body is visible.

Race is but one example of an identity category that emerges when the performer is visible, but the issue is often overlooked. Whiteness prevails in animal performances, yet vanishes at the intersections of other aspects of human identity such as gender and sexuality in discourses about performance. For example, reviewers of *A Year With Frog With Frog* involving white actors have commented on the musical's queer undertones, but never on the actors' whiteness (Feingold, "Aurally Sound" 59; Graham).

In contrast, non-white actors in animal performances rarely go without comment in critical analyses. When animal characters are raced as African Americans, they often exist on the level of stereotype, combining "common sense" notions of animality with "common sense" notions about race. A *Theatre Journal* article developed out of a seminar led by David Savran entitled "Let Our Freak Flags Fly: *Shrek the Musical* and the Branding of Diversity" examines the multicultural politics of DreamWorks's *Shrek* musical in light of "postracialist" perspectives in U.S. society that have grown stronger since President Obama's election. In the article, Jessica Brater and her co-authors analyze the antagonisms between the musical's progressive message of tolerating differences and the stereotypes of African Americans and gay men exhibited through Shrek's donkey sidekick. Similarly, *A Year With Frog and Toad*, presents an all-white world yet, like *Shrek*, has been marketed as a musical about diversity and tolerance of differences.

It is important to look at human identity in addition to the categories I have established in order to understand the nuances of race, gender, and sexuality present in animal performances. Issues of human identity and representation are important areas of analysis because the human body is always present and animals are so often considered signifiers of the "natural." Animal

characters are raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized in particular performance contexts and animality has an impact on how these identities are constructed or naturalized. I explore these elements further in the following chapters.

Chapter Two

A Year With Frog and Toad and the Discourse of Value

A Year With Frog and Toad, a musical based on three of Arnold Lobel's children's books from the nineteen-seventies, premiered at the Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis (CTC) in 2002, then went Off-Broadway.³ The show sold out its Off-Broadway run and moved to Broadway in 2003. After a three-month stint on Broadway, it received three Tony nominations becoming the first children's theatre piece to obtain such esteemed critical recognition. Since then, "Frog and Toad" mania has swept through professional, community, and school theatres in the U.S.⁴ The musical consists of Frog and Toad engaging in various leisure activities through the four seasons of the year in isolated episodes that highlight the personality differences between the two characters. Although the productions vary, the same discourse of value legitimates the musical in advertisements, reviews, and study guides: *A Year With Frog and Toad* teaches that people who are "different" from each other can be best friends.

However, the discourse elides the social, economic, and political conditions suggested by production practices, thereby encouraging spectators to abstract morality from material conditions. This type of abstraction facilitates what Terry Eagleton describes as a moral subjectivity that is "radically depoliticised" (99). Drawing from Eagleton, I interrogate how the musical's purported values have been concretized in three productions, one by First Stage in Milwaukee, one by the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, and the third a touring version of the musical by Work Light Productions.⁵ If the discourse of value accompanying the musical was

³ Arnold Lobel's daughter, Adrienne Lobel, commissioned the musical from CTC with the intent of moving it to the Off-Broadway New Victory Theatre (Adams).

⁴ In 2008, at least twenty-six different productions of *A Year With Frog and Toad* hit the stage; in 2007, there were at least thirty including the national Broadway tour. I came to these numbers by counting the various productions through Lexis-Nexis.

⁵ Due to Actor's Equity issues I was unable to view video of the original CTC production.

rooted in an understanding of the material conditions evoked by particular productions, an entirely different set of values would emerge, and with it a politically aware spectator subjectivity. This chapter explores how each production of a *Year with Frog and Toad* relies on the Romantic association of children with animals in order to instill an apolitical spectator subjectivity and how this subjectivity remains consistent across various production choices. However, this chapter also considers rare instances in which politically aware reviewers, as well myself, have interpreted the musical as queer, and discusses the ways in which the TYA context works against such readings.

The plethora of children's literature and other media geared towards young people involving animals naturalizes the notion that children and animals share a unique bond, thereby securing the inferior conception of both. Anthropologist Brian Boyd argues that children have a natural affinity for animals:

Any kind of animal can engage children's attention, the familiar and cuddly or the remote and fearsome, the puppy or the tyrannosaur, presumably because there was once an imperative need for human infants to distinguish the animals around them. Infants naturally identify with animals—find them a natural metaphor for themselves—in that they are less equipped with language than the adult human world. (224)

Explanations such as Boyd's ignore the socially constructed nature of child/animal relationships, particularly the ways in which children's literature perpetuates the association of children with animals.

The child-animal association is a product of an ideology that views children as a separate and lower species. David Kennedy, a childhood studies scholar, offers a psychological

perspective, arguing that a “subspeciated” group such as children “receives the dark and light side of the subspeciator’s unconscious material—hence the divine child/deficit child, goddess/whore, and the noble/bestial ‘savage’” (64). To a great extent, children are subspeciated in the contemporary U.S. as indicated by the fact that many adults conceive of children as a homogenous group and thus feel comfortable asserting they like or dislike “kids.”

We can see how the ideology of child/animal inferiority prevails when considering animal acting’s reputation in Western-European theatre as a kitschy form of performance. According to the *Cambridge Guide to World Theatre*, “the portrayal of animals as individual characters became immensely popular after the French Revolution, as a byblow [sic] of Rousseau’s ideas” (Banham 29), but animal acting died out with the advent of modern realism because it “could not be taken seriously by adult audiences” (29). By specifying that adult audiences could not take animal acting seriously, the *Cambridge Guide* insinuates that child audiences could take the practice seriously. Indeed, animal characters are generally thought of as a staple of children’s theatre although the practice has changed over time. According to a *New York Times* article by Sylviane Gold, professional TYA has mostly moved “beyond fuzzy animal suits”(14), creating a significant distinction between animal representations in children’s books, whether represented visually or not, and animal representations onstage.

The difference between an animal representation on a page and one on the stage can be understood in terms of a continuum between the two categories mentioned in the previous chapter: anthropomorphism, “human characteristics imposed on the images of animals,” and theriomorphism, “animal imagery used to identify humans” (Baker, *Picturing* 121). If an actor embodies an animal character, the representation tips from anthropomorphic to theriomorphic because the human body of the character becomes the most obvious visual feature. When an

animal character is represented anthropomorphically in a children's book; the character's body looks more like an animal than a human: picture a frog wearing pants. If the frog character is put onstage, the representation becomes theriomorphic; the character looks more like a human than a frog: picture a human wearing frog eyes. As mentioned earlier, Coleman Jennings, a leading TYA professor, recommends theriomorphic representation, which is now common in contemporary professional TYA. He argues for less costuming: "Because they [children] are by nature so imaginative, children will see the animal in the characterization that is merely suggested by the actor's movement and sounds, regardless of the costuming" (4). Jennings's statement that children are "by nature so imaginative," has a romantic ring to it because it implies that adults are less imaginative than children. Jennings gives the impression that children buy into animal characters in a way that adults do not. However, Baker argues that children and adults buy into talking animals in much the same way: "everyone, including quite young children, knows that animals don't really talk which prompts such genuine delight in the anomalous convention of the talking animal" (*Picturing* 159). It is precisely the knowledge that animals do not talk that allows children to enjoy talking animal representations and role-playing animals themselves, but the enjoyment of giving words to animals extends to adults as well. The knowledge that animals do not talk does not prevent adults from imagining conversations with animals, as the daily dialogue my father imagines with his dogs indicates. For now, it is important to realize that in contemporary TYA productions, the human body has become prominent in animal acting over realistic animal or stuffed-toy appearances. Plain-clothed humans labeled "animal" occupy TYA.

It is not surprising that animal representations thoroughly saturate theatre for young audiences considering the daunting number of TYA plays adapted from children's literature,

which is filled with animal characters. The contention from the “mother of creative drama,” Winifred Ward, that “drama based on literature is dearer to children’s hearts than any other kind” (107) continues to prevail. Since children’s literature is full of animals, many contemporary productions have been adapted from classic talking animal stories. TYA companies produce adaptations of Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* and Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, in addition to present-day books like Kevin King’s *Lily’s Purple Plastic Purse*. TYA companies produce plays based on popular children’s literature because they rely on name recognition in order to attract audiences. Children’s literature and TYA perpetuate the association of children and animals.

Children and animals are marginalized in Western society, as English literature scholar Sue Walsh argues, “the animal and the child together occupy [a] position of triviality and non-significance, or insignificance” (151). It is no coincidence, then, that animals make up a great deal of “children’s culture,” that is, the culture adults create for children. Animal studies scholar Bruce Boehrer observes, “animal characters are marginalized as genre fiction in children’s literature or fantasy,” calling animal stories, “naïve genre fiction” (2) filled with “sentimental anthropomorphism” (8). Indeed, any walk through the children’s book section of a bookstore or library will attest to the fact that children’s literature is largely made up of animal stories. Gene Myers, an environmental studies scholar, argues, “our metaphors and our zoos reduce the animal to a spectacle and render it passive and marginal to our existence” (2). However, the animal can only be considered marginal to “our” existence if children are excluded from the “our,” for our culture tends to make animals function as central rather than marginal elements of children’s existence. To speak of animals as marginal figures is to ignore their ubiquitous presence in the lives of children because children are often the target audience of animal representations and

zoos. However, one must note that animals have not only been central figures in children's lives, they also functioned as central figures in adult lives as the children's literature scholar Tess Cosslet contends, "the animal story ... migrated down the hierarchy of literary genres from adults to children, in consequence of an increasing polarization between adults and children. Adults were seen as rational and cultured, while children were imaginative and primitive" (1). In light of Cosslet's suggestion, the marginality of the animal story hinged upon its growing association with children's culture and perhaps *visa versa*.

Animal stories have also long been used as teaching tools for children. The compulsion to use animals to teach children has roots in eighteenth-century Romantic ideology that constructs children as beings that are closer to nature than adults. In the late eighteenth century, natural history books for children were used to educate middle-class children about the social hierarchy as "animals represented subordinate human groups" (Ritvo 81). This trend gave way to other forms of animal stories in the mid-nineteenth century in which animals had been humanized (Ritvo 90). Today anthropomorphized animals still populate children's literature, perpetuating the Romantic association of children with animals. Literature scholar Jacqueline Rose believes that the Romantic Movement dominates children's literature to this day and with it the Romantic notion of the child:

It is assumed that children's fiction has grown away from this [Romantic] moment, whereas in fact children's fiction has constantly returned to this moment, repeated it, and reproduced its fundamental conception of the child. (63)

Phrases such as "the primordial child" (Kennedy 27) or the "child of nature" (Thacker and Webb 18) capture this fundamental conception of the child. In order to unpack the Romantic child it is

useful to examine *A Year With Frog and Toad* in light of one of the key thinkers of the Romantic Movement: Rousseau.

In many ways the environment and lifestyle that Frog and Toad inhabit resembles the idyllic childhood that Rousseau describes in his book about childhood education, *Émile* (1762). It is interesting to note that Rousseau compares children to puppies and kittens at various points in his text (Rousseau 16, 26), similar to Aristotle who claims, “psychologically a child hardly differs for the time being from an animal” (16). For Rousseau, children should live natural lives as animals or “quasi animals” (Kennedy 28). Accordingly, Frog and Toad simultaneously represent children as well as animals in pseudo-adult roles. Further, Rousseau stipulates that the childhood he describes is only limited to male children of upper-class backgrounds (Rousseau 20, 62). The Frog and Toad of the musical are male and have the same upper-class background as Rousseau’s ideal pupil. *A Year With Frog and Toad* exemplifies Rousseau’s class prejudices. Not every child can have access to the perfect childhood just as not every child can have access to the upper-class lifestyle led by Frog and Toad.

In comparing Rousseau’s stipulation for a perfect childhood to Frog and Toad’s lifestyle it is just as important to note what is absent as what is present. In Rousseau’s frame, childhood should not be hindered by the adult world, for the adult world corrupts the natural course of a child’s development into an adult (Rousseau 11). Kennedy characterizes the adult world of the Romantics as “a fallen world—a world of time, decay, death, and the alienation and psychological division introduced by sexual experience” (45). The pressures of what Kennedy considers part of the “adult” world do not exist for Frog and Toad. The story consists of Frog and Toad passing their time with leisure activities such as swimming, sledding, and baking cookies. Occasionally they deal with minor issues that center around Toad. Toad feels impatient about his

flowers growing, feels sad because no one has ever written him a letter, and worries about Frog going off to be alone. Frog then fixes Toad's problems. Frog and Toad's lives are self-contained as their world lacks both economic and social institutions. They do not attend school or church or encounter anything that Althusser would consider an Ideological State Apparatus. This freedom from social institutions coheres with Rousseau's ideal, as he claims that, "the social institutions in which we are immersed, would crush out nature in him [Émile] without putting anything in its place" (11). The closest thing to a social institution is the snail that delivers the mail, yet there is no mention of a post office as the snail delivers the mail on his own.

Without the remnants of the adult world, Frog and Toad are left with nature as their guide. In Rousseau's paradigm Émile should live in the country, far from city life (21). Émile should be exposed to the "rigours of the seasons" and should be "taken out on the fields everyday" (29). For Rousseau, nature constitutes the center of a child's education and the less interference on the part of adults the better. The child should enjoy nature as much as possible: "There is purely natural activity which helps to make the body vigorous without bringing judgment into play: as in swimming, running, jumping, whipping a top, throwing stones" (55). Like Émile, Frog and Toad enjoy nature season by season through physical activity such as raking leaves, swimming, and sledding.

For Rousseau, childhood constitutes a separate state of being that should be distinguished from adulthood. This coheres with the status of *A Year With Frog and Toad* as a musical for children, not for adults. Rousseau constructs childhood as an idealized state of being in which children can be carefree, are not to "save time, but to waste it" (41), and generally learn what they like (51). Rousseau goes on to claim that, "childhood is, or ought to be the age of games and frolics"(64) as well as "bright, vigorous, care-free, completely absorbed in the present" (65).

Frog and Toad definitely embody this perfect childhood unhindered by adult pressures to learn or restrictions on how they are to behave. Ironically, Frog and Toad relate more to a specifically Romantic construction of childhood than they do to animals, although their animal status creates the conditions under which this idyllic childhood can be created.

Two binaries emerge from the musical's construction of a separate and carefree world: the human/animal binary and the adult/child binary. In terms of Frog and Toad, the musical is about the adult/child binary much more than the human/animal binary. However, it is useful to discuss the multiple layers of animal acting or drag present in the musical. As stated earlier, the characters of Frog and Toad only signify animals by name, as the characters do not exhibit any animal-like behaviors except for a brief reference to hibernation at the top of the musical. Frog and Toad are not anthropomorphized. In order for anthropomorphization to happen, human characteristics must be imposed on animals. Human actors play Frog and Toad, and therefore there is no animal to begin with. Frog and Toad could have human names such as Fred and Tim and nothing about their portrayals would need to change. However, a layer of drag emerges in the fact that the adult actors playing Frog and Toad behave in a child-like fashion in alignment with Romantic constructions of the child.

There are few differences between Rousseau's and the musical's constructions of the child. For Rousseau nature is the best teacher and adults imposing an outside sense of morality need not bother children. In fact, according to Rousseau, children possess a morality that can be considered superior to that of adults (Kenyon-Jones 53). In the world of Frog and Toad, there are no moral apparatuses keeping the two amphibians in line. They make their own rules and follow them. If Toad wishes to stay in bed through spring, he may do so. If Frog and Toad desire to stuff themselves full of cookies until they feel sick, they may do so. Frog seems to be the voice

of moderation. He gets Toad out of bed and suggests putting the cookies away. In general, both Frog and Toad enjoy self-directed and somewhat hedonistic lifestyles. Arnold Lobel himself admits that he wrote the characters of Frog and Toad as children:

[children] feel a release when they read stories about Frog and Toad who do not have parents—but who are children, really. Their preoccupations are those of children. They like cookies, they like ice cream, they like to go swimming, just as children do. Yet they have the freedom of adults. They live in separate houses, they can come, they can go. (Natov 95)

Frog and Toad are essentially children left to their own devices.

The animal personas of Frog and Toad enable the characters to walk the line between child and adult in the children's books. Animal characters allow readers to get around the question of whether the characters are adults or children. If Frog and Toad were children they would be seen as possessing too much freedom: where are the parents when Frog and Toad are gorging themselves on cookies? Why do they live limit-free lifestyles? If Frog and Toad were adults one would have to wonder how they live carefree lives with no responsibilities beyond having fun. Lobel speculates about how Frog and Toad would be interpreted as human characters: "I suppose I could write a story about two old gentlemen but it would be sort of peculiar. Suddenly they would be human beings, and you'd have to write about why they were eccentrics" (Natov 96). In Lobel's view, the youthfulness of Frog and Toad create the conditions for their carefree animal lives.

For Lobel, the animal characters also stave off critical questions about the race and class of the characters. Lobel specifically chose animals so that his books would hold universal appeal. Lobel explains:

by using animals, by pulling it away from everybody, everything, you bring it to everybody. I mean Frog and Toad belong to no one but they belong to everyone, every sector: rich children, poor children, white children, black children.

Everybody can relate to Frog and Toad because they don't exist in this world.

(Natov 95)

In the children's books, Frog and Toad do not indicate a specific race, and their clothing and homes suggest that they are of modest means. The fact that they are animals in nature makes it possible to interpret their identities in a variety of ways. In adapting the book for the stage, producers of the musical were unable to keep with Lobel's original intent of appealing to a wide audience and instead created a very specific audience for the musical on two fronts. First, due to the economic circumstances of TYA in the US, the child audience had to have parents that could afford tickets to see professional theatre or attend a school that has enough funding to support a field trip to the theatre. Second, the producers of the musical had to make ideological choices by deciding on the race, class, gender, and age of the actors and are also faced with the fact that questions of sexuality inevitably arise with adult human actors. These human actors then convey the musical's moral values.

The musical itself, as part of the larger TYA apparatus, positions itself as a teacher of children in a manner that breaks from Rousseau's philosophy of education. If the musical were purely about creating pleasure for children, then it would keep with Rousseau's vision. However, the musical positions itself as a form of values education as TYA producers strain to extrapolate a moral message from the leisurely lifestyles of Frog and Toad. The pressure to position *A Year With Frog and Toad* as a form of values education stems from the pressure on U.S. TYA to conform to school ideologies. As Roger Bedard notes, "TYA generally serves young people only

as a limited and ‘safe’ educational tool” (91). In order for U.S. TYA to succeed it must position itself as educational or else face the prospect of losing school audiences.

As a facet of the larger TYA apparatus,⁶ *A Year With Frog and Toad* can be considered a moral technology as defined by Terry Eagleton: “a particular set of techniques and practices for the instilling of specific kinds of value, discipline, behavior, and response in human subjects” (97). The moral technology of *A Year With Frog and Toad* encourages a particular form of subjectivity, or “lived and imagined experience” (Butler, *Psychic Life* 122), through productions and the corresponding moral imperatives of its official discourse. Typically, guardians or schools grant young people access to productions that are accompanied by study guides and programs designed to guide the responses of spectators by highlighting certain aspects of the production over others. Study guides ascribe value to *A Year With Frog and Toad*, linking it to school curriculums (however tangentially), a broader mission to cultivate appreciation for the arts, and/or some sort of abstract moral value. Abstract values also circulate in newspapers and advertisements, as the First Stage advertisement for its production claims, Frog and Toad “bring home the values of trust, loyalty, and warm cookies” (*First Stage* 14). The claim envelopes the musical in an aura of moral wholesomeness: what could be contentious about “trust,” loyalty,” or “warm cookies”? At the same time, the discourse creates a frame through which to view the musical that has been abstracted from the particularities of production practices. Almost *any* production of the musical can be said to “bring home” such values.

The official lesson of *A Year With Frog and Toad* that proliferates through study guides and reviews in conjunction with the Worklights tour and various professional productions is that “people who are different can be friends.” For example, a study guide that accompanies the

⁶ I refer to TYA as an apparatus following Althusser who considers schools “Ideological State Apparatuses” (Althusser 7,17) and Bedard who contends that much of TYA in the U.S. is bound to school ideologies (Bedard 90-91).

Broadway tour states, “Frog and Toad have the kind of friendship we want every student to have—one that surpasses any surface similarities or differences and is based on a deep connection and loyalty between two people ... People who are extremely different from one another can be friends. Differences can make a relationship strong” (*State Theatre* 4). This phrase appears verbatim in various study guides so that the “we” includes producers of the tour, various venues hosting the tour, and the Children’s Theatre Company in Minneapolis (CTC), where the musical originated. CTC’s study guide also includes the hyperbolic claim that Frog and Toad have “the kind of friendship that can change the world” (Children’s Theatre Company). Similarly, newspaper articles about the touring production repeat the lesson so that it seems people across the country agree about the value of the musical, elucidating its cohesion as a moral technology. A preview from Seattle states: “they learn valuable lessons about life and friendship and how everyone is different in their own special way” (Armstrong, “Frog and Toad” 37). A preview from Omaha makes almost the exact same statement: “they learn life lessons about friendship and appreciating individual differences” (Palmer). Such framing about appreciating differences positions the musical as wholesome and innocuous for children to consume. In *A Year With Frog and Toad*’s official discourse, however, differences between people are limited to personality traits. This reduction of difference to personality is made possible by virtue of Frog and Toad first being written as animal characters in children’s books.

History of Science scholars Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman argue that animals make morals in fables easier to communicate. They observe,

Whereas the same old stories told about humans might lose the moral in a clutter of individuating detail of the sort we are usually keen to know about other people, substituting animals as actors strips the characterizations down to prototypes.

Animals simplify the narrative to a point that would be found flat or at least allegorical if the same tales were recounted about humans. (9)

Frog and Toad certainly function as prototypes, as the characters represent opposing personality traits. There is something about the human acting in the musical that feels flat compared to the animals in the books. In the books, each animal simply represents a human characteristic, as Frog is a type A personality while Toad is lazy and wants to stay in bed. Onstage, there is something dissatisfying about each character's reduction to a set of personality traits. Perhaps it is easier to buy the lack of complexity of each character when communicated through animal form.

Study guides flatten out the potential complexities of Frog and Toads as they encourage young people to reflect on the “differences” between Frog and Toad through pointing to scientific distinctions between frogs and toads or emphasizing the personality traits of the two characters. The study guide for Children’s Theatre Company in Minneapolis asks young people to reflect on their personal qualities within a binary framework by deciding whether they are “serious” or “silly,” “tidy” or “sloppy,” “studious” or “sporty,” a “listener,” or a “talker ...” (2). The study guide then instructs students to use the leftover characteristics to imagine a friend who is “different” from them. Likewise, newspaper articles and reviews support the production’s personality-based definition of “difference” by highlighting the “odd couple” dynamic of Frog and Toad’s friendship (Blanchard B05; Graeber E37; Preston 2B).

The call to embrace those who are “different” through accepting those who have different personalities emulates Eagleton’s paradigm for a moral technology that depoliticizes subjectivity. In his 1985 essay, “The Subject of Literature,” Eagleton asserts the teaching of literature is a moral technology that produces forms of subjectivity necessary to the maintenance of the social order:

the literary technology does not simply teach [a person] specific moral values (though it surely does this too): its primary end is simply, as it were, to teach one to be *moral*. Now how can one be taught to be moral without being taught to be moral in specific definable ways? ... The task of the moral technology of literature is to produce a historically peculiar form of human subject who is sensitive, receptive, imaginative and so on ... *about nothing in particular*. (98)

The alternative to a person with a moral subjectivity “about nothing in particular” would be a critical thinker who imagines a link between morality and material practices. A moral sensibility that relies on abstraction from material conditions only benefits those at the top of the social hierarchy (99). In the case of *A Year With Frog and Toad*, the idea of creating friendship with those who have different personalities obscures the pervasive ways in which people are systematically distinguished, or as Judith Butler contends, “injuriously” distinguished (*Psychic Life* 104-5), from one another. In order to fulfill the moral imperative of the lesson one must simply refuse to discriminate against others because of their personalities without consideration of the categorical differences that prevent friendships such as race, gender, age, and class. Moreover, the personality-based notion of harmonizing despite differences is a perfect way to gloss over problems in our society that has a growing disparity between classes.

If it is alarming to see differences between people reduced to personality traits, it is even more disturbing to see how the abstract values of *A Year With Frog and Toad* have been concretized in production. The musical, only nominally about animals, roots Frog and Toad in human material conditions through set and costume choices. Therefore, the abstract value of “difference between friends” becomes entwined with human identity in the transfer from the children’s books to stage. When actors embody the animal characters onstage, human identities

become prominent features of the animal characters; the animals become raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized. Consider Joseph Roach's contention with regard to eighteenth-century English theatre: "In the theatre, remote abstractions become physical practices ... generalities that govern conduct and establish priorities of value—'Taste,' 'Duty,' 'Honor,' 'Beauty,'—gain an otherwise unattainable specificity under conditions of precise selection and control" (157). Roach reminds us that theatre can function to concretize the abstract values of a society. In this case, the values in the official discourse of *A Year With Frog and Toad* such as "difference between friends," "loyalty," and "trust" are given particularity onstage through casting and design choices. We have to ask not only *what* values are communicated, but also *how* values are concretized in theatrical practice: who demonstrates the aforementioned values onstage and what type of society do they live in?

The musical's values were illustrated in the 2008 production of *A Year With Frog and Toad* at First Stage in Milwaukee involving an upper-class Frog and Toad. Departing from the books' homely aesthetics, the amphibians both dressed in pristine pseudo late nineteenth-century dated suits and boater hats. Frog wore a green silk tailcoat, complete with silky blue vest, golden vest chain, and khaki riding pants. Toad wore a brown business suit with a puff tie. Each amphibian had new outfits for every occasion; they wore white pajamas and caps when they slept, and when they swam and sled they wore brightly colored robes and fuzzy striped sweaters that looked like they had been purchased at a contemporary department store. Similarly, their dwellings, although dwarfed by giant lily pads in the background, evoked the comforts of upper-class life. A perfect white picket fence surrounded Frog's yard—Toad's fence looked rustic—and the interiors of their homes each had new looking multi-colored quilts and props that signified their affluence such as Toad's golden alarm clock and Frog's silver tea set. Although

Frog seemed to be classed slightly higher than Toad, both of their lifestyles indicated an abundance of material wealth. Frog and Toad were adults who engaged in nothing but leisure year round, only occasionally hampered by mild conflicts that stem from their personality differences. I knew Frog and Toad were adults because of a scene in which Frog recalled a story from his childhood. When Frog and Toad were not gardening, reading, swimming, sledding, or reflecting on how happy they were to be friends, they were consuming sandwiches, cookies, soup, iced tea, and hot chocolate. The material conditions evoked by the production design marked Frog and Toad's friendship as upper class, bringing new meaning to the phrase, "the kind of friendship we want every child to have" (*State Theatre* 4). Not every child can have the type of friendship Frog and Toad have because their friendship is enabled by a set of economic conditions that allows them to enjoy leisure activities together twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year.

It might seem that we can ignore the question of whether the characters need to work because the musical takes place in an animal realm. Yet the musical includes a snail mail carrier, curiously dressed in a cowboy outfit in the First Stage production, who struggles throughout the four seasons to deliver a letter from Frog to Toad. Once the snail accomplishes his mission, he delivers a number about his self-actualization, singing, "I never even dared to dream of a life in civil service" (Reale). At the end of the musical Toad tells Frog he sent a Christmas package via the snail, indicating the snail's struggle will continue. The First Stage production communicated the idea that working-class animals enjoy serving the affluent as demonstrated by the snail, classed as a cowboy, who worked for the two amphibians in business suits.

In addition to the economic conditions that allowed for Frog and Toad's friendship, it appeared that their common human identities enabled their friendship. Although First Stage's

study guide for the musical claims that Frog and Toad are “very different” (Newby 1), the actors who played Frog and Toad were both white male adults who happened to be surrounded by all-white animal friends and conventionally gendered women. The majority of female adult actors, which included the birds, the mice, and Frog’s mother (from a flashback), displayed a stereotypical femininity as they pranced about the stage speaking in high-pitched tones while wearing frilly dresses. In a world that appears racially homogenous, and where men reside at the top of the social hierarchy, personality differences are all that stand in the way of the rich white male paradise that intends to provide child spectators with the concrete manifestation of values such as, “friendship,” “honesty,” “courage,” and “kindness” (Newby 1).

Like the First Stage production, the production at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville included an all-white cast and stereotypically gendered women; however, there were several noteworthy differences. The most striking difference from the First Stage production was that the set, props, and costumes of Frog and Toad created a lower-class aesthetic. The interiors of the amphibians’ homes had worn out paint, wallpaper, and floorboards. Toad’s clock face was faded with age; Frog’s tea set was mismatched, and the finish on his wooden table was chipped. Frog and Toad wore modest mismatched green and brown suits that looked like they had been bought at a thrift store as opposed to a department store. Two lower-class white males who had access to all of the food and leisure they desired year round delivered the moral of *A Year With Frog and Toad*. Interestingly, the snail’s costume did not indicate a difference in class. The snail, played by the same actor as in the First Stage production, wore a basic navy blue t-shirt and pants with sweatbands around his head and wrists as if he was out for a jog, which downplayed the suggestion that he works for Frog and Toad. The lack of class difference between the snail and the amphibians indicated that Frog and Toad do not sit at the top of an economic hierarchy. The

production choices in terms of class aligned more closely with the aesthetics of Lobel's books. In general, however, Frog and Toad did not present a world of difference as their gender, race, and class identities remained consistent. Still, the UW-Platteville production perpetuated the musical's official lesson: "Our differences should not stand in the way of but, rather, only enhance our relationships"(Farrelly 10), and it too relied on a personality-based notion of difference.

The touring production by Work Light Productions of *A Year with Frog and Toad* that I saw at the Overture Center in Madison, WI was striking in its lack of embodiment of its animal premises. Aside from a little bit of jumping at the beginning and end of the show, the actors playing Frog and Toad made no attempt to suggest physically or vocally that they were anything other than human. Further, their costumes, vests, slacks, and tailcoats made no attempt to evoke their amphibious natures aside from their green and brown color schemes. The majority of other characters had at least one visual element that signified their animal natures. The two female birds wore wide-brimmed hats decorated with large feathers; the moles wore sunglasses; the male lizard wore a yellow suit with brown squares that suggested scales, and the female mouse had a large bow in her hair that suggested mouse ears. The snail wore a cowboy hat, dark trench coat, bandana, and slacks, whereas the snail in the First Stage Children's Theatre production wore a backpack that looked like a snail shell. People wearing these costume elements in daily life would not signify animal at all, but because these costume elements take place in the context of an animal play, the audience understands the characters as animals. This is because people are more likely to interpret clothing as signs of character when worn onstage. Kirby explains this phenomenon with the example of Western boots, noting that such boots do not signify cowboy

when a person wears them offstage, but if a person wore them with only a back leotard onstage, they might signify cowboy (“On Acting and Not-Acting” 3).

The animal actors in the play occupied two positions on Kirby’s continuum of acting to not-acting. In terms of human behavior, all of the performers’ acting could be considered complex because their performances involved a variety of physical and emotional pretenses such as pretending to be in water and experiencing joy. However, for most of the actors, their performances of animals could be considered a form of “non-matrixed representation”(“On Acting” 3) in that they wore costumes that signify animal but did not behave as animals. A small amount of animal acting in the production could be considered simple on Kirby’s scale because it involved feigning one animal-like element. Simple animal acting occurred with the birds, who at one point flapped their arms in a motion reminiscent of the chicken dance and at another pecked their heads while eating cookies. The snail actor also utilized simple animal acting because he moved across the stage in a slow side stepping motion, but otherwise made no attempt to indicate animality in terms of speech or movement.

The main indicator that the characters were indeed animals aside from their names was the set that at one point included a backdrop of pond reeds indicating the small size of the characters. However, the majority of set pieces, such as the exterior fences and mailboxes, and domestic interiors of Frog and Toad’s home were strictly human.

Compared to the other two productions of the musical that I have seen, the touring production muted animality to the greatest degree in terms of costume, set, and acting. However, it kept with the general trend of an all-white cast with two adult men playing Frog and Toad and included costumes and behaviors that enforce traditional gender roles for the female actors. In terms of gender, the actor playing Toad came across as more effeminate than Frog, whereas

other productions I have seen tend to feminize Frog more as he is the more together, more upper-class dandyish character. The show also kept with the trend of bourgeois aesthetics, but to a greater degree with Frog, Toad, the turtle, and the birds. More than the other productions I have seen, this one, with its unified bourgeois aesthetics, muted animality, and strict enforcement of conventional female gender roles communicated the idea of a hegemonic white man's utopia.

All three productions teach the lesson that "those who are different can be friends," yet the identities of Frog and Toad remain absent from discussions in programs and educational materials of their similarities and differences. Frog and Toad are both middle-aged and male. Frog and Toad are of the same class or slightly different classes. Frog and Toad are both white. My suspicion is that to discuss their identities would politically contextualize the musical, thereby encouraging politically aware moral subjectivities in the spectators who might then question the material conditions that the productions present. Imagine a young person being asked to consider the similarities in race, age, class, and gender of Frog and Toad. To encourage such a discussion of identity would disrupt the veneer of universality the animal realm generates, drawing attention to the similarities and differences between spectators and those represented onstage.

Some reactions to the musical have taken its specificity in terms of identity into account. Although the prevailing discourse about *A Year With Frog and Toad* is "apolitical" in its focus on the musical's abstract values, there have been flickers of discourse that interpret the musical from an explicitly political angle. In particular, I want to quote at length from Michael Feingold's review of the Broadway production in the *Village Voice* (a likely place for non-traditional interpretations) because it raises questions about the form of spectator subjectivity the musical requires:

My inner child, the only one I was able to bring to the performance, felt moderately entertained; my outer adult found some aspects amusing and others a little puzzling. He didn't understand, for instance, why the characters sometimes behaved like animals and did animal things, while at other times they behaved like adults and did middle-class suburban things [...] My outer adult wondered a little, too, why the title characters seemed to have no spouses or offspring, unlike their parents, or the neighboring birds who served as commentators. (Here my inner child definitely said something about fairy tales, referring specifically to Oscar Wilde's.) [...] Then there was a whole problem about whether amphibians would celebrate Christmas, and my inner child settled the whole thing when he looked at us derisively and said, "They have to have a Christmas number or it's not commercial." We bowed to this expression of childhood wisdom, and decided that instead of trying to analyze the show any further we would just make a list of everything we liked about it. ("Aurally Sound" 59)

The tension in Feingold's experience between his "inner child," whom he tacitly assumes should have a depoliticized subjectivity and his "outer adult," who has the ability to interpret the musical politically, raises the question of what kind of subjectivity is required for any spectator, regardless of age, to enjoy *A Year With Frog and Toad*. In the end, Feingold realizes he must give up analyzing the show from a political perspective in order to enjoy it, a choice that acquiesces to the demands of the musical's official discourse to ignore the material conditions and identities of the characters.

Feingold is not the only critic who expresses ambivalence about how to interpret the identities of Frog and Toad, namely whether or not the two amphibians are queer. Trey Graham of the *Washington Post* confesses:

I tried to hold out, did my best to fortify my inner cynic by counting the innumerable ways in which an irreverent adult could read Frog and Toad's relationship as crypto-queer, but by the time Olcott & Co. brought on the Large and Terrible Frog—a kid-stalking creature, “terribly large, and largely terrible,” who “eats little bunnies dipped in dirt and likes frog children for dessert”—I'd decided Frog and Toad was the kind of kids' show I could love.

Part of Graham's ambivalence, like Feingold's, stems from anxiety over reviewing a production aimed at children, but he similarly relegates his “crypto-queer” interpretation to a politically aware adult subjectivity (in this instance, the awareness that queerness is taboo in theatre for children) and sets that interpretation aside once he begins to enjoy the performance. I too read the musical as queer, but unlike Feingold and Graham I found myself unable to set my queer reading aside. In fact, the pleasure I took from productions of the musical manifested from my politically aware subjectivity that enabled me to notice its queer undertones. Feingold and Graham assume that TYA should not be read as political or queer by virtue of its target audience, but it is exactly that assumption that creates a productive, and perhaps pleasurable, tension for politically aware spectators. On the one hand, the musical begs for queer analysis. On other hand, the musical's classification as “TYA” undoes its potential to be read as queer. I will first read the musical as queer and then explain how that reading does not work in the TYA context.

Unlike Feingold and Graham who ultimately disavow their queer readings of the musical,

I am going to follow through with mine by looking at the ways the characters push the bounds of normative sexuality. More so than the books the musical highlights Frog and Toad's declarations of love for one another. Frog and Toad are adult men who rely on each other year round. The musical begins with Frog singing, "I'd like to sing a little ode/About my good friend Toad" (Reale). Apparently Frog cannot enjoy the seasons without his companion Toad as he claims, "Spring isn't....springy without you" (Reale). At one point Frog goes off to be alone and reflect on how happy he is singing: "mostly I am happy because I have you [Toad]" (Reale). While the musical focuses mainly on Frog professing his love for Toad, Toad seems to return the sentiment. On Christmas Eve Toad sings:

No it wouldn't feel like Christmas
 Not without you I believe
 Christmas wouldn't come without you
 Only winter's cold I fear
 But it really feels like Christmas
 Now that you are here. (Reale)

The lyrics make it clear that Frog and Toad truly need each other. Frog and Toad spend the seasons together, wake up from hibernation together, and spend Christmas together. When Frog seeks solitude, Toad is close behind with a picnic waiting to cheer Frog up. Clearly Frog and Toad depend on one another emotionally. When Toad feels sad about not having received a letter, Frog feels it is his responsibility to send a letter to Toad. One can argue that Frog and Toad are merely best friends, but the level on which they rely upon each other for happiness suggests more. That Frog and Toad participate in conventionally effeminate activities also lends

the musical to a queer reading. Frog mentions that Toad is “not so good at sports” and that he loves to “take tea” with Toad (Reale). Toad spends his time growing flowers and baking cookies. Frog and Toad lack characteristics associated with masculine gender roles, which makes their companionship seem even queerer, especially when the other characters uphold strict gender roles.

That Frog and Toad are adult men living without families potentially places them on a queer timeline that recalls queer theorist Judith Halberstam’s definition of queer time as “the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (*Queer Time* 2). The only overarching timeline that Frog and Toad need follow is that of the seasons, a very “natural” existence, otherwise they are free to pursue their leisurely lifestyles year by year uninfluenced by the pressures of heteronormative time. However, this queer reading works only in a limited sense. While Frog and Toad lead lives uninhibited by the imperative to reproduce, the structures emerging from their bourgeois existence offset the queer potential of their lifestyles. In terms of time, Frog and Toad lead fairly normative lives. They play all day and sleep all night. Their comfortable material lives and normative daily activities do not suggest the radical nature of a life governed by queer time in Halberstam’s sense.⁷

Any queer potential in the musical must also be considered against the history of policing children’s sexuality. The assumption that Frog and Toad are asexual given their childlike characteristics works against a queer reading. As Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurling observe, “There is currently a dominant narrative about children: children are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions”(ix). According to childhood historian Philippe Ariès, the notion

⁷ For example, Halberstam lists “ravers, club kids, HIV-positive barebackers, rent boys, sex workers, homeless people, drug dealers, and the unemployed” (*Queer Time* 10) as examples of those whose daily lives exhibit queer time.

that children should be innocent of sexual desires emerged in the seventeenth century and solidified in the eighteenth century (49).

Foucault perhaps provides the best account of the regulation of children's sexuality in *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault dates the regulation of children's sexuality back to the eighteenth century calling, "the question of sex a constant preoccupation"(27) in secondary schools as evidenced by the attempts to control children's spatial relationships:

The space for classes, the shape of the tables, the planning of recreation lessons, the distribution of the dormitories (with or without partitions, with or without curtains), the rules for monitoring bedtime and sleep periods—all this referred, in the most prolix manner, to the sexuality of children. (28)

According to Foucault educators thought deeply about how to keep children apart from each other in an effort to regulate their sexuality. In terms of *Frog and Toad*, one cannot help but wonder why each amphibian has a separate home characterized by a bed on each side of the stage. Whatever queer undertones emerge from *Frog and Toad*'s deeply loving relationship are dampened by the fact that producers of the musical have made it very clear that *Frog and Toad* sleep apart from one another. *Frog and Toad* are free to love all day, but at night each returns to his respective quarters. We know there will not be any loving in the night.

Frog and Toad cannot be interpreted as queer because that would be scandalous in the context of U.S. theatre for young audiences. In fact, it is integral to the show's success that it not sustain queer readings. This is evident given the controversies surrounding performances of *Cootie Shots: Theatrical Inoculations Against Bigotry for Kids, Parents, and Teachers*. The play, a collection of vignettes designed to promote the tolerance of various identity groups including gays and lesbians, drew controversy in 2002 and led to a lawsuit by angry parents in Novato,

California (van de Water and Giannini 104). The controversy over *Cootie Shots* illustrates the degree to which any play remotely suggesting the acceptance of gay and lesbian identities is not allowed in TYA, particularly at the elementary school level. Negative parental reactions to *Cootie Shots* indicate a larger public concern over the exposure of children to homosexuality. Referencing outcries over Teletubbies and the Sesame Street characters Burt and Ernie, education scholar Kerry Robinson argues they “are signifiers of a serious international moral panic that has continued to rise, peak and subside around children and sexuality, particularly in relation to ‘the homosexual’”(113-114). In the U.S., the policing of school curriculums by parents intent on eliminating anything about homosexuality epitomize these moral panics over children and sexuality. An example is the widespread uproar over the children’s book *And Tango Makes Three* (2005), discussed later in this dissertation, about two male penguins that raise a chick together at the Central Park Zoo.

We can rest assured that there are no queer actions between Frog and Toad because the musical takes place in a context in which queerness has been banned from children’s culture. The presumption that TYA is a desexualized space shrouds the main characters in an aura of safety. Further, the Romantic notions of the child that dominate the musical reinforce the conception of its target audience as existing in an idyllic state, separate from elements associated with adults such as sexual identity. While common sense constructions of animals and children in TYA discourage overt queer readings of the musical, constructions of animal characters and children as safe might allow audiences to take pleasure in its queer undertones without anxieties over the sexuality of the main characters. Perhaps the musical’s explicit message of tolerance of differences can be stretched to include an implicit message that it is okay for two men to love each other.

The musical may push boundaries in its potential to be read through a queer lens; however, there are multiple levels of structural privilege embedded in the musical due to the identities of the actors who play Frog and Toad. These identities go unmarked in discourses about the musical due to the characters' designation as animals, a designation that provides an alibi for their white male bourgeois identities. Frog and Toad do not have to explain their lives at all or account for their white suburban atmosphere because they are animals. As such, discourses about the musical must disavow race in order for audiences to engage with the fantasy animal world in which structural privilege is presumed not to exist.

However, to mark Frog and Toad as white adult males forces us to consider how we interpret their leisurely lifestyles. The marking of Frog and Toad as white and male raises questions about whether they are able to enjoy such carefree lifestyles as a result of racial and gender privilege. Indeed the hierarchies that Lobel intended to avoid in his children's books come to the forefront of the musical. It seems that all of the animals benefit from belonging to an all-white world free of racial and sexual tensions. The fact that the world of Frog and Toad is all white naturalizes white privilege as part of the animal and human world. I deem the world of Frog and Toad all white with full awareness of the socially constructed nature of the term "white" following Brander et al. who claim that, "whiteness does not exist as a credible biological property" (8). Still, as an audience member I could not help but notice the homogeneity of the cast.

I propose that the similarities between Feingold and Graham's experiences of the musical and my own are not coincidental, rather they represent a problem that politically conscious spectators face when watching productions that reinscribe classism, racism, and sexism through upper-class set and costume designs, stereotypically gendered women, and racially homogenized

animal realms. Of course none of these elements are surprising to find in professional TYA, which generally operates within a bourgeois atmosphere. It is however important to note that adults get to choose whether to see productions such as *A Year With Frog and Toad* whereas children typically do not. Furthermore, adults get to choose whether to politically engage with the production or to sit back and enjoy the show. If adults feel they must set political consciousness aside when watching animal performances, are children being encouraged to do the same?

At present, a great deal of TYA functions as a moral technology that evacuates material conditions from morality through proliferating abstract discourses of value. The question is not how a TYA production about animals such as *A Year With Frog and Toad* can be used to address explicitly political issues; rather the question is whether a TYA production acknowledges its already political relationship to spectator subjectivity when it posits itself as a purveyor of values via animal characters. It is not surprising that a musical that tends to reinforce social hierarchies through production choices such as casting, set, and costume design, and educational materials encourages depoliticized subjectivity in its official discourse. When the purported values of a production have nothing to do with the production choices, we have a serious elision, as often study guides, advertisements, and reviews point out a production's wholesome values with no consideration of production choices. In order to replace abstract discourses of value with discourses rooted in production choices, TYA producers must consider whom their production choices benefit: who do animal characters represent and who do they not?

Within the TYA context animals are symptomatic of a larger problem, which is that the theatre has to be safe enough for children to consume, as TYA companies must conform to school ideologies or risk losing their funding (Bedard 90). Animals are the perfect vehicles for

maintaining the status quo because they are not thought of as raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized beings in the context of children's culture. Animal characters largely facilitate TYA's safety as they provide a perfect alibi for forestalling political engagement with issues of human identity, ultimately allowing audiences to take pleasure in white male upper-class fantasies.

Chapter Three

Acting the Black Male Ape

In her essay, “Animal Acts for the Changing Times,” Una Chaudhuri claims that “actual animality” is infiltrating American drama as the theatre moves away from simple symbolic representations of animals. She argues, “the anthropomorphism of the stage animal seem[s] to be tempered ... by a powerful connection to actual animality, and so to the mystery of the non-human” (37). Rather than treating animals as stand-ins for humans, Chaudhuri believes animal representations are beginning to speak for “animals as and for themselves” (39). For Chaudhuri, American drama is turning towards recognition of animals on their own terms. However, this chapter argues that when the human body is present onstage the possibilities for interpreting animal characters as possessing actual animality become extremely limited as categories of human identity such as race, gender, and sexuality come to the forefront of the performance. Using Mark Medoff’s *Prymate* (2005) as a case study, I argue that when André De Shields was cast as the play’s animal character, the gorilla Graham, on Broadway, the play recalled stereotypes of African Americans that overcame the “animality” of the character. Indeed I argue that there can be no interpretation of Graham’s animality without taking issues of race into account.

Prymate takes place in the desert of New Mexico at the home of Esther, a Deaf linguistic anthropologist, and her signing companion, Graham, whom she has stolen from a laboratory. Esther’s ex-lover, Avrum, the director of the primate lab, hunts down the two escapees with the help of a private detective and intends to bring Graham back so that he may use the animal for his AIDS research. With the help of a sign language interpreter, Allison, Avrum attempts to convince Esther to bring the gorilla back to the lab. However, Esther refuses, insisting that

Graham is like a child to her. Sexual tensions between Esther and Avrum place Esther at the center of a love triangle as Graham and Avrum compete for her affections. The love triangle involves two competing versions of masculinity: Avrum's, affluent, intellectual, masculinity and Graham's, earthy, bodily, and impulsive masculinity. Avrum's masculinity and sexuality is defined by control as he assumes he can get what he wants through calculated arguments, whereas Graham's masculinity is driven by impulse. Eventually the truth emerges that Avrum has already infected Graham with the HIV virus out of revenge for Esther having left him. Sickened by Avrum's act, Esther allows Graham to nearly kill Avrum, but she stops the gorilla at the last minute. As revenge for giving HIV to Graham, Allison, who also has HIV, bites Avrum's lips and infects him with the virus giving the narrative a "what goes around comes around" sensibility. At the end of the play, Esther and Avrum confess their love for one another and Esther decides to go back to the laboratory with him and Graham.

Medoff's play deals with a variety of ideological stances surrounding animal as well as human rights. Reviewer Michael Feingold adequately describes *Prymate* when he observes the play "seems contrived to contain, in 90-plus intermission-less minutes, as many conflicts, as many crises, as many current issues, and as many transgressive devices as possible" ("The Ape of Things" 84). Medoff addresses the issue of whether humans have the right to experiment on primates as Avrum and Esther frequently argue about his right to do AIDS research on Graham. Avrum asks Esther, "If your human child was HIV positive and studying Graham could save that child, would you hesitate even a second?" (Medoff 18). Avrum believes that humans are superior to apes and should therefore be allowed to use apes for research. Esther rebukes Avrum's assertion: "I don't have a 'human child.' I have Graham" (18). Esther refuses to believe that humans are automatically superior to apes. She believes humans and apes are unique individuals

that should be judged on a case-by-case basis rather than lumped together. She argues, “members of our species dumb enough to exchange fluids have less value than my gorilla” (18). Esther calls Avrum “Dr. Mengele” (18), insinuating that he is as terrible as the notorious Nazi physician who conducted experiments on prisoners at Auschwitz. The play hinges on Esther and Avrum’s debate, asking whether primates should have the same rights as humans.

In addressing the issue of animal research ethics, Medoff depicts Graham as a noble savage that straddles the boundary between human and animal. The play does not present a clear solution to the problem of where Graham belongs, whether it is in a lab, in Esther’s care, or out in the wild. Graham is at once cultured, since he knows sign language, but he is also an uncultured and “natural” animal that cannot control his sexual and violent impulses. Donna Haraway reminds, “Monkeys and apes have a privileged relation to nature and culture: simians occupy the border zones between those potent mythic poles” (1). Medoff depicts Graham as oscillating between nature and culture, humanizing the gorilla by giving him access to human language, however limited. Medoff also attempts to humanize the gorilla by displacing him from his natural habitat into the New Mexican desert. The gorilla functions as a human grown accustomed to the desert environment because he fishes and mixes mud for adobe. Graham is at once displaced from nature but is also of nature.

Graham’s humanity suggests that experimentation on primates is unethical due to the ape’s ability to relate to humans. One manner in which Graham resembles a human is through his relationship with Esther. Graham is elderly and sick, and Esther has to take care of him and ensure that he uses his inhaler for his emphysema. The first scene of the play in which Esther administers Graham’s inhaler, as a mother would to a child, sentimentalizes and humanizes Graham, rendering him a gentle beast who is capable of participating in a loving relationship

with a human being. Medoff depicts Esther and Graham almost like a couple as Graham sweeps Esther up into his arms (5). Graham also behaves like the “man of the house” by doing manual labor and fishing. Clearly Graham’s time with Esther has “civilized” him into a functioning member of a domestic household. We see the depth of his connection to Esther when Graham defends her from Avrum when the two get into fight. Graham is loyal to his mother figure. Graham’s is multifaceted in that he plays several submissive roles in relation to his master, Esther. From the beginning we see Graham as part child, part servant, and part domesticated animal. Medoff stipulates that Graham has the mental age of an eight year old (6) and describes him as an “obedient yet rambunctious child” (14). Esther treats Graham like a child and also like a pet. She gives Graham directions such as “to sit” and he generally follows her demands as if she were his mother/master. In many ways Graham functions perfectly within a domestic household.

Although Medoff portrays Graham’s relationship with Esther as sweet and endearing, he also reminds us that Graham is a wild animal. Graham is not human in that he behaves like a savage that must be tamed. Esther constantly has to control his actions by telling him “down” and keeping him from attacking and sexually harassing Allison. When Graham and Allison first meet, Esther has to warn Allison not to show her teeth or make direct eye contact lest Graham view her as a threat (13). Despite Esther’s ability to manage Graham, he remains a constant danger. At one point Esther has to stop Graham from drowning and nearly killing Avrum. Although Graham exhibits many human-like qualities there are limits to his ability to function within human society. Medoff portrays Graham as a sexually domineering being, straddling the boundaries between sexual deviant and innocent. Graham’s sexuality constitutes the one facet of his identity that lies beyond Esther’s control. Graham may follow Esther’s orders and behave in a

civilized manner, but when it comes to sex his animality renders him incapable of controlling his impulses. When Graham first meets Allison he immediately chases her, smells her crotch, signs that he likes her, inquires whether he may touch her breasts and attempts to do so. Esther excuses Graham's behavior, claiming: "I had an assistant—behind my back she used to let him touch her breasts and she would masturbate him" (14). While Esther implies that Graham's sexual advances towards Allison are not his fault, he nevertheless seems obsessed with sex. Graham listens to Esther's orders at first, but his sexual advances towards Allison continue. Graham's animality connotes unrestrained sexuality.

As the play progresses, Graham becomes increasingly sexual. He signs, "Where girls? Hump hump hump" (14) and "G. hot dude" (15). Graham continues his sexual advances towards Allison despite Esther's prohibitions: "*Graham coos at Allison, endeavoring to seduce her with sweet sounds. He points down, makes a masturbatory gesture*" (15). As Esther attempts to control Graham's advances towards Allison, Avrum reminds them that Graham is an animal and therefore a slave to his sexual desires: "You can't divert Graham's attention from his sexual needs to a higher moral goal" (15). Avrum essentializes Graham, implying there is a firm boundary between humans and animals. Humans can control their sexual impulses whereas animals cannot.

For Graham, sex and violence are interrelated activities. Graham's violence begins when he sees Esther fighting with Avrum. Graham inserts himself into the mix, throwing Avrum down and hitting him. The only way Graham can be subdued is through sexual interaction with Allison who offers him her breasts. The breast motif continues throughout the play, as Graham frequently makes attempts to grab Allison's breasts (35), and Esther intervenes to prevent his actions:

ESTHER. [Down-stay!]

GRAHAM. [Want touch girl]

ESTHER. [No. Can't touch girl!] (*To Allison.*) He thinks he as a right to touch you! (35-36)

Graham's belief that he has a right to touch Allison renders him a dominant male that takes what he wants when he sees it no matter how others feel. Graham does not consider other people's wants and desires, only his own. No matter how much Esther attempts to control Graham, he cannot be sexually tamed.

Graham's sexual desire for Allison culminates in a violent scene between the two. His sexual advances towards Allison continue, leading him to urinate on her, a sign of dominance that Esther warns Allison about earlier in the play. Graham violently forces himself on her.

Alison exclaims:

Graham—don't! (*She breaks free, retreats. Graham stalks her aggressively.*)

Graham, no. No, Graham, no touch. (*Graham keeps coming, though [...] Graham presses his hands to her breasts ...*) OK, if I let you just...(*Graham wants more; he takes Allison's hand and puts it between his legs. Reflexively, Allison makes a move to escape. He clamps her behind the neck with the breast-hand, crushes the other at his groin.*) G, not me, that was another girl. Not me, not me. Esther!

Esther! Esther, help me! (*His grip on her increases. He raises her over his shoulder, spins her, bends her over, pull her shorts down [sic]. In pain, in terror of being raped, she fishes, grabs at his groin. Graham freezes at her grip around his penis. Allison masturbates Graham.*) (37)

Allison masturbates Graham until he climaxes, and Avrum finally saves her. Esther scolds Graham for the deed, but the grotesqueness of the scene makes it clear that Graham cannot function normally within human society, even under Esther's supervision. Esther's scolding seems like a pithy consequence given the magnitude of Graham's violation of Allison. Graham cannot be blamed for his actions because he is an animal, but he also cannot be allowed to sexually violate women. The play pushes the issue of animal rights to the limit by presenting negative consequences to treating apes as members of human society.

In addition to animal rights, the play addresses the issue of Deaf rights. Esther claims that Avrum devalues Graham's life and infects the gorilla with HIV because he communicates through sign language rather than spoken language. Esther argues, "If [Graham's] four-hundred words were spoken instead of signed, you'd never have done this ... and if you really did respect me as an equal, you wouldn't have done this" (32). Esther and Graham have virtually created their own miniature civilization, their own Deaf culture, which Avrum discovers and disrupts by virtue of his white, masculine, and hearing privilege. In terms of ethics, Avrum believes the majority rules. Just as he believes that the life of one primate is worth less than the millions who would benefit from an AIDS vaccine, Avrum believes that hearing culture trumps Deaf culture. He suggests that Allison's job as an interpreter is less important because it serves less people, claiming, "Everything is not meant to be accessible to everyone; all laws do not apply to all people! Some of you are just way the fuck down the fucking food chain" (34). Avrum's hierarchical thinking places hearing people above the Deaf and humans above animals.

Ultimately, the play challenges whether humans necessarily have moral superiority over animals. Avrum is a self-righteous scientist who accuses Graham of lacking a sense of morality. At the same time, Avrum displays his own moral depravity by infecting Graham with HIV

unknown to Esther. Allison also turns out to be morally depraved due to her purposeful infection of Avrum. While the majority of the play enforces a human/animal boundary in which animals are violent and sexual and humans are capable of restraint, Medoff depicts both humans and animals as equally capable of causing others harm. The harm caused by Avrum and Allison is calculated and inexcusable. The harm Graham causes can be excused by virtue of him being an impulsive animal that is a slave to his own desires. Graham can at least claim innocence whereas Avrum and Allison cannot. How the play negotiates the human/animal divide largely depends on the casting and acting of Graham.

Graham has been portrayed through various forms of animal acting throughout the play's production history. In the play's first production by the American Southwest Theatre Company, under the title *Gila*, Garon Michael, wearing a full-bodied gorilla suit, played Graham. The type of animal acting called for by the animal suit is anthropomorphic animal drag, and I would also argue that the physical limitations imposed by the massive suit required the actor to use Kirby's simple acting. Walking on all fours, hooting, and using limited sign language constitute Graham's actions, but the suit undercuts the actor's ability to communicate emotion. In the second production of *Gila*, the same white actor played Graham but did not wear an animal costume and instead hardly wore any clothing. The type of acting required for the no-suit approach is corporeal animal acting, in which the animal's qualities emerge from the body. The play becomes about an animal-like human rather than a human-like animal. Phyllis Frelich, the actor that played Esther in all of the productions, compares what it was like to act with the gorilla in the animal suit versus no animal suit:

As an actor, I much preferred the “no clothing” approach because I would see the actor’s face and could have a real relationship with the character. When he was in the full gorilla suit, I had to work a lot harder. It was like having a relationship with a big stuffed animal. (Zachary 269)

Frelich indicates that acting with Graham in no animal suit was much more complicated than acting with Graham in an animal suit. The gorilla suit made the acting simple on Kirby’s scale, whereas the acting without the suit required complex acting. The fact that the human body was the gorilla’s most prominent feature in the Broadway production makes the play about the animalization of the human. Instead of humanizing a gorilla, the play animalizes the body of the human actor.

When *Prymate* hit Broadway, the director, Edwin Sherin, chose André De Shields to play Graham using corporeal animal acting. Graham’s body was entirely human, as De Shields wore shorts, a t-shirt, gloves and shoes. One reviewer commented that De Shields resembled a “UPS delivery guy” (McCarter 19). Garon Michael, the actor that had previously played Graham, stayed on with the production as the “primate behavioral specialist” (Zachary 217). Many reviewers commented on De Shields’s remarkable and sympathetic portrayal of the gorilla (Feingold, “Ape of Things” 84; Barnes 52; McCarter 19), which apparently was the saving grace of the show. Reviewer Jeremy McCarter observes, “In truth, Andre De Shields, who plays the gorilla, works a kind of transformational magic. There are no clearly defined standards in the critic’s handbook about judging how an actor plays a simian, but Mr. De Shields does it with unmistakable grace and power” (19).

Despite De Shields's successful execution of the role, the actor's race became a point of controversy. For Michael Feingold, the casting of the gorilla as an African American complicated the play's already messy bundle of issues. He writes,

Since the animal is simultaneously presented as (a) almost human in comprehension and feeling, (b) freer and simpler than humans, and (c) corrupted in its habits by human dishonesty, the use of a black actor in the role gives the already conflicting animal stereotypes a double-whammy echo effect, getting all the animal-rights and race-relations issues evoked by the image thoroughly confused. Since the animal's corruption (by an offstage lab assistant, before the action begins) is sexual in nature, the show reaches its nadir of taste in a King Kongian ape-and-blond-beauty moment that can cater to any racist heart of darkness in the audience while solemnly disavowing all such intentions. ("Ape of Things" 84)

For Feingold, De Shields's race was an integral element in how he interpreted the play's issues. The animal rights issues blended with racial issues, creating confusion given that the text does not directly address issues of race. The *New York Times* reviewer Margo Jefferson took issue with the casting of De Shields: "We are watching a man pretending to be an ape assault a woman in ways that men often do. How could we not be upset, and how could there not be more layers of discomfort and distress when the actor looks so African and the woman looks so Nordic?" (n.p.). Jefferson finds that she cannot help but interpret the rape scene between Allison and Graham through a racial and gendered lens although Graham is a gorilla. Even De Shields himself was questioned for taking on the role of the gorilla. In his *New York Times* article about the production at Florida State University, Bruce Weber reports:

[De Shields] admits he has been chastised by other black actors for taking on a role that perpetuates a racial insult ... “It occurred to me that being qualified to assay this role, it is inescapable I’m bringing to it a sensibility that is racially explosive,” he said. “No conscious adult can come to the play and not think of O.J. or Kobe Bryant or any African-American male who has achieved trophy status.” (n.p.)

De Shields recognizes that previous negative portrayals of African-American men as violent murders and rapists ghost his portrayal of the gorilla. It is clear that the casting of the gorilla as an African American man amidst an otherwise all-white cast brought issues of race to the forefront in discourses about the performance in a manner that the casting of the gorilla as a white man did not.

For Chaudhuri, De Shields’s animality was the most important part of the performance and the issue of race secondary. In her reading of the performance, Chaudhuri was taken by De Shields’s ability to act the gorilla. She observes:

André De Shields delivered a performance crafted of such acute observation, humility, affection, and generosity that spectators actually shared in some of the inter-species relationality that the play was about. Like a modern-day shaman, the actor used the body and spirit of the animal to lead us on a journey into another order of existence, one that our organisms still remember, even if our social identities do not. (“Animal Acts” 38)

Chaudhuri believes that De Shields’s tapped into actual animality with his performance, and that he was able to bring spectators into another realm in which two different species can come together. Chaudhuri also suggests a break in spectators’ ontologies in which they are animal organisms on

one hand and social identities on the other. Spectators can experience the animality of the performance as animal organisms while going beyond the bounds of their social identities, identities that are constituted by race, gender, and sexuality. For Chaudhuri it is important that the audience not allow De Shields's race to get in the way of experiencing the inter-species relationality of the performance. She laments,

Sadly, De Shields's brilliant performance could not overcome the clamor of offense taken by those who could not get past the actor's race. Yet it was precisely the risk the production took in casting a black actor as an ape that made it so much more interesting than the rather conventional drama of ideas the play otherwise was. In having an opportunity to face down the racist stereotype *from within*, as it were—that is by fully embodying the being of the animal, rather than merely mimicking its superficial behavior—De Shields was changing the equation that for so long denigrated animals as well as the “othered” groups to whom they are compared. (“Animal Acts” 38-39)

There is a tension in Chaudhuri's reading about how she believes the audience should negotiate De Shields's race. On one hand, she seems to believe the audience should be able to “get past the actor's race” (39), suggesting that the audience should dismiss race as an issue. On the other hand, Chaudhuri seems to ask the audience to interpret De Shields's casting as a progressive acknowledgement of and commentary on the historical consideration of African people as ape-like. For Chaudhuri, the othering of animals and oppressed peoples are two parts of the same “equation,” to use her term. De Shields's ability to embody animality therefore tackles the issues of racial as well as animal oppression at the same time. Chaudhuri suggests that audiences give De Shields's animality and his race equal weight.

However, as “the clamor of offense” over the how the gorilla was cast indicates, De Shields’s race seems to be the weightier issue. This is likely due to audience awareness of racial stereotypes of black men, as Patricia Hill Collins reminds, “African American men live with the ideological legacy that constructs Black male heterosexuality through images of wild beasts, criminals, and rapists” (102). Indeed, in looking at De Shields’s embodiment of the ape one must consider past as well as current associations between black people and apes.

The depiction of African American men, and African Americans in general, as hypersexual and violent animals has deep historical roots that date back to when European explorers first encountered Africans. Winthrop Jordan argues, “Englishmen were introduced to anthropoid apes and to Negroes at the same time and the same place” (29), and that this introduction contributed to the long-standing association of apes and Africans among white Europeans. However, Monique Scott contends that it was not the introduction of Europeans to Africans and apes at the same time that led to the African-ape association because Europeans had had contact with Africans before apes, and suggests that it was the bestialization of Africans in order to justify slavery that fostered the African-ape association (25). Regardless of the origin of the association, the African-ape association fit into eighteenth-century hierarchical thinking. As Collins describes, “The new category of primitive situated Africans just below Whites and right above apes and monkeys, who marked this boundary distinguishing humans from animals. Thus, within Western science, African people and apes occupied a fluid border zone between humans and animals” (99). Just as Haraway places apes at the border zone of nature and culture, Collins describes how Europeans viewed African people at the border of cultured humans and uncultured apes. Eighteenth-century scientific classification systems such as those of Carl Linnaeus treated Africans as a separate species from Europeans. Linnaeus lists characteristics of

Homo africanus: “black, phlegmatic, lax, black, curly hair; silky skin, apelike nose, swollen lips” (qtd. in Pieterse 40). Africans were not just considered apelike in their appearance, but also in their customs as the 1725 physician James Houston likened the behaviors of West Africans to that of monkeys (Pieterse 40).

Exhibitions in the nineteenth century that paired African people with apes exemplified the association between Africans and apes. For example, in 1845 two Bushmen children from South Africa were put in an exhibition alongside baboons and other monkeys suggesting that the children belonged to a species other than human (Goodall 83). Scott observes that the African-ape association solidified in the nineteenth century due to the concept of Darwinian evolution (26). She explains:

Where Africans and apes might have once been deemed to just share superficial characteristics (dark skin crudely equated with dark fur), in the language of Darwinism these characteristics could now share the weight of evolutionary similarity. Darkness could now be invoked as a shared primitive evolutionary trait, to the neglect of countless other characteristics shared between apes, Europeans, and the rest of humanity. Paradoxically, evolutionary thought allowed Africans certain biological affinities with Europeans through shared ancestry while also significantly distancing them by focusing on biological affinities thought to be shared uniquely among Africans and apes. (26)

Darwinian evolution added scientific weight to existing social hierarchies and was used to confirm long held myths of African inferiority by justifying them in new manner.

The association of African people with apes carried into the twentieth century as demonstrated by a book titled *The Negro a Beast*, published in 1900, in which Chas Carrol

provides scientific data from his time that measures the differences between black and white bodies from head to toe. Starting with the head, Carrol compares black bodies to white while constantly likening the characteristics of black bodies to apes. For example, Carrol writes, “The length and narrowness of the Negro’s skull is a character of the ape” (46). Carrol mentions each part of the body, ending his comparisons with a repetition of the phrase the “Negro presents another character of the ape”(58). Carroll goes on to argue that whites and blacks are of differing species based on differences in brain weight (105-107). Biased scientific claims such as this solidified the association of black men with apes. The early twentieth-century exhibition of Ota Benga, a pygmy from the Congo who was exhibited alongside an orangutan at the New York Zoological Park, epitomized the African-ape associations such as those espoused by Carrol (Bradford and Blume 178). Zookeepers had Benga sleep in the Monkey House and kept him locked in a cage except for certain times when they would let him out to perform for spectators. Benga was forced to mingle with an orangutan that was often let into his cage (181). The conception of Africans and African Americans as being located at the border of the human persists in many ways today.

In his essay, “Racist Discourse and the Negro-Ape Metaphor” Tommy Lott argues that the association of African Americans and apes is alive and well, citing how the police officers involved in the Rodney King beating referred to African Americans as “gorillas” (7). Lott asserts that there are historical roots in the association dating back to Aristotle who considered “alien people as monsters and inhuman variations of the species” (8). Lott provides several examples of African “Hottentots” being associated with apes in scientific discourses of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (8). Many thought “Hottentots” were missing links between humans and apes (Pieterse 41). Some even believed that the “Hottentots” were a product of

sexual intercourse between apes and humans (Lott 8). While the view that apes and African people produced offspring has been debunked for quite some time, remnants of that myth persists today. For example, growing up I encountered the racist myth that the HIV virus began as a result of Africans mating with monkeys.

A recent study that has attracted lots of attention finds that although black people have been historically associated with apes, contemporary people still make that association. The study, done by Philip Atiba Goff and his colleagues, shows that even in the absence of explicit racist attitudes many people associate apes and black people on a subconscious level. Researchers conducted six different studies mainly with groups of college students comprised of both white and non-white people. For the first study, researchers created three different groups. The first group was subliminally shown black faces, the second white faces, and the third a nondescript line drawing. After being shown the faces students were asked to identify various groups of animals including apes. The images were made fuzzy at first, but were made clearer frame-by-frame. The students shown the black faces were quicker to identify apes while the students shown white faces were slower. The second study addressed the reverse question. Instead of looking at the association of black faces with apes, the study tested whether subjects associated apes with black faces. The subjects that were first shown ape pictures were more drawn to black faces than subjects who were not shown ape faces. The researchers concluded that even students who were unaware of the black-ape association made a connection between black faces and apes. The third study tested whether participants associated Asian faces with apes. The researchers found that it is not just the faces of any oppressed group that gets associated with apes, only the black faces. The fourth study tested whether students' attitudes towards black people facilitated the black-ape association. The researchers asked participants to

categorize “Black and White names by race at the same time as they categorized animal names as either apes or big cats” (300). The researchers found that the participants “were faster to categorize target words when Black was paired with *ape* than when Black was paired with *feline*” (300). The study also demonstrated that many of the participants were unaware of the black-ape association. The fifth study tested whether the participants would condone violence against a person thought to be black when primed with subliminal images of apes. The results of the study were that the subjects believed the violence was justified when primed with images of apes and the suspects believed to be black. The sixth study tested the frequency of ape-like associations in black death penalty cases versus white. The researchers found that blacks suspects were more frequently associated with apes in the press and more likely to be put to death than their white counterparts.

The black-ape association has also been noted in a *New York Times* article titled “The Ape in American Bigotry, From Thomas Jefferson to 2009,” which traces the history of the association of African Americans with apes in the context of the United States. The author, Brent Staples argues, “The effort to dehumanize black people by characterizing them as apes is central to our national history” (n.p.). Staples supports this assertion by citing Thomas Jefferson’s claim that “male orangutans were sexually drawn to Negro women” (n.p.). Staples further observes, “Ape propaganda reached a hysterical pitch during periods when African Americans were winning rights or making racial progress. During the 1950’s, for example, racists reacted to the movement toward integration with placards and broadsides depicting apelike caricatures of Negro men performing heinous acts or making sexual advances on the flower of white womanhood” (n.p.). The association of African Americans and apes exists today as evidenced by the circulation of images of President Obama as an ape. In 2009, a *New York Post* cartoon drew

controversy for insinuating President Obama was a chimp. The cartoon depicted police officers shooting a chimp along with the line: “They’ll have to find someone new to write the next stimulus bill” (Chan and Peters). The cartoonist intended to satirize a recent police shooting of a chimp, but many readers of the cartoon considered it racist, flooding the *Post* with complaints (Chan and Peters). More recently, Orange County Republican Marilyn Davenport created a scandal by circulating an image of Obama as a chimpanzee-child with chimp parents via email. Davenport claimed not to see anything wrong with the image that questioned Obama’s citizenship with the subtitle: “Now you know why-No Birth certificate!” (Banks 2). Yet the image was blatantly offensive in suggesting a link between African Americans and apes. Indeed a Google search for Obama as an ape turns up dozens of images as well as images of the first lady, Michelle Obama, as an ape. While images of African Americans as apes may be more taboo than they once were, it is not difficult to find references to African Americans as apes in images or words on the Internet. The research done by Goff and his colleagues raises critical questions about the casting of De Shields as a gorilla. The association of black people and apes is not as distant as one might think.

In *Prymate*, race, gender, and sexuality intersect with animality to produce a less than savory image of Graham that coheres with longstanding stereotypes of African-American men. There can be no understanding of Graham as a symbol of Chaudhuri’s inter-species relationality that does not take the primacy of the character’s race into account. In this case, race intersects with species identity rendering Graham a racialized other. According to Harvey Young, race may be a more prominent factor in interpreting character identity than gender and sexuality, and to that I would add animality. Young argues:

The pervasiveness of racial profiling and its ability to entrap a wide array of black

bodies underscores the necessity of the current enterprise: to demonstrate the similar embodied experiences of differently placed, temporarily and geographically, black bodies, and to urge a reconsideration of post-race and/or pluralist accounts that maintain recognizable blackness is no longer a determining condition in the experience of the body. (11-12)

Citing examples of racial profiling that pervade contemporary times, Young maintains that race can be an immediate signifier of identity and that “the black body has been given compulsory visibility. It has been *made to be given to be seen*” (12). Graham, as a scientific experiment, is on display in a way that coheres with the historical display of black bodies. Avrum seeks to bring Graham back to the lab from which he came where he has been observed and experimented on. Graham is an alien black body subject to the whims of the white scientists who keep him, whether for morbid purposes such as Avrum’s HIV experiments or more personal purposes such as Esther’s desire for companionship. Graham has no agency in determining how his body will be used or abused.

Esther’s position as a white scientist studying a gorilla recalls the white privilege of primate scientists. Haraway points out in her book *Primate Visions* that historically apes have been depicted as the domain of white female scientists as (152-56), Jane Goodall being the most well-known female scientist to study apes. In this sense, the play reflects a tradition of scientific inquiry that has alienated African Americans from participating in primate research. Graham is subjugated to a white woman both as an African American man and as an object of primate research. Graham’s animality intersects with De Shields’s racial identity to produce a doubly subjugated individual.

The play does not advance the position of black men or gorillas through its violent and hypersexual depiction of Graham. The gorilla offers little in terms of redemptive qualities, especially once the rape scene occurs. Graham functions as an intruder into the all-white “civilized” world of the play because he clearly does not belong in the society of scientists. Reading Graham as an African American implies that there is also a black/white dichotomy in which white civilized people can control their sexual impulses whereas black uncivilized people cannot. Graham’s massive size and physical capabilities, obsession with white women’s bodies, the focus on his penis, and the fact that he has contracted HIV, all constitute negative stereotypes of black men. The play itself does not deal explicitly with issues of race, making De Shields’s race the elephant in the room, so to speak. Indeed, Graham comes to represent unrestrained black sexuality. He sees what he wants and he takes it, to Allison’s detriment, raising the specter of the black male who rapes the white woman. Despite Esther’s efforts to create a home for Graham, his race, as well as his violent and sexual impulses, keep him alienated from the society in which he finds himself. Graham violates those around him. He violates Avrum with physical violence and violates Allison with sexual violence. In the end, he has to be taken back into captivity to be further alienated from the society in which he lives. The play communicates the idea that African American others do not belong in civilized society, and they must be contained. It seems that Graham, as an uncivilized sexual being, intends to dominate all of the white women around him. In addition to attempting to dominate Allison sexually, Graham attempts to dominate Esther’s sexual activity. When he sees Avrum and Esther in a sexual embrace, he “roughly pushes them apart” (21), effectively demonstrating who is boss to Avrum. Sex and violence become the main features of Graham’s animality.

In addition to being violent and hypersexual, Graham comes to symbolize the spread of the HIV virus, another myth that has been associated with African Americans. The issue of exchanging fluids becomes a recurring theme in the play as the threat of HIV looms throughout. In a highly sexualized scene, Avrum splits a lime with his teeth and exchanges fluids with Esther:

*He tears one half free, the other in his mouth, citrus running down his chin [...]
And she takes it from there, the exchange of fluid ... the kiss extending deep into
the present, if not the future [...] Tongue wet with citrus, she takes a deep draught
of his beer. He takes beer, lime, fluid, from her mouth into his. (21)*

Avrum and Esther are free to exchange fluids since neither of them has HIV and also because of the unlikelihood of contracting the virus through kissing. However, the fear of HIV prevents Avrum from exchanging fluids with Graham because Graham contracts HIV. Graham forces Avrum to take a bite of his apple: “*Graham holds Avrum firmly, effectively controlling him physically; he presses the apple against Avrum’s clamped teeth [...] Graham pushes. Avrum’s jaws open. The apple is introduced. Avrum takes a bite.*” (23). Later we learn that Avrum was reluctant to share an apple with Graham because he had given Graham the HIV virus. The fear of contamination from Graham continues throughout the play. At one point Graham passes out because Avrum shoots him with a tranquilizer dart. When Esther tries to revive him with mouth to mouth, Avrum worries she will contract the virus from him yelling, “What? Christ? No don’t put your mouth on him! He’s...” (29). Avrum implies that one can contract HIV through mouth to mouth with Graham, another way in which Graham is othered by white civilized society.

At the end of the play, the three main characters agree to go back to the lab, presumably so that Avrum may continue his AIDS research on Graham as well as his romantic relationship

with Esther. In the love triangle between Avrum, Graham, and Esther, Avrum comes out as the true winner. Graham will go back to being contained as an animal by white civilized society. Reading race into the ending of the play it seems that Avrum has succeeded in preventing interracial relations between Graham and Esther. This is not to say their relationship was necessarily sexual. Rather, it is to recognize that, in the end, the two white scientists belong together while the companionship between Esther and Graham is disrupted. They are no longer free to dwell in the deserts of New Mexico, but must instead go back to the sanitized environment of the lab where Graham can be displayed, watched, and experimented on.

In the Broadway production of *Prymate*, De Shields fully embodied the animal representation creating a raced, gendered, and sexualized human body enacting apelike movements. Although Chaudhuri implies that De Shields tapped into an essential animality, there is no animal essence because no matter how realistically the gorilla is portrayed the animal is entirely mediated by the actor's human body. Returning to my tripartite understanding of animal drag, the corporeal nature of De Shields's gorilla signifies on three levels: the understanding of De Shields as biologically human, the indicators of his animality as expressed through voice and movement, and the understanding of De Shields as a raced, gendered, and sexualized being. While it may seem De Shields's performance holds the potential to blur the human/animal binary by portraying an animal realistically, there can be no sense of human ontology to be blurred that escapes the mechanisms of race, gender, sexuality, and compulsory visibility. Graham is black. Graham is a man. Graham is heterosexual. These constructed categories intersect with the animality onstage thereby associating a specific type of animality with the identity categories rather than a sense of only being human. Animality and humanity cannot be understood simply in binary terms because the human is constituted by categories of

identity. The presence of animality, then, becomes associated with human identity categories rather than Chaudhuri's sense of inter-species relationality.

This is not to say that the audience cannot read race in a complicated way, or buy Chaudhuri's argument that De Shields tackles racial stereotypes from within. Rather, it is to assert the impossibility of an audience "getting past" an actor's race in animal performances that bring racial tensions to the forefront by virtue of casting choices. By placing an African American actor in the role of a gorilla amid an all-white cast, the play automatically becomes a commentary on past as well as present racial dynamics, dispelling any sense of essential animality existing outside the bounds of social identity and history.

The controversy that ensued over De Shields's performance of an ape raises the question of whether it is possible for a black male to play an ape character without reinscribing the racist ideology such a representation recalls. Based on the De Shields example, I am slow to assert a blunt proscription that black men should never play apes because the apparatus that produced his representation must also be considered. De Shields's ape representation took place within a theatrical apparatus ill equipped to question the racial hierarchy the play presents. This apparatus includes its production on Broadway, the realistic play in which it takes place, and the psychological acting techniques the play requires. A black man performing as ape in the context of a Broadway theatre that caters to white middle-class spectators increases the risk that it will be subsumed within the dominant ideological system that maintains racial hierarchy. This hierarchy is epitomized by the success of the Broadway production of *The Lion King*, which employs a large number of black actors, yet places them within an exoticized realm that coheres with current stereotypes of Africa as an undeveloped continent largely populated with wildlife. When I saw *The Lion King* on Broadway, I could not help but notice the whiteness of the audience, all

too excited to consume safe images of Africans and African Americans as exotic animals removed from immediate social and political context. Just as the performances of blackness in *The Lion King* do not threaten established racial hierarchies, the black ape in *Prymate* maintains racial hierarchy through remaining subjugated.

In addition to the performance venue working against the reception of the black-ape representation as a challenge to racist stereotypes, the realistic form of the play and the type of acting it requires naturalize the racial hierarchy the play presents rather than question it. As a realistic play, *Prymate* is devoid of techniques that could potentially make a black-ape representation seem strange. Rather than encouraging audiences to view the black ape at a critical distance, the representation is flattened against a realist backdrop that encourages audiences to receive it at face value. That De Shields performed the role realistically failed to expose the gap between actor and animalized racial representation, but rather conflated them.

In effect, there may be no way for a black-ape representation to escape the historical baggage it carries. You cannot address compulsory visibility by pretending to be blind. However, a black-ape representation can be viewed critically and in a manner that challenges racial hierarchy if it is performed in such a way that draws attention to its constructed nature. One way in which to do that might be to employ some of the Brechtian techniques Jill Dolan describes in *The Feminist Spectator* that call attention to the constructed nature of performance itself. These techniques include disrupting the narrativity of the piece and creating distance between performer and character (106-109). Dolan's project is to find a way for theatre to challenge gendered hierarchies, and she is careful to note that Brechtian techniques alone are not enough to do so, and insists performances must also work to "foreground gender as a performed role" (101). Similarly, performances of black apes must also foreground race and animality as

performed roles. In addition, a representation of a black ape might also require performance content that more explicitly historicizes the depiction of black male as ape rather than presenting it as straightforward fact.

A Year With Frog and Toad and *Prymate* exhibit two different ways in which animal performances work to abstract human relations. In the case of *A Year With Frog and Toad*, animality provides the excuse for racially homogenized casting and conventional gender roles. The nominal designation of “animal” is enough to condone the white male fantasyland that productions of the play construct. The designation of the play as about animals and for children functions to obscure critical questions about the social world the play presents. In the case of *Prymate*, we see the opposite effect in that the Broadway production of the play attempts to abstract away human qualities such as race in order to represent the animal. Yet race, rather than the animality of the character Graham, proved to be the element that audiences latched onto, moving in on the play’s focus on animal rights. Indeed, the social world the play represents came into question due to the gorilla’s racialization as a black male. It did not matter that the animal character was portrayed in an animal-like fashion, as audiences displayed a predilection for reading human identity into the performance. In the following chapter we will see how playwrights use animals more directly to explore self-consciously issues of identity in relation to human sexuality.

Chapter Four

Queer Uses of the Animal

A 2004 *New York Times* article titled, “Love that Dare not Squeak its Name,” tells the story of Roy and Silo, two male chinstrap penguins at the Central Park Zoo who mated for six years and together raised a chick named Tango. The article describes their relationship: “They exhibit what in penguin parlance is called ‘ecstatic behavior:’ that is, they entwine necks, vocalize to each other, they have sex. Silo and Roy are, to anthropomorphize a bit, gay penguins” (Smith). Roy and Silo drew media attention after attempting to incubate rocks until their zookeeper allowed them to adopt an egg. That decision made Roy and Silo into poster children for gay rights and lead to a controversial children’s book named *And Tango Makes Three*, which topped the most challenged book list from 2006-2010, with the exception of 2009 (American Libraries). Since the book’s publication, there have been multiple attempts to remove it from the children’s sections of libraries into “mature sections” and nonfiction sections, as well as requests to remove the book altogether (Associated Press; McClatchy). The media attention and controversy over the two “gay penguins” attests to the ways in which animals can be powerful symbolic tools onto which human desires are written. Animals function as pawns through which struggles over nature are played out.

Bruce Bagemihl’s foundational study, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*, offers some insight into the sensationalism gay animal narratives incite. Bagemihl documents homosexuality in over 450 species (limiting himself to birds and mammals) (12). Although homosexual activity is common in the animal kingdom the sensationalism that comes with the same-sex couplings of penguins and other animals can be attributed to general ignorance stemming from the lack of documentation of such instances within the scientific

community. Bagemihl finds several reasons why homosexuality in animals has been both overlooked and downplayed. These reasons include the view that homosexuality is an aberration (87), the idea that heterosexuality is assumed even among animals that are not obviously gendered (96), and not counting homosexual activities as sex (106). Bagemihl also critiques scientists' explanations of homosexual activity that recall homophobic responses to human homosexuality. These explanations include "the idea that homosexuality is an imitation of heterosexuality, a 'substitute' activity when the opposite sex is unavailable, a 'mistake,' or a pathological condition" (123). Bagemihl debunks each one of the assumptions using examples from the animal kingdom, demonstrating the extent to which homophobia has influenced scientific studies of animal sexuality.

Discomfort with the idea of animal homosexuality extends beyond the scientific community. In an article titled, "Penguins, Dog Vomit, and Human Sexuality," the religious conservative author Gary DeMar critiques those who consider Bagemihl's study and examples such as Roy and Silo as evidence that homosexuality is acceptable. DeMar writes, "Homosexuals extrapolate that what animals do naturally in nature applies to what higher 'animals' can do naturally without any moral judgments attached. But the lower animal/higher animal model breaks down when so-called natural behaviors in animals are considered" (n.p.) DeMar cites the proverb, "a dog returns to his own vomit" as an example of an animal behavior that would not be desirable for humans to do. The thrust of DeMar's argument is that we cannot model ourselves off of animals because there are plenty of acts animals engage in such as raping, killing, or eating their young, that would be morally reprehensible for humans to commit. If we accept homosexuality as morally sound because it occurs in nature, then we also have to be willing to condone a plethora of other animal activities. DeMar's argument runs into problems, however,

because he has already condemned homosexuality in advance. DeMar makes his judgment of homosexuality clear by aligning it with atrocious acts such as raping and killing. Nevertheless, DeMar's critique draws attention to one of the pitfalls of building a politics on the idea of nature, for doing so indiscriminately assumes that what we consider natural is positive. Sociologist Jeffrey Weeks problematizes the concept of "the natural": "the meaning of 'Nature' is not transparent. Its truth has been used to justify our innate violence and aggression and our fundamental sociability. It has been deployed to legitimise our basic evil, and to celebrate our fundamental goodness. There are, it often seems, as many natures as there are conflicting values" (62). Because nature has been used to explain a range of acts from good to abhorrent, it does not necessarily cast homosexuality in a positive light. Further, deferring to nature as a justification for homosexuality leads to an essentialism that ignores how concepts of sexual identity have shifted throughout history.

Of course the issue of homosexuality occurring in nature has become a prominent point of contention in contemporary debates about gay and lesbian rights. Gay and lesbian activists have championed the occurrences of animal homosexuality as proof that sexual orientation is rooted in biology. The logic follows that gays and lesbians deserve equal rights because they cannot change their biology. In a speech advocating for homosexuality as a biologically influenced phenomenon, molecular biologist Warren C. Lathe III cites instances of homosexuality in rats and flies as evidence that human homosexuality occurs naturally. While Lathe acknowledges that animal behaviors are not always indicators of human behavior, he insists that "if we expect [a trait] theoretically and see it in other populations we can reasonably expect to see it in humans" (23). Instances of homosexuality found in nature often generate controversy as such instances are viewed as validation of gay and lesbian lives.

In a 2010 article in the *New York Times Magazine* titled, “Can Animals be Gay?” Jon Mooallem tells the story of Lindsay C. Young, a biologist in Hawaii who discovered that a particular breed of bird, the albatross, formed female-female life partnerships. Young’s discovery caused controversy when the news media got a hold of the information, dubbing the birds “lesbian albatrosses.” Since then there has been a plethora of discourses regarding the “lesbian” birds, some celebrating them from a liberal gay rights perspective and some denigrating them from a conservative family values perspective. Gay rights advocates contacted Young asking her to fly a rainbow flag at the female birds’ nests, and a conservative senator put Young’s paper online with the post, “Your Tax Dollars at Work,” even though Young’s research was not funded by federal money. Although Young resists applying human terms to her study, the terms “gay” and “lesbian” nevertheless emerged as labels for the birds in popular discourses, and the results of her work were interpreted through the civil rights lens. The Young case demonstrates the extent to which pro and anti gay advocates view queer animals as a threat to the prevailing heteronormative order.

Over the last decade penguins in particular have emerged as both emblems of heterosexuality as well as homosexuality (Sturgeon 102). Environmental studies scholar Noël Sturgeon describes what she calls “penguin family values” as “the use of the sexual and mating habits of penguins as tokens in the culture wars over the naturalness of heterosexuality or homosexuality” (109). These culture wars have led scholars to examine the use of the penguin as a symbol of both conservative and liberal family values. Scholars such as Judith Halberstam and Sturgeon have pointed out the heteronormativity embedded in the 2005 documentary *March of the Penguins* about the trials and tribulations of emperor penguins as they brave the harsh climate of the Antarctic (Halberstam, “Animating” 268; Sturgeon 110). Dubbing the film

“penguin porn” (“Animating” 267), Halberstam contends that the film’s “gaze remains ... obstinately trained upon the comforting spectacle of ‘the couple,’ ‘the family unit,’ ‘love,’ ‘loss,’ heterosexual reproduction and the emotional architecture that supposedly welds all these moving parts together” (268). At the same time, Halberstam argues the film ignores the “homo or non repro queer penguins” (270). Due to its heteronormative framing, the film became a favorite of Christian fundamentalists who lauded the film for its exhibition of family values such as “monogamy, sacrifice, and childrearing” (Halberstam, “Animating” 269). Similar discourses of penguin family values have emerged in relation to both “straight” penguin narratives as well as “gay” penguin narratives.

Countering the conservative appropriation of penguin narratives, Susan Talburt and Claudia Matus have documented what they call, “gay penguin discourses,” contending that this discourse is characterized by “Romantic love, family, parenting, community, sexuality, and morality” (2). The discourses Talburt and Matus find apply assimilationist logic to same-sex coupled penguins that mimic normative reproductive timelines. They observe, “the ideal gay penguin comes out as gay, falls in love, follows natural desires to parent, and may marry as a reward” (1). Such discourses read penguin lives through a heterosexual/homosexual binary. Sturgeon finds a similar set of normative discourses in her “penguin family values” (102). For example, she observes, “the Central Park penguins were made into a living symbol of the naturalness and success of gay marriage” (111). However, Talburt, Matus, and Sturgeon limit their examination of penguin discourses to news outlets and films. This chapter focuses on how two plays about same-sex coupled penguins challenge prevailing narratives of penguin hetero/homosexuality as well as gay penguin discourses that attempt to normalize penguin sexuality: Steven Svoboda’s *The Penguin Tango* and Marc Acito’s *Birds of a Feather*. I argue

that *The Penguin Tango* and *Birds of a Feather* denaturalize heterosexuality and homosexuality as identities, thereby queering the gay penguin discourses that attempt to assign stable sexual identity labels to penguins. In both plays animals are not used as symbols of “the natural,” rather they self-consciously queer human assumptions about penguin sexuality, essentially mocking the imposition of human sexual norms onto penguin narratives.

The Penguin Tango combines three stories of same-sex coupled penguins: Roy and Silo at the Central Park Zoo, Wendell and Cass from the Brooklyn Zoo, and penguins from the Bremerhaven Zoo in Germany. The play, set in Germany, focuses on Roy and Silo’s struggles as they deal with human interventions into their sexual lives. These interventions mock actual events that took place in Germany when zookeepers attempted to break up male same-sex penguin pairs by separating them and flying in female penguins from Sweden to mate to with them (Talbert and Matus 3).

Here it is important to note that the play was originally produced through theriomorphic animal acting. The actors wore human clothes and behaved like humans except for waddling while they walked. The human body comes to the forefront of the performance as the penguins become raced, gendered, and sexualized. There are several layers of performance that must be taken into account. The human actors masquerade as animals, even if it is mainly at the level of nominal signification. The animals then masquerade as humans by wearing human clothing and cross-dressing. The fact that humans perform as animals performing as gendered humans creates layers of alienation between animal identity and human gender norms. Svoboda draws attention to the fact that gender is not distinguishable among penguins with a slide projection (2), making it plain the human actors gender and sexualize the animals.

It is also noteworthy that in the original production the Wendell and Cass couple was interracial (Fox), thereby challenging the white normativity that generally occurs in animal plays. The choice to make Wendell and Cass an interracial couple in a play composed of all animal characters renders the natural world racially inclusive. The director, Svodoba himself, acknowledges that the penguins are raced, gendered, and sexualized via the human actors. Unlike *Prymate*, in which an African-American actor was cast as the only animal character subjugated among an all-white human cast, the choice to make Wendell and Cass interracial implies a more pluralistic animal realm.

In terms of form, *The Penguin Tango* uses both meta-theatrical and documentary style elements. The play is framed as if taking place as part of a zoo exhibit, doubly positioning the audience as both spectators of the play and spectators at the zoo. Certain animals indicate they are aware they are performing with direct presentations to the audience. Periodic interventions from a zoo announcer let the audience know when they are watching the penguins perform actions intended for the zoo spectators as opposed to watching actions behind the scenes. The documentary style quality emerges from the framing of the play as inspired by true stories. Slides of newspaper headlines following the relationships of the penguins reinforce the true to life feel. Slides educate the audience about Humboldt penguins in a manner reminiscent of the teaching mission of actual zoos. At the same time, the overt educational framing creates the sense that the zoo carefully constructs what the audience consumes. The on and offstage animal performances suggest that the zoo contrives a particular version of nature for its spectators, leaving audiences to question the concept of the natural.

The play positions the audience as learners about penguin sexuality, opening with Wendell teaching the audience facts about Humboldt penguins with a slideshow. This framing

positions the audience as unknowing spectators who must learn the ins and outs of penguin sexuality. At the same time as play positions the audience as learners about sexuality, the play portrays penguins as learners about human culture. As much as the audience must be schooled on penguin sexual practices, the penguins must school themselves on human sexual practices. There are no assumptions about what is natural either for penguins or humans. Reading from a book, Wendell explains the conventional birds and bees of human sexuality: “the humans have some odd deviations under there [sic] dresses and suits. It appears that ‘females’ have dresses and bows and have an ice crater. Whereas ‘males’ wear suits and ties and have an icicle” (Svoboda 3). It makes sense that Wendell has to read about human anatomy from a book given that male and female penguins do not have distinguishable genitalia. Wendell’s use of euphemisms such as “icicle” and “ice crater” distinguishes him as a penguin. Svoboda renders human anatomy and binary gender roles as entirely foreign to the animals. This unknowing stance continues throughout the play as the penguins try to figure out human sexual culture. From the beginning it is clear that human gender roles do not apply to penguins.

The play treats male and female gender as social constructions as Gomez, a female tomboyish penguin, enters claiming she has been abducted by the zookeepers and given a bow to wear. The play denaturalizes conventional femininity through Gomez’s character by positioning her as a learner about human femininity. Wendell gives her a copy of *Cosmo*, which he deems “the training manual for human mating rituals” (3), so she can learn how to be feminine. However, Wendell makes clear that human mating rituals do not apply to penguins because penguins “choose their mates based on the quality of their nest” (5). In contrast with this fact,

Svoboda satirizes human mating rituals through the characters Giovanni and Curly, two male penguins intent on mating with Gomez. Giovanni is a stereotype of masculine gender norms that speaks love poetry to Gomez while Curly is a weakling with a “molting problem” (6).

The play recalls Judith Butler’s essay, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” in which Butler claims, “Compulsory heterosexuality sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic” (312) and that homosexuality is often viewed as a mere copy of heterosexuality (313). Svoboda renders heterosexuality as a copy by denaturalizing its production and demonstrating that it is an enforced norm. Compulsory heterosexuality is construed as inauthentic, unoriginal, and false when Roy attempts to imitate heterosexual gender roles by wearing a dress and pearls and treating Tango in a motherly fashion in contrast to his masculine partner Silo. Roy indicates the constructed nature of his gender performance when he observes, “It takes a dress and a suit to make a chick. One of us has to wear the dress” (15). Roy sees reproduction as the product of performed gender roles, a notion that Svoboda enforces with the zookeepers’ attempts to enforce penguin heterosexuality.

The denaturalizing of heterosexuality in the play occurs through the plotline in which the German zookeepers, whom we never see, abduct Roy and force him to be heterosexual. The zookeepers make Roy stop wearing dresses, give him pants and a polo shirt, and call him “male.” While he was abducted the zookeepers mocked Roy and called him “schwul,” a German term for homosexuality. The proper gender roles and sexual identity labels create identity crises for Roy and Silo. Roy goes to Wendell for help, rejecting the identity labels the humans have imposed on him. Silo also worries about being “schwul” and goes to Wendell asking to purchase a dress for Roy so that they will no longer be considered “schwul.” Yet Roy refuses the feminine gender role he once embraced: “The dress, the pearls, the rock they were all about having a chick. And I

don't know much about the 'schwul,' but I know it means we can't have a chick. If we can't have a chick, I don't need a dress" (27). For Roy, gender roles are only useful as long as they lead to his ultimate goal of reproduction. Svoboda stabs at the notion that the goal of any gay couple should be to reproduce just like heterosexual couples. Wendell and Cass, for example, are perfectly content without raising a chick whereas Roy parodies heterosexuality in his desperation for a chick. Now that the heteronormative veneer of Roy and Silo's relationship has been disrupted, they must deal with the issue of what the absence of a chick means for their identities.

Through their insults, the zookeepers introduce Roy to the concept of homosexual identity, which none of the penguins have knowledge of before. When Roy consults his fellow penguins they are totally confused by the term "schwul" and initially talk about it as if it were a disease:

ROY. I need you to prove I am not a "schwul."

WENDELL. I am not sure I understand.

ROY. I need you to use the human's "literature" to prove that I am not a "male,"
that I can still have a chick, and that I am not infected with the "schwul."

CURLY. (*Jumping up from under the bed*) What's a "male"?

ROY. Curly?!

WENDELL. It's a human term for people who wear suits and have icicles.

CURLY. Then what's a "Schwul"? (23)

The play also denaturalizes the idea of homosexual identity as the penguins, who possess a very human subjectivity, have no idea what the term means. Wendell and Cass have an unassuming attitude toward the sexual identity label:

ROY. The humans said I am "schwul" because I mate with Silo and we've never

had a chick.

WENDELL. I've never had a chick. Cass has never had a chick. We mate together. Oh my, if mating with another penguin and not having chicks makes you "schwul" then Cass and I are –You infected us with the "schwul." (23)

The penguins have no use for sexual identity labels, either gay or straight. They simply have sexual practices that are beyond the bounds of human identity. If it were not for the human zookeepers, there would be no penguin sexual identity at all. Even Curly takes an unassuming stance towards the label, nonchalantly volunteering, "I'll be a schwul" so that he may sleep in the same bed as Roy, Silo, Wendell, and Cass (31). The penguins blindly go along with whatever the humans have presented them.

The sense that penguins have no awareness of sexual identity emerges more fully as they go to great lengths to figure out the mystery of "schwul," even kidnapping a flamingo and grilling him for an answer. Wendell displays a flamingo named Phillipe and introduces him as "the homosexual"(47) in a way that recalls Foucault's declaration that the homosexual is now a species (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 43). The discussion reveals that there are vast differences between flamingo mating practices and penguin mating practices, rendering the animal world as sexually diverse. For example, flamingos have a series of sexual partners and do not become life-long mates whereas the Humboldt penguins remain monogamous mates for life. The sexual diversity of the animal world works to queer penguin discourses that inscribe monogamy as the most desirable quality for penguins to have. By showing that there are alternatives to the Humboldt penguin life style, Svoboda teaches the audience that not all birds maintain monogamous sexual relationships, effectively queering bird sex.

Another way in which the play queers gay penguin discourse is through the absence of homophobia amongst the animals in the play. The play portrays homophobia as a distinctly human sentiment that only comes from the zookeepers. A key difference between homosexuality in humans and homosexuality in animals is the absence of homophobia among animals. Science studies scholar Myra Hird observes, “The most notable difference between human and nonhuman animals is that, among nonhuman animals, homosexuality does not invite negative reactions from other animals” (118). Svoboda’s play marks the absence of homophobia among animals as there is no separation between the “gay” animals and the “straight” animals.

The play also satirizes gay penguin discourses through the story of Roy and Silo. Whereas the media inscribes the Roy and Silo saga with discourses that sentimentalize their incubation of rocks, the play turns their incubation of rocks into a farce. For example, Svoboda makes it obvious to all the other penguins that Roy incubates a rock.

GOMEZ. You know you are holding a rock, right?

ROY. Tango is not a rock. [...]

WENDELL. We buy into the delusion to keep Royale happy. (8)

Even Roy’s partner Silo does not validate the rock Roy attempts to hatch:

ROY. Tango’s cold.

SILLO. Tango’s a rock.

ROY. Tango, sweetie don’t listen. Daddy Silo’s upset.

SILLO. Tango’s a rock that you found at the bottom of the swimming pond.

ROY. Tango is an expression of our love. If Tango isn’t real, then our love
isn’t real. (14)

Svoboda mocks the heterosexual narrative that insists reproduction is the ultimate goal of mating with Roy's declaration that he and Silo need to have a chick to make their love real. This idea counters the gay penguin discourses that insist that Roy and Silo, and other same-sex penguin couples, should be able to adopt and form nuclear families. Clearly Roy and Silo do not share the same "penguin family values." Whereas Roy is determined to have a chick, Silo is determined to get a job in Sea World as an entertainer. This difference in values counters the prevailing discourses that position the two penguins as having the same values in terms of hatching and raising a chick. Talburt and Matus outline the prevailing gay penguin discourses:

the penguin's "coming out" initiates a seemingly natural and inevitable chain of discourse. Coming out leads to a discourse of "real love" and "devotion" between penguins, positioning them as "good"... Following from coming out and true love is the "natural urge" to reproduce. (3)

Silo is not the only penguin in the play that lacks the biological imperative to reproduce. Cass and Wendell, an older gay couple, also have no desire to raise chicks. In fact, even the "straight" penguins such as Gomez and Giovanni do not make reproduction the focus of their lives. This is significant because it challenges the prevailing penguin discourse that considers the nuclear family as ideal for all penguins.

The main people concerned with reproduction are the zookeepers, Silo, and the unseen spectators at the zoo for whom penguin mating becomes an attraction to the exhibit. The zookeepers seem obsessed with heterosexual penguin reproduction as declared early in the play with a voiceover announcement from the zoo stating: "Our goal at Bremerhaven zoo is to save the Humboldt penguin from extinction ...our zookeepers are beginning the first stage in our experiment to save the Humboldt penguin for future generations" (1). The experiments that

follow attempt to get the penguins to mate in opposite-sex couples, emphasizing the ways in which animal sexuality is often “reduced to a purely reproductive function” (Alaimo 59).

The zookeepers introduce aversion therapy by implanting a chip in Roy’s head that delivers an electric shock whenever he sees his partner Silo. The zookeepers then introduce him to Dia, a Swedish penguin who is to be Roy’s new mate. As the zookeepers attempt to force Roy to reproduce with Dia, it becomes clear that heterosexuality is an act as Roy plots to fake sex with Dia. Svoboda parodies the real life intervention of the German zookeepers that flew in Swedish birds to mate with the same-sex oriented penguins.

Dia is an extreme stereotype of female gender roles. The fact that Dia has a Swedish heritage and is sexy recalls German stereotypes of Swedish women as Smilla Ebeling and Bonnie Spanier state, “Germans tend to see Swedish women as highly feminine, attractive, sexy, and very open minded when it comes to engaging sex”(130). In contrast to Dia, Gomez is a tomboyish female thereby demonstrating gender diversity among the animals at the zoo. Dia’s sole purpose is not to find a life long mate; rather the zookeepers send her only to change Roy’s sexual orientation and to produce an egg. Roy will not get a chance to raise the chick since Dia’s stop at the German zoo is one among many. Dia is hyper sexualized and frequently asks Roy to make her “hot.” Roy has no intentions of mating with Dia, and he keeps putting it off until he realizes that mating with her may be the only way to get the zookeepers off his back so that he can be with his true love, Silo. However, after rejecting Dia so many times, Roy can no longer make Dia feel “hot” and she has to teach him how to court her saying, “You need to make Dia ‘hot’, until then no mate. First step: Romance Dia” (56). Roy fails to learn how to seduce Dia and turns to Giovanni to teach him the ways of heterosexual courtship. Heterosexuality does not come naturally to all the penguins because some have to be taught.

In addition to learning the ways of heterosexuality, Roy must negotiate interpellations into homosexuality. The penguins find an anti-gay book that pathologizes homosexuality, and they begin to accept the term “schwul” as an identity. Wendell defines homosexuality: “I think it means two suits or two dresses mating and not having chicks. Clearly we are all Homosexual” (74). The penguins begin to accept homosexuality as part of their identities but treat it as an embarrassment. Roy begins to view himself as “a violation of nature”(76) and believes he can rid himself of homosexuality by mating with Dia. By showing the penguins negotiating homosexual identity, Svoboda challenges the prevailing discourses that automatically assume that penguins exist in a binary frame of hetero/homosexuality. Svoboda renders homosexual identity as a foreign concept to the penguins and treats it as an entirely human phenomenon. However, gradually the penguins and the flamingo begin to accept “schwul” as an essential identity and seek to interpellate Roy into identifying with that category:

WENDELL. Sweetie, the “schwul” are staging an intervention.

PHILLIPE. In order to protect the “schwul” everywhere from the evil of
humanity, you can’t cloaca kiss with Dia. [...]

WENDELL. If your cloaca touches Dia’s cloaca you will be held up as proof by
the humans that being “schwul” can be cured. (82).

Roy resists their interpellations and eventually has sex with Dia, but only so that he can be with Silo. Roy then sleeps with Silo despite the pain of being zapped by the chip. Roy and Silo’s mating transforms Dia’s attitude toward same-sex relationships and she decides to give her egg to them. Dia’s conversion indicates what many gay rights advocates believe heterosexuals ought to do, which is to sympathize with gays and lesbians and allow them to adopt.

The animals trick Roy into believing he is pregnant by feeding him bad fish, which makes him bloated, and then make him think he has laid Dia's egg. Near the end of the play Svoboda neatly wraps up the love lives of the animals with a mating for life ceremony involving Roy and Silo, Gomez and Giovanni, Cass and Wendell, and Phillipe and Dia. If the play had ended on that note, I would consider it complicit in gay penguin discourses that make marriage and reproduction the ultimate goal of animals and humans alike. However, Svoboda foils the "happily ever after" ending by including what lies ahead for these animals. Wendell explains:

Gomez will slowly leach the poetry out of Giovanni's life. As much as
 Phillipe loves Dia there is still fun to be had with other flamingos ...
 The worst pain to come awaits Roy and Silo. The humans aren't done
 experimenting with us penguins. (113)

The experiments continue and Silo states that he will get a chip in his head and have to mate with a female penguin named Scrappy, a plotline that mimics the reality of Silo leaving Roy for a female. Although the animals participate in a mating for life ceremony, their love lives are still not contained by normative discourses of hetero/homosexuality. Interestingly, when Tango is born in the last scene of the play, all of the penguins volunteer to participate in raising the chick, extending the family unit beyond Roy and Silo.

Ultimately Svoboda's play takes the audience on a learning journey that stresses the differences between penguin and human sexuality. Svoboda draws attention to the ways in which humans intervene in the sex lives of penguins either by supporting penguins by giving them eggs or by trying to destroy same-sex couples by separating them and forcing them to mate with female penguins. The play satirizes the tendency of humans to read themselves into penguin lives and to impose gender and sexual norms on other species. The fact that human actors

animate the penguin characters illuminates the way in which humans are subject to societal norms.

In challenging societal norms regarding sexuality, Svoboda engages with both pro and anti gay discourses about the naturalness of homosexuality. The penguins confront the notion that homosexuality is an abomination, asserting love triumphs over biology. Silo claims, “The stupid humans don’t even understand love. All they see is ‘biology’”(93). When Dia sees Roy and Silo mate, her heteronormative ideology is eliminated. She exclaims, “Roy and Silo mate despite Dia. Despite pain. Despite Biology. It most glorious thing Dia ever seen” (95). The penguins discover that Roy and Silo’s love persists despite adversity. This notion coheres with liberal gay rights discourses that portray gays and lesbians as equally deserving of loving relationships as their heterosexual counterparts. Svoboda challenges the notion that there is no biological basis for homosexuality by including Bagemihl’s research on homosexuality in animals. Wendell proclaims, “I have discovered the truth about ‘schwul.’ [...]According to Doctor, *Doctor* Bruce Bagemihl there are over 450 different species with documented cases of homosexual behavior in nature. Especially among the humans” (102). After Wendell’s proclamation Silo has the realization, “We’re normal” (102). Svoboda’s confirmation of the naturalness of homosexuality in animals supports his overall ideological project, which is to assert the equality of gay and lesbian subjects. The fact that gay and straight penguins share in commitment ceremonies side by side attests to Svoboda’s participation in the discourse of gay rights.

To a limited extent, then, Svoboda asserts the validity of gay equality in a manner that coheres with “gay penguin” discourses that champion marriage, family, and reproduction. However, Svoboda departs from those discourses by suggesting that penguins understand

something about love that humans do not as they live beyond the bounds of sexual norms. Wendell asserts, “Penguins are love. And how that love manifests itself, whether through parenthood or sexuality is inconsequential because we are love. The humans only value love if it is tied up in some package they recognize and don’t find frightening” (105). Svoboda queers penguin love by rendering it as something unrecognizable to humans. There is something queer about the way Svoboda’s penguins attempt to fit human norms through clumsily embracing proper gender roles. The more the penguins try to make themselves recognizable through human norms, the more alien their gender and sexual identities seem. This sense of strangeness only increases when the humans attempt to impose their norms on penguins.

While Svoboda espouses an ideology that champions equal rights for gays via the animal character, the animal character enables human norms to be rendered foreign. The animal character creates a lens that facilitates critical distance between the audience and the play’s ideology. This critical distance emerges as the play depicts humans masquerading as penguins masquerading as humans masquerading in gender roles. The play’s end epitomizes the sense of penguin masquerade when Curly takes away an interesting lesson from all that has transpired. Curly enters wearing Roy’s dress and carrying a rock that he treats as an egg. When Gomez asks what he is doing, Curly replies, “Getting a mate.[...] ‘Aversion Therapy’ here I come” (112-113). The cycle begins again as Curly believes that the process Roy went through will ultimately gain him a mate. For the second time Curly masquerades as a gay penguin, attempting to be like his schwul friends. Svoboda creates the sense that the penguins still do not fully grasp what it means to be heterosexual or homosexual. There is a gap between penguin identity and human identity that the penguins queerly engage with and play around in because their lack of gender identity allows them to do so.

Marc Acito's *Birds of a Feather* also takes on a satirical stance in relation to same-sex coupled penguins. However his play only focuses on the trials and tribulations of Roy and Silo at the Central Park Zoo as the play is based on the controversial book *And Tango Makes Three*. The most dominant gay penguin discourse occurs in the infamous children's book, which uses assimilationist tactics to draw the reader into accepting Roy and Silo as mates just like heterosexual couples. The book begins with an overview of human families then moves on to describing heterosexual mating practices among the penguins: "Every year at the same time girl penguins start noticing the boy penguins. And the boy penguins start noticing the girls. When the right girl and the right boy find each other, they become a couple" (Richardson and Parnell). The book introduces Roy and Silo as two penguins "in love" just like the heterosexual penguins, and both penguins notice, "the other couples could do something they could not" (Richardson and Parnell). The authors portray the two penguins as desiring to mimic heterosexual penguins, essentially using the heterosexual penguins as the yardsticks by which Roy and Silo are measured. The book portrays Roy and Silo as simply wanting what every other penguin wants: to reproduce. The book hammers in the point that Roy and Silo behave "like all the other penguins" (Richardson and Parnell) as it implores readers to accept the two dad penguins as normal, the main point of the book. Politically the book does not offer much to the gay rights debate except for implying it is okay for children to be exposed to the concept of two dads. Acito, however, steers clear of the book's liberal agenda in his portrayal of Roy and Silo. Acito also replaces the straightforward reproductive narrative embedded in gay penguin discourses such as those present in *And Tango Makes Three* with open debates about the issues such discourses raise.

In terms of form, *Birds of a Feather* resembles *The Penguin Tango* in that it also utilizes meta-theatrical framing and documentary-style elements. Acito presents the play initially as a

newscast, positioning the audience as television viewers, but he also positions the audience as spectators at the zoo. However, Acito does not maintain these premises throughout his play to the extent that Svoboda does. Instead, Acito foregrounds the play's theatricality by having only three actors play twenty-four roles. This requires the actors to quickly transform from one character into another, sometimes in view of the audience. The onstage role changes create awareness in the audience that they are watching a play, allowing critical distance between them and the narrative.

Acito frames his penguin narrative with broader sensationalist discourses about homosexuality in the American media. This differs from Svoboda who frames his play with discourses about Humboldt penguin sexuality. From the beginning of Acito's play it is clear that what he presents is to be read through the discourse of controversy over gay rights. In the first scene, the CNN newscaster, Paula Zahn, does a special on the issue of homosexuality stating, "We're going to spend the next hour on one of the most controversial subjects in America—gender, sexuality, and what makes some people straight and others gay" (1). Zahn mentions the controversy over *And Tango Makes Three* and presents the following penguin scenes as part of the series on homosexuality. As mentioned above, Acito positions the audience as both viewers of the news and as spectators at the zoo. The zoo spectators have come to see the penguins because they are interested in their sexuality. However, rather than coming to see their heterosexual mating practices the spectators are there to see the same-sex coupled penguins.

Like Svoboda, Acito highlights differences between Roy and Silo in relation to family. A scene between Roy and Silo with a rock in *Birds* is strikingly similar to Svoboda's scene in which the two penguins argue about whether the rock is an egg. Roy, depicted as more effeminate, insists that his rock is an egg, and Silo, the masculine penguin, argues back that it is

not, giving the explanation: “That is impossible. We are both males. And it’s a rock” (4). Roy believes that there must be three penguins in order to form a family whereas Roy thinks two penguins can form a family. The argument between Roy and Silo over the status and importance of the rock demonstrates diversity between the two penguins thereby challenging the prevailing gay penguin discourse that portrays Roy and Silo as equally desiring of a nuclear family.

Whereas Roy wants to have a family, Silo only sees outside benefits to doing so, remarking:

Whenever any of us has a chick, the Room Service people take the whole family beyond the Great Blue Wall for a vacation. It’s yet another special right rewarding heterosexual behavior. (8)

Silo only sees the benefits of having a family in relation to heterosexual privilege rather than the intrinsic benefits that his partner sees. Like Svoboda, Acito disrupts the neat narrative of penguin love and family.

In contrast to Svoboda’s naïve penguins, Acito’s penguins express sophisticated knowledge about human gender and sexual norms, particularly Silo who deconstructs such norms throughout the play. Roy and Silo approach sexual identity in differing manners. Roy embraces his identity as gay, at one point exclaiming, “Honey, we’re here, we’re queer, we live in a zoo” (32), whereas Silo exhibits a questioning stance towards sexual identity labels. Acito creates the sense that gay identity is something humans impose on the genderless looking penguins.

SILO. [...] all day they peep at us. Like we’re freaks of nature. Just because we’re both male.

ROY. They can’t tell the difference. Hell, sometimes I can’t tell the difference.

SILO. I can. [...]

ROY. Please. We have no external dingle dangles. Besides, who cares if they know we are gay.

SILO. I am not gay.

ROY. Hah!

SILO. Our *relationship* is gay. (5-6)

Like Svoboda, Acito has the penguins use euphemisms for human genitalia, rendering it foreign to them. Acito also engages with two different discourses about gay sexual identity: the essentialist and the constructionist. The humans view the penguins as gay because of the knowledge that they both are male even though they cannot tell the difference between the genders of the penguins. In this sense, the humans impose their notion of sexual identity onto the penguins. Roy embraces his essential identity as gay whereas Silo presents the constructionist view, insisting that he himself does not possess gay identity and pointing out that “Sexual identity is an artificial construct. A modern paradigm to codify behavior and put us into boxes” (6). To this Roy replies, “Someone’s been listening to the zookeepers” (4). While Acito associates the imposition of sexual identity with humans, he also insinuates that penguins learn to question sexual identity from humans. These elements imply that humans have been shaping penguin paradigms of sexual identity even though human paradigms do not easily apply, especially given that penguin genders are indistinguishable without DNA testing (Talbert and Matus 3).

As a foil to Silo, with is sophisticated understanding of gender and sexuality, Acito has a bigoted hawk character named Pale Male who has sex with a female named Lola. Like Roy and Silo, the hawk characters are based on real life birds. The hawks had built a nest on the side of Paula Zahn’s apartment building in Manhattan. Pale Male and Lola epitomize the male/female

binary and have many arguments over proper gender roles. Pale Male constitutes a stereotypical player who has mated with multiple women and fathered twenty-seven chicks (27). Lola questions traditional gender roles and suggests that they follow the example of the gay penguins at the zoo that divide their labor equally (27), thereby demonstrating the heterosexual norms do not have to be adhered to, and suggesting alternative models can be followed.

Pale Male expresses anti-gay sentiments, challenging the prevailing gay penguin discourses by introducing the perspectives of right wing conservatives, particularly those who view the gay penguins as an abomination. Pale Male states, “That’s not right. Two males raising a chick [...] Because a chick needs a father and a mother” (27). By expressing dissent against gay penguins, Pale Male resists the romanticizing discourses that limit gay penguins to narratives of love and family, highlighting their controversial status as gay parents. Pale Male insists, “That chick is going to grow up confused. Those queers could make it gay” (27). In addition to the discourse of gay identity politics employed by the penguins, Acito presents anti-gay discourses, squarely situating gay penguins within ongoing debates.

Acito adds a third engagement with penguin sexuality through the perspectives of the female zookeeper who supports the gay penguins. Acito describes the zookeeper as a “Plain Jane” (5) and depicts her as a kind of failed heterosexual. The zookeeper cannot get a man because gay men surround her, from her high school date to her dancing partners at the bar. Yet the zookeeper does not exhibit resentment of gay men, but rather embraces them as companions. In many ways the zookeeper presents the view that Acito intends for his audience to have. Acito makes clear connections between the naturalness of homosexuality for animals and humans through the zookeeper’s beliefs:

You see, practically every species on the planet has gay sex. But for the longest

time the Straight White Men Who Rule the World tried to cover it up by calling it “dominant behavior” instead of admitting that animals enjoy a recreational romp as much as people do. (29)

Acito engages with the same debates over the naturalness of homosexuality as Svoboda, putting forth the view that animal gayness validates human gayness. Drawing upon nearly the same anti-gay discourses that Svoboda presents, Acito stages a debate about homosexuality between the zookeeper and a “Fat Cat Senator.” The senator claims, “Homosexuality is unnatural because it does not propagate the species” (30). The zookeeper argues back that “there are other ways to propagate a species, like genetic mutation” and that “Biological diversity is nature’s back-up plan” (30-31). For Acito as well as Svoboda, the biology issue emerges as a result of relating homosexuality in animals to homosexuality in humans. Both playwrights, however satirically, put forth the ideology that homosexuality is as natural to humans as it is to animals. However, both playwrights situate their discourses of natural homosexuality within the context of debate by engaging with their opponents’ views, highlighting the ways in which gay penguins are simply pawns in larger arguments about homosexuality.

It is important to note that in the debut production of *Birds of a Feather* the actors who played Roy and Silo also played Pale Male and Lola. From looking at production photos it seems that nominal animal acting was used, meaning the animal characters wore human clothing and behaved like humans (Treanor). Lola, however, was in male to female drag in addition to presenting her identity as a hawk. The traditional gender roles between Pale Male and Lola are offset by the choice to have them read as two gay men. On the one hand, the actors play Roy and Silo as gay men, an aspect that is lost when just looking at the seemingly genderless penguins in

And Tango Makes Three. On the other hand, the double casting choice functions to queer bird heterosexuality and to satirize Pale Male's anti-gay sentiments.

Silo also introduces the concept of penguin bisexuality, another challenge to the prevailing gay penguin discourse that situates all penguins as ideally being monogamous mates for life:

I've often thought that our black and white coats were a symbolic representation of our bifurcated nature, that the birds who adhere to the hegemonic, heteronormative model are limited in their thinking and need to expand their minds to the possibility that one could equally be attracted to both genders. (35)

Silo exhibits an advanced theoretical understanding of the degrees of variation in human sexuality by raising the possibility of bisexuality. Silo's understanding is key as it challenges the gay penguin discourse that places understandings of penguin sexuality into a heterosexual/homosexual binary frame. Silo resists both heterosexual and homosexual identity labels, even going so far as to claim he rejects identity labels altogether after Pale Male asks if he is gay (45). Silo denies being gay, even to his partner Roy who embraces the fact that they have "become the role models for alternative families" (62). Silo and Roy fight with Silo accusing Roy of relishing media attention because he fears "that being gay makes you inferior" (64). Gay identity becomes a point of contention that Roy and Silo never agree about. By staging debates about sexual identity and gay rights Acito questions the human tendency to lock same-sex coupled penguins such as Silo and Roy into neat narratives of homosexuality and reproduction.

While Acito refuses to idealize same-sex relationships, he also interweaves a theme of failed heterosexual marriage. He includes a birdwatcher that details how his father left him as a

child, and the zookeeper tells about the miserable relationship between her parents. In addition, he includes fights between Paula Zahn and her husband Richard Cohen over their divorce. Acito presents the view that all relationships, whether gay or straight, have the potential to fail.

Acito returns to his original framing with Paula Zahn doing a newscast from a library in which a mother protests the book *And Tango Makes Three*. Here he addresses another facet of gay rights discourse in the media that deals with the issue of representing gay families. Acito stages another debate with Zahn arguing with the mother over the appropriateness of the book for children. Like the zookeeper, Zahn presents the typical pro-gay views asking, “So what do you say to those gay parents who feel that their lifestyle should be represented, too?” (71). The mother presents the typical anti-gay views that “conversations about ‘alternative families’ belong at home” (70). Acito’s debate positions the audience as judges about the issue, but at the same time assumes sympathy with the pro-gay stance as anti-gay characters like the senator and the mother are portrayed as rather idiotic.

Acito strays from the main plotline of the children’s book by including a scene in which Silo breaks up with Roy for the female penguin Scrappy. A *New York Times* article reported on the incident stating that it caused Roy to stand “alone, in a corner, staring at a wall” (Miller 2), an element also included in the script. Unlike Svoboda, who attributes Roy’s relationship with Scrappy to human intervention, Acito portrays Silo as naturally falling in love with Scrappy. Silo may very well be bisexual after all, although he views his relationship with Scrappy as evidence that he is not gay. This plot element challenges the romantic idealization of Roy and Silo, rendering penguin sexuality, and by extension, human sexuality, as more complicated than the hetero/homosexual binary will allow. Another key plot element is a scene in which the female

Tango is grown up and falls in love with a female penguin. This is important because gay penguin discourses focus exclusively on male homosexuality.

Ultimately, Svoboda and Acito use penguins to comment on debates over human sexual relations. Both plays do not claim to depict animality in any serious manner. Rather the plays poke fun at the parallels humans make between human and animal sexuality. Although Svoboda and Acito's characters are distinctly human, showing few signs of animality, Svoboda and Acito do not attempt to abstract human values via the animal characters as is the case in *A Year With Frog and Toad*. Svoboda and Acito self-consciously take on human value systems and use animality as means of making "common sense" notions of human sexuality seem strange. Imposing human sexual norms on animal characters functions to denaturalize and expose such norms as social constructs as nonhuman animality turns out to be queer.

Whereas Medoff uses the gorilla character in *Prymate* to comment on the boundary between nature and culture, firmly locating animal sexuality on the side of nature in its unrestrained corporeality, Svoboda and Acito deal with sexuality as a product of culture. The penguins represent the cultural facade that is human sexuality while participating in the discourse of "the natural." The fact that Svoboda and Acito's characters are animals seems secondary to the cultural critique they put forth. The plays are not actually about animals or their rights as much as they are about human sexual politics. In this sense, the playwrights continue the use of penguins as "tokens," as Sturgeon suggests, in the culture wars about human sexuality.

The theriomorphic imposition of animal characteristics, in this case penguin, onto gay men works in gay men's favor, reminding us that the type of animal matters. The animalization of gay men as penguins functions to benefit the oppressed group in a manner strikingly different from the animalization of a black man as an ape. Penguins are the perfect stand-ins for gay men

seeking rights. Penguins are cute animals. They waddle. They look like they are wearing tuxedos. Penguins are endearing creatures that possess a certain level of nobility in the way that they collaboratively hatch eggs and rear chicks. Even the manner in which penguins mate through cloaca contact has an egalitarian aura. There is no dominant and submissive or mounting of one animal onto the other. Penguins can be the mascots for gay male rights because there is nothing threatening about the animality of the penguin. The kind of non-threatening animality represented in *A Year With Frog and Toad* works in much the same manner as in *The Penguin Tango* and *Birds of a Feather*. In all three cases, we have nice clean animals that wear collared shirts and compliment one another in disposition. In the penguin plays, animality bestows a sense of rights onto the gay human subject. There is no need to restrain these animals because they restrain themselves.

Prymate works with the concept of animality in a very different way. Unlike the penguin, the ape is a threat. The ape's body excretes fluids: saliva, piss, and cum, fluids that carry the threat of contamination. The ape has size and strength and a body that exhibits desire. The type of animality Graham represents is in touch with baser instincts. Graham's animality emerges from the human body rather than human subjectivity. His human/animal body must be tamed and restrained. His raw (hetero)sexuality is not welcome. For an animal like Graham to be treated as a stand-in for an oppressed group is an insult to that group. An apelike depiction does not advance a group's position in terms of rights. The ape moves the group backwards in a kind of de-evolution. Graham's animality constitutes the opposite of what the gay penguins represent. The penguins are able to stand in for good human citizens precisely because they repudiate the type of animality Graham puts forth.

Of course the type of animal acting used in Graham's representation versus the penguins matters. It is possible to put an actor in a business suit and call him "gorilla" without any of the threatening elements Graham exhibits. The penguin characters are non-threatening precisely because they conform to human social norms and can communicate through human language. In contrast, Graham has a limited vocabulary and behaves outside of social decorum. The more human-like the animal portrayal, the more likely that animality represents a kind of idyllic natural state. The human-like and cerebral penguins and frogs are safe animal representations because they are free of corporeal animality. There is nothing idyllic about Graham's animality, which relates the most to actual animals.

In the following chapter we will see a cross between the animality presented in the penguin plays and the animality presented in *Prymate* through the practice of pony play. Like the penguin plays, animality in pony play bestows a kind of nobility on the human subject. Being an animal constitutes an elevated state. At the same time, playing an animal allows the human performer to engage with the body on a baser level requiring restraint, similar to Graham in *Prymate*. The pony moves between the two poles that the penguin plays and *Prymate* present in terms of resistance to human norms. The penguins demonstrate a cute resistance to human restrictions, generating endearment towards them. In *Prymate*, the gorilla demonstrates a threatening resistance to human restrictions, generating fear. The pony oscillates between these two poles, evoking both a playful resistance to humans and a wildness that must be contained.

Chapter Five

Playing Pony

This chapter analyzes the phenomenon of pony play, a subset of sadomasochistic (SM) subculture in which participants role-play as trainers and horses. Pony play is a unique form of performance that differs from the other animal performances I discuss in that it exists for the benefit of the participants rather than an audience. As a form of private performance that emphasizes the subjective transformation of human into pony, pony play provides a rare opportunity to study animal performance from the inside out, that is, to look at animal performance from the point of view of the performer. This chapter answers three questions: What is pony play in terms of performance? How do pony players construct animal subjectivity? How are pony players sexualized through their performances? Drawing on Michael Kirby, I argue that although pony play can be considered a form of theatre in that it involves roles, costumes, and props, it actually resembles what Kirby calls an “Activity” due to its private nature. I also contend that although human ponies claim to express essential animal identities, their performances are largely based on human sexual pleasures. I base my analysis of pony play on how it is represented in Rebecca Wilcox’s manual *The Human Pony* (2008) as well as the documentary *Born in a Barn* (2004).

Wilcox’s manual is the authoritative guide to how people can perform pony play. Wilcox has a background with training biological equines, which she draws upon in her training of human ponies. A deep reverence for actual horses guides many people to engage in pony play. Wilcox even suggests that pony players research and observe actual horses as sources of inspiration (87-95). However pony play involves more than an extension of people’s interest in horses; it requires them to transform their identities into horses. Wilcox’s manual details how to

facilitate this transformation, from defining the various types of ponies to describing appropriate types of equipment to providing instructions on how to train ponies.

Pony play encompasses a diverse set of practices. Wilcox defines it broadly: “Whenever a human decides to look and act like the biological equine” (1). There are many types of ponies, as Wilcox states there are: “fetish, SM, role-play, and furry, sex may also be used to categorize ponies” (1-2). In addition, the various types of pony play can be broken down in terms of different types of horses that indicate a social hierarchy. For example, Wilcox stipulates that role-play ponies can be broken down into occupations: “show ponies, draft ponies, cart ponies, work ponies, circus ponies, western ponies, war ponies, companion ponies” (4). Pony play is not just about the animal’s function because ponies and horses must be broken down into breeds. For example, Jessica Brown, in her pony play manual claims it is customary for human ponies to be broken down by age and gender categories such as: “Colt (a young male horse), Stallion (a mature male horse), Filly (a young female horse), Mare (a mature female horse), [and] Gelding (a castrated male horse)” (Brown 9). These categories demonstrate the extent to which pony play mimics human categorizations of actual horses.

In pony play, there is a power dynamic between the trainer and the horse that resembles bondage and dominance. Usually one person as the animal works with another person as the trainer who trains him or her like a biological equine. Wilcox’s book even includes a warning: “Readers should understand that pony play, like all BDSM, carries an inherent risk of physical injury, emotional injury, injury to relationships, and other types of harm” (Wilcox n.p). BDSM stands for bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism, and masochism. Pony play involves a higher level of risk and more personal engagement than forms of animal performance that take place in the theatre. Safety precautions are necessary because extreme physical

restriction is a key element of pony play. Ponies often have their hands tied and mouths gagged with a bit in a manner that mimics the restrictions real horses experience. Sometimes ponies wear blinders that restrict their field of vision. In addition, ponies wear various types of harnesses to which ropes and reins can be attached (Wilcox 31). These restrictions force ponies to give control to their trainers and make them vulnerable to injury.

Pony play takes animal drag to a new level of identification with the animal that supersedes the level of identification with animal character that takes place in traditional American theatre, which presupposes a separation between actor and character. Even Method acting, which relies on intense psychological investment in character, recognizes a separation between actor and character (Krasner 15). Contrary to this model, human ponies can lose themselves in their pony personas. For human ponies, being a pony constitutes an imagined return to a pre-discursive state. The trainers who dress the ponies with horse tack and hooves enable the ponies' return to a state in which human language no longer applies. Wilcox stipulates that once a person has entered role, "he or she has literally become the pony" (16). Trigger, a renowned pony player who identifies as a horse claims, "there is a horse soul in me where [I] am 'as' a horse not 'like' a horse" (Human Equine). Many pony players believe that once they become a pony they are no longer ontologically human, and that their roles express their inner identities.

Since there has been virtually no scholarship on pony play, it is useful to look to what has been written about SM given the similarities between the two. Although not all pony play is considered SM, pony play relates to SM in terms of its focus on power, performance, and pleasure. Sexologist Charles Moser provides a useful definition of SM:

Consensual, erotic interactive behaviors played out by partners deliberately assuming, for one, the dominant role, and for the other, the submissive role, where role-playing forms the context for the activities, and where behaviors can, but need not, include the use of physical and/or psychological pain to produce arousal and satisfaction. (33)

Pony play is similar to SM in that it is a consensual practice involving partners in which one person takes on the dominant role as the trainer, and another takes on the submissive role as the horse. Just as SM may or may not involve pain and sexual arousal, pony play may or may not involve pain and sexual arousal. In general, the pony trainer aims to please the pony just as much as the pony aims to please the trainer, although the trainer holds the power in the relationship. The goal of pony play is not necessarily to create pain. Wilcox makes clear that most pony players would not like to be whipped just as a real horse would not want to be whipped (xviii). However, the accoutrements of pony play, such as reins attached to nipple piercings and mouth bits can be considered pain-inducing instruments that facilitate submission.

Foucault's description of a docile body illuminates the ways in which ponies must submit to their trainers. He writes, "A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved" (*Discipline* 136). The human pony constitutes a docile body in that it is made to do the real work of a horse. By treating the human as a horse, the trainer instigates a transformation of the human subject into one who must engage with the world through the imagined subjectivity of an animal. Pony play provides an added dimension to SM practices in that it involves the improvement of the human body. The trainer does not just inflict bodily sensations upon the pony, but rather gets the pony into shape to perform equestrian activities. This subjection in pony

play is done through a combination of restraints and more gentle methods such as grooming and feeding.

While grooming and feeding are not particular to SM culture, there are overlaps in the cultures of SM and pony play terminology. Both pony players and sadomasochists use the term “scene” to describe what they do. Although the term “scene” may suggest public performance, for the most part, pony play is a private practice, and the scenes are real training sessions. Scenes vary in length depending upon the pony’s level of experience. During scenes the trainer teaches the pony how to respond to a variety of physical and verbal cues that mimic the actual training of horses. Wilcox provides a sample scene: “capture the pony, tie the pony in cross ties, groom the pony, tack, warm up with lunging or ground driving, left turn while driving on long lines, hitch up to a cart, drive, unhitch, reward and thank the pony, walk out pony by hand for cool down, groom/check the pony, blanket pony ... light water and snacks” (62-64). The trainer draws upon his or her previous experiences training biological or human horses and the pony communicates whether his or her needs are being met throughout the scene. Reticence on the part of the pony generally indicates that something is actually wrong, with the exception of those ponies that perform naughtiness. Private pony play scenes are evaluated based on the level of contentment of the pony.

Another shared term between SM and pony play is the word “play.” In her book, *Playing on the Edge*, Staci Newmahr provides a productive definition of the term “play” in relation to SM practices:

In an SM context, “play” is a complex word. It references recreation and leisure and evokes a romantic sense of innocence and freedom from encumbrances ... It requires a significant amount of education, both formal and informal. It is

exhausting, often physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Play encompasses a wide range of leisure activities and intimate interactions. It is a hobby and a lifestyle with political, social, and sexual implications. (8)

Like SM, pony play requires the participants to seek out resources and educate themselves in order to safely do the practice. Through the Internet, pony players can find information about pony play including communities of other players, workshops, and human equestrian events. While most pony play involves intimate interactions, opportunities exist to open up the practice to a larger public. For example, each year there is an International Pony Play Championship in which judges evaluate the participants based on their ability to perform equestrian activities.

Like SM play, pony play can be exhausting physically, emotionally, and psychologically in that it pushes people to their limits and operates at a certain level of risk. Human ponies must build up endurance for the physically challenging practices of being ridden, pulling carts, jumping, and galloping. In addition, the bondage aspect puts players at physical risk. Emotionally and psychologically ponies must cater to the whims of their trainers, giving up control of their autonomy.

The risks involved link pony play to Richard Schechner's concept of "dark play." Pony play resembles a form of dark play in that it "is physically risky," "involves intentional confusion or concealment of the frame 'this is play,'" and "plays out alternative selves" (12). Pony play conceals its frame as play because the trainer and pony are not playing at training; they are actually training. Further, as I discuss later, the human pony does not seek to mimic a horse; rather, the human believes himself or herself to actually become the horse. This understanding of human pony ontology conceals the frame "this is play" during the practice. In this sense, the concealment of the frame as play is conducive to the performer's sense of animal subjectivity.

Finally, dark play involves “playing out selves that cannot be displayed at work, or with family” (14). As part of a marginalized subculture, pony players perform their roles in private or in the company of fellow players. They must keep their anonymity. Ultimately, the dark nature of the play involves deep levels of risk, investment, and transformability in the practice.

In terms of performance, pony play is a form of theriomorphic animal drag in which animal imagery, in the form of leather, tack, and hooves, is used to identify the human body as animal. Theriomorphic animal drag involves the creation of an animal character, and in this case, foregrounds animal rather than human subjectivity. Further, the presence of the naked human body creates an ontological tension between the human and the animal. The human body becomes prominent in its near nakedness, suggesting humanity, while also evoking closeness to animal nature by virtue of its lack of clothing. The human body also loses its ability to communicate as the hands become tied and the mouth gagged, diminishing the player’s ability to communicate human subjectivity. Once the costume of the pony is in place, the pony gives up a certain amount of agency to the trainer as an actual horse would, and the trainer guides and shapes the performance.⁸

In order to understand pony play as a form of performance, it is useful to look at how others have framed their discussions of SM given the similarities in the role-playing aspects between the two practices. Sociologist Thomas Weinberg looks at SM through Erving Goffman’s concept of frame analysis, specifically the notion of the “theatrical frame” (128). Weinberg applies the terms “keys” and “keying” from Goffman’s frame analysis, explaining, “a ‘key,’ according to Goffman is ‘the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already

⁸ Pony players wear horse tack and hooves, usually against their naked skin, but sometimes they wear form fitting full-bodied animal costumes, which fall under the category of furry. In some instances furies constitute a form of anthropomorphic animal drag, particularly in cases in which human clothing is imposed on the animal character. However, pony play does not involve human clothing.

meaningful in terms of its primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else” (128). Weinberg provides a useful example of keying as “an action that appears to be fighting but has been transformed into play by the ‘combatants.’ Participants in the activity are consciously aware of the systematic alteration that is going on” (128). The use of the term “key” applies well to SM, as Weinberg explains, “various sorts of keyings are used by the participants: those which transform what might appear to an outsider to be violence into make-believe or a kind of play-like behavior, those which set limits, those which affect role switchings and the dominance order” (129).

However, Weinberg’s use of Goffman’s theatrical frame is problematic because Goffman defines theatrical framing in terms of traditional theatre while SM does not typically take place in that setting. Goffman centers his explanation of theatrical framing on the actor-spectator relationship, describing the spatial boundary between audience and actor, the missing fourth wall, and the fact that actors face out toward the audience (Goffman 139-140). Considering Goffman’s description of the theatrical frame in its totality, Weinberg’s theorization of SM via theatrical framing is misguided because SM does not orient itself to an audience. Ultimately, Weinberg leaves us with a rather vague definition of SM’s performative qualities: “By taking a role which is not really his own the individual reinforces the definition of the situation as play, make-believe, fantasy and the like” (134). Weinberg’s description of SM as play and make-believe leaves us with the question of what he means by “play” and “make-believe.” Weinberg’s unqualified use of those terms suggests he is likening SM to children’s play or any activity involving fantasy and does not quite capture the high stakes present in SM. This is where Schechner’s specification of “dark play” is useful. A more detailed explanation of Weinberg’s terms is needed in order to illuminate SM more fully.

Weinberg is not the only scholar to describe SM in theatrical terms. Philosophy scholar Patrick Hopkins describes SM as “a performance, as a staging, a production, a simulation in which participants are writers, producers, directors, actors, and audience” (123). While Hopkins uses rather formal theatrical terms that do not apply literally to SM, his statement captures the self-generated nature of SM as well as the multiplicity of the roles involved. That Hopkins describes sadomasochists as both actor and audience suggests that SM can be considered a form of one on one performance, with each performer looking back at the other. Unlike Goffman’s notion of the theatrical frame, Hopkins suggests a self-contained performance. In discussing pony play, I would, however, complicate the notion that all aspects of the practice are simulation. While both SMers and pony players mimic relations of power, there are differences between SM and pony play in terms of whether specific acts are simulated. Take, for instance, an SM rape scene. It is clear that the act of rape is a simulation because the bottom consents beforehand to being “raped” by the top. Pony play, however, goes beyond simulation because trainers actually train their ponies. The fact that ponies consent to being trained does not change the fact that an actual training session takes place in which the human pony strives to meet particular goals. The process of meeting these goals may involve the pony pretending to learn what the trainer wants, but the physical demands of the practice require human ponies to build skills and endurance over time. Again, ponies are not playing at training; they actually are training. Nevertheless, pony play still constitutes a form of performance in that the participants take on distinct roles.

Philosophy scholar Nils-Henns Stear provides the most detailed description of the performative aspects of SM role-play. Stear takes issue with Hopkins’s use of the term “simulation” in relation to SM and advocates for the term “make-believe” as a corrective. However, Stear theorizes make-believe in a very specific way by drawing from Kendall

Walton's theorization of the term. Stear's main argument is that "SM is relevantly similar to engaging with fictions. It is relevantly similar to reading a book or watching a film" (23). Stear finds that SM involves three components from Walton's theory of make-believe. The first component is "a principle of generation" that "prescribes rules, which determine what one is to imagine given certain circumstances" (Stear 24). Stear contends that sadomasochists' agreements on the parameters of their role-play ahead of time count as principle of generation (29). The second component is the use of props (Stear 25), which sadomasochists almost always use. The third component involves "quasi" emotions" (Stear 27). Stear uses the example of watching a scary movie to explain the concept of the quasi emotion. He states that if someone feels fear while watching a scary movie, it is only "quasi-fear" because the fear does not motivate the person to act as the person continues to sit passively watching the movie (27). In SM, Stear argues, participants also feel quasi-emotions (29). Going back to the example of an SM rape scene, the bottom does not actually fear being raped by the top, rather the bottom feels quasi-fear, a fictional fear, due to it being a fictional scene in which the "rape" was agreed upon. Stear's theorization of SM as Waltonian make-believe is useful in that it captures the rules of imagination and use of props. However, sadomasochists likely oscillate between real and quasi-emotions given the participatory nature of the practice. This is where Stear runs into trouble with his comparison of SM to watching a movie or reading a book.

I disagree with Stear's stipulation that SM is relevantly similar to experiencing art forms such as novels and movies. Stear contends, "An accurate comparison ... would be to compare SM scenes not to theatre, but to the *engagement with* or *enjoyment of* theatre, from the point of view of the audience. An audience member's game of make-believe is dependent on her or his psychological states just as a role-playing sadomasochist's game is" (29). For Stear, reading a

novel, watching a play, seeing a movie, and participating in SM all require the same level of psychological investment. This, I believe, is an error because Stear must account for the difference in psychological investment between one who directly constructs the make-believe narrative, as in SM, versus one who experiences the narrative secondhand via spectatorship. Here I assume that Stear refers to traditional theatre that presupposes a separation between actor and audience rather than experimental forms of performance that require more active participation on the part of the audience.

The confusion over whether SM is a form of theatre emerges from the fact that participants are performing, but they are not performing for anyone else. SM is not the same as performing theatre, but it is also not the same as watching theatre. To solve this issue I suggest that SM as well as pony play can be considered forms of what Michael Kirby calls an “Activity.” In his 1969 essay, “The Activity: A New Art Form,” Kirby details characteristics of Activities, largely based on Allan Kaprow’s avant-garde performances. However, Kirby’s essay may be relevant in contexts beyond the 1960s avant-garde scene in its ability to characterize performances done solely for the participants. Kirby distinguishes the Activity from theatre: “Experiences of a work may differ, and spectators at a performance necessarily view it from different angles and distances, for example, but the thing is there to be perceived. In the new art form under discussion, the ‘thing’ has moved inside the body, so to speak” (155). For Kirby, the body becomes the primary focus of the Activity, distinguishing the Activity from Stear’s disembodied action of watching a play. In an Activity, Kirby states, the focus is on “*internal* experiences such as proprioception, kinesthesia, and thought,” rather than on “*external* sensory experiences such as seeing and hearing”(156). Although Kirby’s internal/external binary can be problematized, his description of the Activity as requiring internal rather than external senses

applies to how sadomasochists and pony players perceive the scene with the entire body rather than solely through vision or hearing. For example, in the case of pony play, trainers often restrict the eyesight of their human ponies either through blindfolds or blinders, forcing the ponies to rely more on bodily sensations. Further, a large part of the practice is internally perceiving oneself as a pony rather than maintaining outward appearances. Stear's comparison of SM to watching a play fails to capture the differences in sensory experience between watching an activity and performing an activity. Whereas plays are seen and heard, SM and pony play rely on physical sensation.

It is important to distinguish the Activity from everyday activities. The difference between an Activity, and say, making a ham sandwich is that the emphasis in the Activity is on the aesthetic experience (155). This is not to say making a ham sandwich cannot ever be considered an Activity, but the purpose of the action is key. If one makes a sandwich because of hunger, that is a simple, everyday activity. But if one makes a sandwich with the intent of having an aesthetic experience, then it can be an Activity. As Kirby states, in an Activity, "the object of aesthetic experience has become the self-perceived behavior of an individual" (155). The end result of the behavior is not as important as the focus on self-perception and aesthetic experiences that take place through the duration of the Activity.

Pony play resembles an Activity in that players turn inwardly, focusing on their bodies, and are not concerned with performing for an audience. When a person becomes a pony, usually with the help of a trainer, the person leaves his or her orientation toward their perceived external and human world and embraces an internal subjectivity as a pony. This imagined changing of subjectivity is referred to as "pony headspace." Wilcox defines pony headspace as,

the variety of mental and emotional conditions that the player identifies as the particular frame of reference from which he or she operates while playing ... The experience can range from superficial make-believe to complete suspension of everyday reality such that there is no memory of hearing human language or making human meaning out of the events taking place. (13)

The range of mental states extends from the subjective realm of human pretending to be horse to the subjective realm of human becoming horse. For my purposes, I am most interested in the latter since the ultimate goal, which Wilcox foregrounds throughout her book, is to make the transformation into pony as deep as possible. The ability to engage with pony headspace on a deep level takes multiple sessions of practice. The pony's relationship to the trainer reinforces this headspace.

Wilcox's book includes accounts from various persons of what pony headspace means to them. One pony boy, Ronin, describes his feeling of pony headspace: "As a pony my desires are simple: food, water, comfort and company ... I don't know why they want me to do what it is that they want me to do, but I do know that they want me to do it. I want to help, so I do what they ask. To be a pony is to be the ultimate helper" (42). For Ronin, being a pony means returning to a state of basic desires and acquiescing with his trainer's demands without question. Ronin embodies a docile pony that only seeks to make his trainer happy, constituting a form of submission.

Some human ponies operate at such a high level of intensity while in pony headspace that they report an inability to understand human language along with a heightened sensory experience. We might consider this type of pony play as a form of Method acting in that it requires players to develop rich inner thoughts and psychological states. Ali Haberfield describes

her transformation into a pony in relation to pony headspace. In the first stage, Haberfield loses her ability to speak English, which she considers her “last lingering fragment of humanity” (68). The loss of language comes with a gain in clarity of the senses. As a pony she has a heightened sense of sight. She states, “the blue of [the trainer’s] eyes and the pink of her cheeks are absolutely magical. A pony’s eyes are fascinated with such details, and able to detect the slightest movement of fingers towards the pocket that holds the sugar cubes” (69). Haberfield describes her gradual transformation back into a human at the session’s end as her trainer takes off her gear and “the world of words and human understanding start to trickle back” (69). Haberfield feels a distinct difference between her awareness as a human and her awareness as a pony.

Another pony, Lindsey, describes an experience of pony headspace that also creates a shift in awareness: “When in pony headspace, I am aware of the world around me, but only partially, not at all on the same level than when I am human. I do not understand English except for the verbal commands that have I been [sic] trained to respond to, nor am I totally aware of what goes on around me ... time has no significance to me” (83). Rather than gain a heightened sensory awareness, Lindsey’s pony headspace creates a sense of liberation from human constraints. She has a sense of being cut off from the pressures of the human world. Another pony, Hazelnut, describes what it is like to emerge from pony headspace that also indicates a type of liberation: “I rise languidly from pony headspace as if I am underwater. I am not burdened by heavy thoughts or complicated emotions; I choose to focus instead on the movement of my body” (84). Another account from Wilcox’s magazine, *Equus Eroticus*, also provides a description of pony headspace from a pony named Windy:

Once the head piece was properly attached I released myself to “fall” into pony headspace. For myself this space can best be described as “being.” Having my hands and arms taken away with the mitts combined with the bridle which covers much of my face helps me to release from my human self and just be. The other thing that I do in my head is to meditate on not hearing the dialog in my head that is common for people. By turning off the “voice” I can just be in the here and now. Sometimes I will try and do what I think a pony would do but that is human thought so mostly I try to just be. Anytime I look at something I try to not think, just be and do. (Windy)

Not only does Windy lose a sense of understanding external human language, she also loses touch with her internal dialogue. Her experience of pony headspace is meditative, and although her costume creates restrictions, it ultimately facilitates a liberating experience.

Wilcox warns that pony headspace can be so deep that the pony is entirely inhuman: “Deep headspace may render the pony unable to respond from a rational, human mindset, and may leave her unable to take care of herself” (16). Wilcox includes an anecdote about a pony that ate too much sugar, even though she had sensitivity to it, because a bystander kept feeding her sugar cubes (68). The pony player was unable to adhere to her human dietary restrictions and needed her trainer nearby to prevent her from harm. For many pony players the performance of animality hinges on the loss of human subjectivity, a key element that distinguishes pony play from other forms of animal performance that present human subjectivity and rely on language to express animality.

The depth of the accounts of pony headspace above and lack of dualistic perspective of the players in relation to their roles suggests that ponies experience what Mihaly

Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow.” Flow has a similarity with Schechner’s concept of dark play in that those who experience it conceal the framing of their actions as play by refusing meta-awareness of their activities. As Csikszentmihalyi states, “A person in flow has no dualistic perspective: he is aware of his actions but not of the awareness itself” (38). Human ponies are so engrossed in their performances that they do not recognize themselves as performers during the duration of their role-play. The deep quality to the ponies’ experiences further suggests the concept of flow. Csikszentmihalyi stipulates, “In the flow state, action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future” (36). That ponies simply try to “just be” and experience without purposefully performing a role coheres with Csikszentmihalyi’s description of a flow state.

The discourse of pony headspace can be deceiving as it romanticizes players’ animal expressions as distinctly separate from human reality, eliding the ways in which players use the notion of the animal as a vehicle for human-centric erotic pleasures. Pony attire is highly sexualized. Many pony girls trot with their breasts exposed and their nipples either clamped or pierced and attached to reins, and pony boys wear nothing but leather underwear, drawing attention to their erogenous zones. This sexualization creates a departure in the practice from the training of biological equines in that those that train real horses do not focus on giving them erotic pleasures. In her diagram of pony girl equipment, Wilcox includes a chastity belt with a vaginal plug intended to “to keep the pony lustful and always at hand for its master” (31). The picture also includes a tail attached via butt plug, which Wilcox explains is for “educational purposes” (31), suggesting an SM quality. Pony play is not always used as a precursor for sex, as

Wilcox explains, “Many an equine identified pony regards sex with a human as repugnant or odd” (xvii). Still, the accoutrements of pony play suggest sexual availability, particularly since most ponies are naked except for their leather harnesses and straps. When ponies are fully clothed it is usually in a latex outfit that conforms to the contours of the body. It is impossible to deny the sexual element of all forms of pony play given the nature of the attire.

The documentary *Born in a Barn* (2004) provides a look into the lives of four pony players including the sexualized dynamics within the practice. Each of the four pony players has a different sexual relationship to pony play. The film features Trigger, a prominent pony player who has been seen on television and travels the country giving workshops. Two of the pony players, Goody and Andrea, are in a heterosexual relationship and use pony play to enhance their sex life. The fourth pony player, an unnamed woman, whom I refer to as “woman,” uses pony play as a way of reconnecting with her love for horses after she quit riding them due to allergies. She also uses pony play to create a sense of self-love and erotic pleasure. The film demonstrates that pony players have a diverse set of reasons for engaging in the practice, but includes prominent themes also present in Wilcox’s book: the romanticization and sexualization of pony life.

As in the earlier accounts of pony headspace, the film’s players construe human and animal experiences along binary lines, romanticizing the animal aspect. The film depicts Trigger walking by himself in a pasture as he narrates his subjective experience:

I am sure there are some human things that I would miss. There is a lot of down time in being a horse. The horse spends a lot of time out doing his pasturing, enjoying things. That probably will sometimes be boring. Other times when that rider decides she is going to go on that nice long trail ride its very demanding,

very enduring and it makes up for all that boredom. I think the overall peacefulness and the feeling I get from it is worth leaving the human things behind.

Trigger juxtaposes horse life with human life, using pony play as a method of leaving his human subjectivity behind. The film presents a strict binary between human life and pony life in which human life is the world of concerns, and pony life is carefree, simple, and utopian. Both Goody and the woman reiterate this position at various points in the film. Goody describes how it feels to be a pony: “You both just kind of go to this place. It’s pretend but you can kind of forget for a short period of time that you have to go to work, make a living, and do all this other mundane stuff and you can just be a pony.” For Goody, being human means hard work, and being a pony constitutes an escape from the daily grind, creating a sense that horse life is simpler in that you get to “just be.” The unnamed woman also applies a simple/complex dichotomy to human versus horse life. She explains, “As a human my needs are different, complex, and utterly more confusing than the horse stuff. The needs of the horse are really simple and basic.” Like Goody, the woman creates the sense that being a horse constitutes a form of escape from the pressures of human life.

For these pony players, however, being an animal is deeply rooted in their sexual predilections. For example, Trigger only desires to be ridden by human females. In the preface to Wilcox’s book he writes, “I didn’t know exactly what I wanted to do once I found her—all I knew was I wanted to be a horse, and I wanted a woman to ride me” (viii). Trigger’s inner horse distinguishes between male and female human riders due to his human identity as a heterosexual. In the film, however, Trigger insists that he is not into pony play for the romance. He claims: “I don’t look for relationships. I don’t desire relationships. I don’t go out trying to find dates. I go

out and try to find riders. My long-term goal is to experience being a horse day and night for extended periods of time.” For Trigger, being a horse is an end unto itself. However, after Trigger makes that statement he is seen with a nearly naked woman riding on his shoulders, creating the sense that there is something sexual about his engagement with pony play.

The film covers a workshop by Trigger who seeks multiple riders, as he has not yet found a permanent partner. The workshop presents an interesting tension in relation to the issue of sex. On the one hand, Trigger dresses in a highly sexualized manner as he wears no shirt and dons leather underwear so that only his genitals are covered. On the other hand, he maintains that pony play is not about sex. In his opening speech, Trigger reiterates that position:

It’s role-play where one person takes the role of an animal, in this case a pony or a horse, and the other person is the rider or the trainer or the driver. There are some people that enjoy pony play as a form of foreplay. But the majority of people I know who do pony play pretty much do it for the power exchange, for the role-play. If you have a horse and go riding on your horse when you get through riding you don’t take the horse in the barn, well most people don’t take the horse in the barn, and do sexual things. That’s just the same thing with human pony play. It just doesn’t seem right for most people who are into human pony play to have sex associated with it. That’s like role-playing bestiality.

Trigger’s speech demonstrates the extent to which he views pony play as a relationship between a human and a horse rather than a human to a human, particularly his comment about bestiality. For Trigger, the fact that he role-plays as a horse rules out the possibility of a sexual element. The documentary also includes testimonials from riders that verify the human/horse relationship with one woman claiming: “It felt like a real animal almost.” Trigger believes that riders increase

the realism of his identity as a horse rather than give him sexual pleasure. For Trigger, riders deepen his horse subjectivity: “Various ladies ride me who feel like I am a horse and have a horse soul. ... To me the natural instincts [sic] of a horse is to endure and please the rider.” Trigger needs riders in order to fully step into his role as a horse. Yet the rider/horse relationship is not without an erotic element.

Even as Trigger claims that pony play is not just about sexuality, his workshop has sexual overtones. In the background, several of his pupils participate in the workshop either naked or half naked. There is one topless woman, one bottomless woman, a naked woman and a naked man all watching Trigger give rides to various women on his shoulders. Again, it seems that Trigger’s only interest is in having women riders rather than men, demonstrating that his horse alter ego prefers heterosexual interactions with human riders. While he does not engage in pony play to find dates, Trigger desires a permanent female partner who can help him be a horse for extended periods of time. He laments his lack of a partner stating it is “hard to find women within the lifestyle.” It seems that Trigger seeks long-term romance within the pony play lifestyle rather than dates. Several times throughout the film Trigger comments on his status as a lone horse: “I have nobody to muck out my stalls ... Its lonely being a single pony.” Trigger wants to take pony play to another level of intimacy with a partner in suggesting that he wants to live in a stall and have someone clean out his feces.

In contrast to Trigger, who denies a sexual aspect to pony play, Goody and Andrea use pony play as a romantic precursor to sex. Goody explains, “It is a very special bond that is between a rider and a horse. They get a lot of love and affection. As a guy I would project myself in to that position. Man it would be nice to get hugged on and coddled like that.” For Goody, pony play is entirely wrapped up in affection for his partner, Andrea. Being an animal allows

Goody to receive erotic pleasures. In a private scene between the two, Andrea grooms Goody, rubs him down, and pats his crotch. When she dresses him she explains, “Putting the tail on and the bit, that starts to get him really feeling like a pony.” Goody’s transformation into a pony is inextricably bound to his sexual relationship with Andrea. The role gives him the freedom to experience affection in a manner that does not threaten his masculinity. Later in the film Goody expresses his desire to “top,” that is to dominate in the bedroom, but claims pony play allows him to “bottom,” or submit to Andrea.

Goody takes on the role of pony slave, which is more characteristic of SM practices. We see him lacing Andrea’s boots and kissing her feet. Andrea takes on more of a dominant role than other trainers in her session with Goody. She explains:

Once they are in pony space they won’t talk to you. You have to use other methods to communicate. He stomps his feet or he does his bridle at me and gets rambunctious with me so I know he is not happy or he does not want to do something, but that is okay because he still has to do it. Show him who is boss.

In another scene, Andrea blindfolds Goody and rides on his back while he sexually stimulates her by rubbing back and forth. At the session’s end, Andrea releases Goody from his bondage, and Goody states, “So at this point is when she carries me to the bedroom and fucks my brains out.” It is important to note that Goody steps out of his horse role before he has sex with Andrea. This choice recalls Trigger’s earlier statement regarding role-playing bestiality. There is a limit to the human/horse dynamic in terms of sexuality. The actual sex act occurs once they step out of role.

The unnamed woman also explores pony play in an erotic manner in a scene between her and her trainer, Emily. Earlier the film establishes that pony play allows the woman to love her

body, as she claims, “I’ve always thought being too big was really bad and for me. This makes being big really good.” A sexual element is evident in the way the woman dresses for her scene. The woman wears a t-shirt with her breasts exposed and nipples pierced. Emily puts the bridle and bit onto the woman and then proceeds to groom her, saying “Good pony” over and over. Emily then instructs the woman to execute a variety of gaits. When the training session ends, Emily scolds the pony: “Well you were good for part of it so I will reward you, but try picking up your gaits before I tell you and you will be punished.” Here the relationship between trainer and pony resembles BDSM. At the end of the session, Emily proceeds to rub the woman’s nipples with the end of a rope as the reward for a job well done.

The players’ sexual pleasures create a tension with their constructed identities as animals. Patricia MacCormack captures this tension when she asserts:

Furries, plushies, animal role-play, training and bestiality assimilate the animal toward the human rather than attempt entrance into other intensities. Man uses animal to express the most deplorable of desires which make his own sacred, and at turns uses animal desire to excuse certain human prejudices and urges as ‘natural.’ (141)

While I disagree with MacCormack’s negative judgment that animal role-players express “deplorable” desires and her grouping of such play with bestiality, her point that players “assimilate the animal toward the human” rings true on two fronts in relation to pony play. By playing out training and workhorse scenarios, pony players valorize the use of animals for human purposes. Human pony players do not enact scenarios as free animals, but rather implement scenarios in which animals are possessed and controlled. Second, as discussed earlier,

pony players use the concept of the animal as a means of realizing their own erotic desires, symbolically appropriating animals for human ends.

In human pony play, animal roles are used to abstract humanity from human social relations while at the same time remaining deeply embedded in sexualized power dynamics. For many, being a pony constitutes an escape from the pressures of the human world enabled by a transformation into a new subjectivity. Restraints placed on the body via the costume and disciplinary practices the trainer imposes enable this transformation. While many claim the goal of pony play is simply to be kept as an animal and experience and interact with the world on that level, their experiences of being animal include highly sexualized engagements with the human body. Here animality becomes a vehicle for human sexuality as the experience of animality and sexual sensations are inextricably linked. The pony and trainer role-playing dynamics create a new sociality that attempts to use the human body to access an essential animality that is divorced from the cares of the human world. In this sense, pony play attempts to create a utopian engagement with nature that abstracts away staples of human social relations such as identity categories. At the same time, the practice puts human gender and sexuality on display. The performance of animality frees participants to expose their bodies to erotic sensations while maintaining a sense of restrained wildness and animal nobility.

Conclusion

Possibilities for Animals in Performance

In this dissertation, I have discussed the ways in which human identity comes to the forefront of animal performances. Whether animals are performed through nominal animal acting, theriomorphic animal acting, or theriomorphic drag, the presence of the human body remains prominent. Often, animal performance has little to do with actual animals and much to do with issues of human identity. We literally see ourselves first in animal performance. In theatre, animal characters communicate through human language and either replicate human subjectivity or overlap with it. Animals function as empty frames through which we can insert any sort of human identity. While I have critiqued the ways in which animals have been used to naturalize problematic norms, I do not believe this always has to be the case. Animals can be used to critique human hierarchies just as much as they have been used to uphold them. Here I wish to explore the positive potential of the theatrical animal.

While I have critiqued the ways in which animal characters are made to represent whiteness and the upper class in *A Year With Frog and Toad*, I believe the prominence of animal characters in TYA presents vast potential in terms of representing human identity. Animals create an opportunity for racially diverse casts and varied gender performances. Animals tend to be interpreted as representing the universal; therefore it is important to represent the world as culturally diverse. Any kind of human can represent an animal. Since animals in children's books do not typically refer to a particular race, animals onstage can be of any race. In addition to creating more racially diverse casts, it is also possible to include more diversity in terms of ability. Animals can also be made to represent any class. There is no reason why Frog and Toad must be upper class, as the UW-Platteville production demonstrates.

Animals do not have to adhere to conventional gender roles either. For example, in a production of *The Revolt of the Beavers* at the University of Wisconsin-Madison theatre, I noticed that the beaver role had the effect of “butching up” performances by certain female actors and the opposite effect of effeminizing the performance of a male actor. Attempting to behave like an animal opened up possibilities for the actors’ gendered behaviors. The drag involved in playing animal is not too far from cross-gender drag in that performers in both instances play with excessive signification. The excesses of animal acting can be a gateway into varied gender performances.

Indeed, the nominal designation of a character as animal instills a certain level of artifice that can be taken further in TYA productions. Already TYA productions involve adult actors such as Frog and Toad portraying child-like characters. This generates a sense of an alternative way of being “adult.” Why not extend the human cast as animal and adult cast as child aspects in TYA to include cross-gender casting? We know the actors playing Frog and Toad are not really animals, so do they really have to be played by male actors? The lack of realism in TYA by virtue of the animal character means that producers do not have to be tied down to conventional forms of representation.

Although trends in professional TYA involve actors portraying animals without attempting to behave as animals, having an animal name can create alternative portrayals of being human. An animal does not have to conform to human norms. Animals can be queer. Frog and Toad can sustain a loving adult relationship without generating controversy because they are called animals. If they were named “Fred” and “Tim,” their queer relationship would likely raise more eyebrows. The presumed safety of animals can be a boon to TYA practitioners. Perhaps animals can be used to facilitate queer representations under the radar. Instead of using animals

as an alibi for upholding social hierarchies, animals can be used to open up human representations.

By representing animal worlds as diverse, TYA producers can incorporate discussions of human diversity into their educational materials. Biological diversity can be reconstrued as human diversity. TYA producers must recognize that animal characters have little to do with animals and much to do with humans. Since animal characters look, behave, and speak like humans, the question becomes what kind of human is represented? Animals can mean alternative socialities in which humans of diverse races, genders, classes, abilities, and sexualities convene.

In adult theatre, animal acting creates an opportunity to address issues of power between human groups. Performances of animality can allude to the oppression of a particular identity group. While I critiqued the choice to cast an African-American man as an ape, the historical association of oppressed groups with animals remains a relevant theatrical topic. Can animal acting be done in such a way as to encourage audiences to view negative associations between animals and oppressed groups at a critical distance? In plays such as *Sylvia* and *Prymate* that portray particular groups as animalistic in a derogatory manner, can actors demonstrate the gap between themselves and the roles? Or is it possible to counter such associations through alternative casting choices? Changing the human identity of the animal character creates new interpretations of plays and can work against problematic aspects of the text. Casting *Sylvia* as male would change the play from a narrative about woman's subordination to man into a narrative about a man struggling with homosexuality. The love triangle between Greg, Kate, and Sylvia would take on a new meaning given Sylvia's eventual integration into their marriage. Casting Graham as white against a black Avrum would reverse the narrative from being about a black man's animality to that of a white man's animality. Theatre producers can challenge

existing negative associations between particular groups and animals through casting against the stereotype.

Animals present an opportunity to point out and critique human norms. As the controversy over the gay penguins illustrates, animals are often viewed as parallel to us. What we say animals do or do not do has political implications for what we consider valid human behavior, particularly in matters relating to sexuality. If animals can be gay, so can humans. While there are inherent problems in this logic, such as the potential for essentialization, the fact remains that conceptions of human nature are inextricably bound to considerations of animal nature. Animals validate certain human behaviors as natural, but animals can also be used to make human norms seem strange. When animal characters are seen attempting to conform to human gender norms, as in the gay penguin plays, they render such norms absurd. Animal portrayals facilitate a critical perspective on human behaviors. When we represent animals as trying to be like us, to mimic our categories of identity, it generates questions about the naturalness of those very categories.

In animal acting, there is really no way to get outside of the human. This does not mean animal acting fails. Rather, representing the animal provides the occasion for one to step back and reflect upon what it means to be human, and perhaps the opportunity to broaden that definition. In pony play, for example, human ponies think deeply about what it means to possess a human subjectivity constituted by language. In thinking themselves through the animal, they generate alternative ways of experiencing humanness that are not language bound. By inserting their bodies into the ropes, straps, and harnesses of horses, human ponies attempt to approximate the bodily sensations of animals. To an outside observer, it may just look like humans dressing up as horses. However, the art of pony play takes place within the individual that finds a new

way to experience the world by traveling from the human to a construction of the animal and back to the human again. Pony play does not get individuals outside the human, but to a new way of being human.

Animal acting does not advance Chaudhuri's concept of "critical zooësis" by deconstructing the distinction between human and animal because the animal is a layer upon the human in the form of a name, a set of ears, a distinct gesture, or a sound. The animal is an appendage to performances of the human rather than an element that blurs the conception of human and animal as separate ontological states. The exception might be instances of pony play in which players perceive themselves as blurring that ontological boundary internally. However, in most theatrical contexts, performances of animality do not blur human/animal ontology but rather demonstrate alternative ways of being human. Animal acting does not render humans as animals. That human language dominates most animal performances prevents this from occurring. What animal acting does do is push us to consider what makes a human a human. For this reason, it might be more fitting to speak of animal acting as potentially facilitating a form of "critical humanness" rather than "critical zooësis." Whereas critical zooësis refers to the deconstruction of the human/animal opposition, critical humanness refers to the questioning of what constitutes the human. Not all animal performances lend themselves to critical humanness, but therein lay the potential should animals be used to explore the full range of human identity in its myriad manifestations.

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