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Furry Cartography: Performing Species

Marla Carlson

This essay traces vectors of desire that organize contemporary relationships between human and nonhuman species. A flight toward altered embodiment includes both the perpetual performance that body modification makes possible and the temporary, more limited performance that occurs within furry fandom. Another flight directs itself toward a posthumanist life-world that does away with the notion that animals do not think and that all humans think in the same way or at least should do so. These vectors become visible in performance and produce conceptual maps that overlap but are not identical. After introducing the performance at the heart of this inquiry and some theoretical underpinnings, I will map out four overlapping networks of performance: in the first, humans perform as something other than human by taking on an alternative-species identity. A second network, of modified bodies at the limits of cultural norms, both overlaps with the first and challenges its reification of species boundaries. The third network also undoes boundaries, but here humans seek new sorts of ethical performance with companion species—performances born of affective bonds. In the fourth network, affect links performances along the autism spectrum to nonhuman species and back again to expanded norms for behavior and cognition. Finally, my analysis will bring into focus the psychic and commercial snares that continually adapt in order to recapture and contain the desires moving through these maps.

Locating Performance for Stalking Cat

My cartography begins with a man who calls himself Stalking Cat and for more than thirty years has been engaged in a project of tattoos, implants, and surgical alterations intended to bring him as close as possible to physical identity with his totem animal, the tiger (fig. 1). Also known as Cat Man, Tiger Man, or simply Cat, he grew up with the name Dennis Avner in Oscoda, Michigan, a small town on Lake Huron a couple hours north of Flint. From earliest childhood, Cat has experienced a connection that

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This essay began as a plenary presentation to the American Society for Theatre Research in 2007 and then took shape in portions presented for conference panels at Performance Studies international (PSi), the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, and the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present in 2009, and again at PSi in 2010. I thank the organizers of these panels, the two readers for *Theatre Journal* whose comments helped me to improve my argument, the Office of the Vice President for Research at the University of Georgia, Scott Adkins of the Brooklyn Writers Center, and, of course, *TJ* editors Penny Farfan and Catherine Schuler.



Figure 1. Stalking Cat.

he perceives as spiritual to all feline species but particularly to tigers, and he says that his modification simply uses technology to accomplish a sort of transformation long-practiced among his Huron and Lakota ancestors.

Upon discharge in 1980 from the navy, where he served as a sonar technician, Stalking Cat began the transformation project he had long-imagined. He was working as a computer technician in the San Diego area at the time and, because they were easiest to arrange, began with tiger-stripe tattoos on his face and fish scales on his arms and legs—the latter pattern connected to feline food rather than appearance. The surgeries took longer to arrange. Steve Haworth of Phoenix, who describes himself as a “body modification and human evolution artist,” did most of them: pointing his ears, reshaping his cheeks and forehead with silicone implants, moving his nasal septum, cleaving his upper lip, replacing his teeth with feline dentures.¹ These modifications

¹ Unless otherwise attributed, information about Stalking Cat’s views and personal history is based upon my interview in April 2007 and subsequent personal communications. See Stalking Cat’s website at <http://www.stalkingcat.net>; for more information about Steve Haworth, see <http://www.stevehaworth.com>.

have resulted in Cat's perpetual performance as something that exceeds human-species norms but certainly does not achieve full felinity. Stalking Cat struggles to maintain this performance as a profession. Fees for public appearances at venues such as Ripley's Believe It or Not provide crucial though not dependable income. When I met him in 2006 he was working on a deal to market a Stalking Cat action figure, which has not materialized, nor have more recent plans for a talk show or for paid college appearances. His agent, Chuck Harris, ensures that any contract is equitable, negotiates a reasonable fee, and takes care of travel arrangements, but Cat's livelihood has been difficult. As of this writing, Harris informs me that Cat is on the road, busy with public appearances, but he never finds quite enough work.

Cat is not alone in seeking to resemble a nonhuman species. In discussing the individuals profiled by the documentary *Animal Tragic* (2002)—Leopard Man, Stalking Cat, Katzen, and Lizard Man—Annie Potts establishes a continuum based on their degree of identification with the species they choose to resemble. Leopard Man, the most fully animalized of the four, has a full-body leopard-stripe tattoo, and at the time of filming lived in primitive conditions on the Isle of Skye, avoiding human contact as far as possible,² although in 2008, at age 73, he moved to a retirement home.³ Stalking Cat is more human-friendly than this, but he also prefers feline company to human. Katzen, “the first woman in history to ever have a full body theme tattoo,” is a performer and tattoo artist living in Austin, Texas.⁴ She claims a powerful feline connection but, in contrast to Stalking Cat, speaks of this more in relation to sensuality than to spirituality. Like Katzen, Lizard Man lives in Austin and is a performance artist. The only nonfeline of this group, he selected the lizard on aesthetic grounds and says he has no “interest in figuring out what goes through the peanut size brain of a lizard.”⁵

Twenty years after beginning his modifications on his own, Stalking Cat went to a furry event at a science-fiction convention. He says that when he walked into that room in 2000, he felt comfortable with other people for the first time. “Furries” are people who enjoy anthropomorphic art and fiction, even taking on animal identities themselves; some are involved in role-playing games; many use online avatars to perform in virtual space, and then sometimes perform in actual space by donning ears, tails, or complete fur suits at fan conventions. Furry fandom has provided Cat with community, friendship, and material support. I spent an afternoon with him on Whidbey Island at the home of Tess TheRedPony and her husband, a Boeing engineer, in April 2007. Cat had gotten to know this couple through informal fur-friendly gatherings of science-fiction fans in Southern California and moved north with them in 2005. He lived with them, did some work on their house, and unsuccessfully sought computer-related work in the Seattle area. My visit coincided with the household's monthly fur party, and the guests began to arrive as our interview finished. I did not see much costuming or overt as-animal performance on this occasion. Fleet Wolf, who lived there as well, wore an

² Annie Potts, “The Mark of the Beast: Inscripting ‘Animality’ through Extreme Body Modification,” in *Knowing Animals*, ed. Laurence Simmons and Philip Armstrong (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 151–52.

³ Chris Irvine, “Tattooed Leopard Man Leaves Hermit Lifestyle Behind,” *Telegraph*, 27 October 2008, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/3265474/Tattooed-Leopard-Man-leaves-hermit-lifestyle-behind.html> (accessed 4 July 2010).

⁴ Katzen, “The Enigma of the Total Tattoo” (<http://tattoos.com/katzen.htm>), qtd. in Potts, “Mark of the Beast,” 141.

⁵ Interview with Eric Sprague, aka Lizard Man (in *Animal Tragic*, directed by Phil Stebbing [Reel Life Documentary, in association with Channel 5, UK, and First Circle Films, 2002]), qtd. in Potts, “Mark of the Beast,” 140.

identity badge, and another person with whom I talked for awhile about animals and spirituality wore cat ears and a tail. They all soon became engrossed in a role-playing game based on Fleet Wolf's anthropomorphic novel-in-progress. This sort of game is like structured improvisation, but the players do not physically embody their roles. I felt like an outsider at a theatrical rehearsal, both intrusive and bored, and left about an hour into the party. Because expenses and dynamics became unworkable for this interesting household, Cat was asked to move out later that summer. Another friend from furry fandom gave him a place to live in Tonopah, Nevada, and a job in housing renovation. That friend moved on, the work dried up, and Cat was seeking clients as a home health aide when I last spoke with him, in 2009.

My interest in furry fandom began with a chance encounter, when I sat next to Stalking Cat and Tess on a flight to Chicago in 2006. We were all en route to annual gatherings: for them, the Midwest FurFest convention; for me, the conference of the American Society for Theatre Research. This encounter then came to mind during a smaller conference the following spring when Tony Kubiak spoke of the recent creation of a chimeric human-cat protein intended to block allergic reactions (in humans).⁶ This potentially beneficial hybrid resembles an instance of a-parallel evolution that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe in *A Thousand Plateaus*: a type-C virus links the baboon to the cat by carrying along genetic information from one species when it attaches to the other. The process alters the DNA of all three—cat, baboon, and virus. Proposing the rhizome as an analytical alternative to the tree structure, Deleuze and Guattari map such relationships horizontally.⁷

These material linkages made me curious about others forged not through DNA but instead through inter-species affect, and I set out to map the vectors of desire along which Stalking Cat moves together with other body modifiers, as well as those he travels with other humans who feel a powerful connection to nonhuman species. Instead of thinking about Cat's *identity* as a monstrous combination of animal and human or his outward manifestation of an inner animal that exists as a kind of primitive substratum—his *nature*, which is perhaps the way he himself thinks of his endeavors—this essay examines some locations where he can be spotted. I take a particular notion of "location" from Rosi Braidotti as a "collectively shared and constructed, jointly occupied spatio-temporal territory."⁸ As conceived in Braidotti's nomadology, subjectivity moves through various locations, rather than settling down in any one clearly defined position. This notion preserves individual agency, since we actively participate in shaping these locations, but at the same time takes into account the degree to which they, in turn, define us. Locations are not places. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, rhizomes have no "points or positions," but instead "only lines."⁹ We can alternatively think of locations as categories: some fit better and some worse, and none is entirely adequate, but they all exert a pull or torque that does, in fact, change

⁶See Anthony Kubiak, "The Sacred Clade and the Rhizomatic Dis-ease of History," *Modern Language Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (2009): 43–66. The study is reported in Daocheng Zhu et al., "A Chimeric Human-Cat Fusion Protein Blocks Cat-Induced Allergy," *Nature Medicine* 11, no. 4 (2005): 446–49.

⁷Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 10.

⁸Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 12.

⁹Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 8.

the contours of one's lived experience.¹⁰ Most importantly, however, locations remain both partial and temporary. Because Stalking Cat does not reside in any one location but is instead torqued by many, my mappings do not capture him—they form not nets, but a network, like a neural or computational network, which is flexible, responsive, and able to expand by forming new connections.

Performing as Animal

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. Many actors will have encountered exercises in animal essence to develop a character's physical being. As I was revising this essay for publication, I happened to see tigers in the theatre twice on a single weekend. Rude Mechs's delightful show *The Method Gun* concerns a group of acting students who spend nine years rehearsing a single production. Interrupting their actorly angst is a tiger—that is, one member of the ensemble in a tiger suit with another seated at a microphone to provide the voice—on the lookout for someone to eat, but also providing the excitement that he thinks the theatre needs. This tiger presents simple appetites and direct action and in the end walks off arm in arm with the company's leading lady.¹¹ The eponymous tiger that Robin Williams plays—with no costuming or behavioral indications of nonhuman identity—in *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* also presents an alternative to human ethical worries. After he bites off one Marine's hand and is shot by another, he leaves his cage to prowl the city as a ghost. This tiger explains that he was an atheist, as all tigers are, with an understanding of the difference between heaven and hell as “not hungry” and “hungry.” Now he feels guilt for certain children that he ate and wonders whether an unreasonable god has made him a tiger and is now punishing him for his nature.¹² In both of these plays, a human actor performs as a tiger in order to embody certain qualities, much as Laura's disability serves metaphorical ends in *The Glass Menagerie*. These naturalizing metaphors depend upon a notion of Tiger as an unproblematic and unself-conscious relation to the world based on appetite, which, in turn, rests upon a fundamental distinction between human consciousness and that of any other creature.

Loosely connected to these sorts of theatrical animality, anthropomorphic art and fiction have long-provided humans with temporary escapes from the Human. Furry fandom emerged as a subculture in the 1980s, with hotel-room parties at science-fiction and comic-book fan conventions. The furry parties led to a prototype ConFurence

¹⁰ Susan Leigh Star and Geoffrey C. Bowker use racial categorization and pass laws in South Africa to explain the concept of torque in their *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 196–225. I take the term from Donna Haraway's observation that “[w]e live in a world where people are made to live several non-isomorphic categories simultaneously, all of which ‘torque’ them”; see Nicholas Gane, “When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done?: Interview with Donna Haraway,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, nos. 7–8 (2006): 135–58, quote on 138. Haraway further explains that “people have to live in relation to several simultaneously obligatory systems of standardization that they can't fit, but must live with” (147).

¹¹ *The Method Gun*, by Rude Mechs, written by Kirk Lynn, directed by Shawn Sides, with Thomas Graves, Hannah Kenah, Lana Lesley, E. Jason Liebrecht, and Shawn Sides, Dance Theatre Workshop, New York City, 12 March 2011.

¹² *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, by Rajiv Joseph, directed by Moisés Kaufman, with Robin Williams, Richard Rogers Theatre, New York City, 13 March 2011.

Zero in 1989, and furry conventions have multiplied since that time.¹³ The largest is Anthrocon, which began in 1997 and attracted 4,200 attendees in 2010.¹⁴ Cat and Tess were among the 1,422 fans attending the Midwest FurFest in 2006,¹⁵ and a few days after my interview on Whidbey Island, Cat was headed off by train to CaliFur—the successor to ConFurence, which ended in 2003—where he served as an organizer of the cabaret and did body-paint for feline dancers. Fur cons typically feature workshops, games, dances, fursuit parades, talent shows, and similar events. Vendors sell anthropomorphic art, badges, fursuits, and accessories, and the conventions include an auction or other event to raise money for animal-related nonprofit organizations.

In March 2009, I attended Furry Weekend Atlanta (FWA), arriving on a Friday night in time to watch a dance contest with all the contestants in fursuits. In order to gain admission to the convention as a scholar, I had submitted to the organizers a description of my research and a sample interview protocol. A sensationalist emphasis on furry sex, while hardly surprising, has made the fandom media shy. “Yiff,” which refers to sex or pornography, is the most familiar and notorious aspect of the fandom, often known through the 2003 *CSI* episode “Fur and Loathing” (in Las Vegas) and similar treatments on MTV, *ER*, and in the popular press.¹⁶ The WikiFur history identifies controversy over public sexual behavior as the downfall of ConFurence. Only three interview subjects talked to me about their own erotic investment in the fandom, but I suspect that many others were more interested in having fun at FWA than in talking to me about their sex lives. Although my official escort soon left me to proceed on my own, a few people approached me between interviews to make sure I was not up to anything objectionable. The most interesting of these was a graduate student in performance studies whom I met only in full fursuit and who checked my credentials with his major professor, an old friend of mine. I hope that this young scholar and amazing fur-suit dancer—he won the contest—will write about the fandom. I saw parents attending with their children and vendors who work various types of conventions, one of the latter noting that there are fewer surly people at a fur con than at a Renaissance fair. A pack of *Cats* fans prowled the convention, acting sexy in their Lycra unitards and face paint. They seemed vaguely out of place to me, and I didn’t realize what they were until I saw a lip-synched dance to “Macavity” during the talent show.

I began the next morning with a panel called “Fursuit Performance 101” that largely focused on the mechanics of cooling and hydration. As most readers might assume, bodies can become dangerously overheated inside these suits. The speakers, both of whom had worked professionally as mascots, did eventually address the question of character development. Furries spend considerable time and energy in developing

¹³ “History,” in *WikiFur*, 7 February 2011, available at <http://en.wikifur.com/wiki/History> (accessed 15 March 2011). See also Fred Patten, “A Chronology of Furry Fandom,” in *YARF!*, available at <http://yarf.furry.com/chronology.html>; Perri Rhoades, “The Furry History Project,” in *LiveJournal*, available at <http://spectralshadows.livejournal.com/46979.html> (both accessed 15 March 2011); and Francesca Coppa, “A Brief History of Media Fandom,” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 43–45.

¹⁴ Giza (Douglas Muth), “What Anthrocon Is All About,” in *Anthrocon*, 28 March 2006, available at <http://www.anthrocon.org/about> (accessed 15 March 2011).

¹⁵ “MidWest FurFest,” in *WikiFur*, 26 November 2010, available at http://en.wikifur.com/wiki/Midwest_FurFest (accessed 15 March 2011).

¹⁶ “Fur and Loathing,” written by Jerry Stahl, directed by Richard J. Lewis, in *CSI* (USA: CBS Paramount Network Television, 2003).

a fursona: planning appearance, behavior, personality; drawing the character and making up a life story; commissioning badges; perhaps getting a costume, but perhaps not. One speaker, Tilt Longtail, particularly urged neophyte fur suiters to develop engaging physical behaviors for the fursuit parade, pointing out that simply waving becomes quite a bore for spectators. At the end of this panel I explained my project and made contact with my first interview subject.

Some of the people with whom I spoke added only a pair of ears or a tail to their human apparel. One of these was Krowy, a graphic-design student who showed her work in Artists Alley¹⁷ for awhile, but decided that she was not really prepared for that. She had previously attended Anthrocon and found that experience “hellish” because she got so much business drawing portraits that people became impatient waiting for theirs. Asked at the end of the interview if there was anything else she would like to share, Krowy told me that she is a Christian and lately had been having second thoughts about the fandom and the way it is perceived by outside people, because “the whole yiff thing—that’s what people immediately think of.” She regrets the one porn commission she has done—although it “wasn’t that bad, more romantic”—because she is serious about her career as an artist and would not want to be known for that sort of work. Identical twins Wolfy RedWolf and Foxy56 also wore only ears and tails, because they cannot afford full suits, but they also had a large number of stuffed, plushy chihuahuas—their live chihuahuas were not allowed in the hotel, though both kinds accompany them when they ride their three-wheeled bicycles in twin parades.

I interviewed four people in full fursuit, two of whom took their fur heads off for our conversation. When Renard Foxx first attended FWA three years earlier he talked with some fursuiters and observed how much fun they were having. He saved \$700 to buy his partial fursuit of head, arms, and tail, but plans to build another one himself. Millie the Jackalope builds suits both for herself and on commission, charging about \$400. The partial suit that she was wearing cost only about \$50, and that expense will not increase for the full suit, since she already has all the materials. Her personal character is not the jackalope, but rather a husky-bunny hybrid, which she plans to construct after she finishes a couple of pending commissions—she wants this particular suit to be perfect. At the higher end of the price range, an inheritance enabled Zorin Fox to buy his fursuit for about \$1,600 shortly before this convention. Although some people wear their suits only at conventions, others may wear them on dinner or bowling excursions with other furies. Millie has had positive experiences wearing her fur suit in nonfur public settings; for example, Halloween provides a great opportunity—she went in costume to a military commissary and to Walmart, where she said an older lady started dancing with her in the parking lot and did not want to let her go. She also has a kitty costume that small children like. When Renard tried wearing his suit near the pet supplies at Walmart, however, store employees objected to the fact that he was masked, although the greeter had initially looked at him with curiosity and smiled and waved, perhaps thinking that Renard was part of a promotion. Zorin and his friends also find that most businesses will not allow masked individuals inside, although others only require that such individuals have proper identification and be accompanied by someone who is unmasked.

¹⁷ “Artists Alley is the space at a convention where amateur and professional artists display their work, draw commissioned sketches and badges, and may sell merchandise of their work such as prints, CDs, comic books, and buttons”; see *WikiFur*, available at http://en.wikifur.com/wiki/Artists_Alley.

People make new friends at a convention and then stay in touch online, and they make friends online whom they then meet in person at the convention. At Anthrocon, Krowy met people who lived only twenty miles from her isolated home in the country, whom she would not otherwise have had a chance of meeting. Now she plans to get together with these people. Wolfy RedWolf was looking forward to meeting a friend from Second Life in person at FWA. Virtual experiences remain important, even for those who do attend conventions or have meetups. Wolfy told me that yiff awakened him, in his mid-fifties, to an attraction to other men. He now identifies as gay on Second Life and straight in real life. Zorin Fox, who at age 21 considers himself a bisexual male, said that fandom opened him up to having meetups with other males. Several of the people with whom I spoke at FWA observed, without being asked, that there are more male than female furies, most of them either bisexual or gay. A vendor pointed out that there is a lot of transgender performance going on at fur cons; for example, she had met a man in a wolf suit who thought of himself as a man with a wolf inside him, but the wolf is female. Millie, Zorin, and others describe themselves as more outgoing and playful while in their fursuits, and they thrive on the attention and hugging. Some furies care deeply about nonhuman species and others want to experience life as a cartoon animal; but the furies with whom I have spoken all describe a sort of engagement with *humans* that animal masquerade frees them to experience.

Performing the Limits of Species

In contrast to the sorts of metaphorical animality that I have been discussing, some performances *de-naturalize* both the animal and the human. Lizard Man, for example, performs his modified body as entertainment, turning himself into a commodity and ironizing both nature and culture. Potts points out that he has a degree in philosophy and was on his way to an academic career when he, in essence, ran away to the circus—or rather, to its split-off remnant, the freak show. I watched him on YouTube putting screwdrivers, electric drills, and copious fluids up his nose and lying on a bed of nails with a young woman standing and bouncing on his stomach.¹⁸ We might position Lizard Man at the midpoint of a perpetual performance continuum between the considerably animalized Stalking Cat and the French conceptual artist Orlan, who in 1990 commenced a project titled *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* with nothing of the animal involved—unless we consider Woman to occupy the same position as Animal, both being categories that serve to define Man by opposition. In this series of plastic surgeries that incorporate facial features selected from canonical works of art, Orlan denaturalizes culture by making its assumptions visible. The notion that the *Mona Lisa* is a disguised self-portrait of Leonardo da Vinci, for example, inspired forehead implants that mimic her/his brow but remain obviously artificial. Orlan's so-called reincarnation is, first and foremost, an embodied critique of the ways in which women are coerced into adhering to an impossible standard of beauty.¹⁹

¹⁸“Lizardman Sideshow Stunt Compilation,” YouTube, 21 December 2006, available at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=xUp9xmYY2YY> (accessed 31 October 2007). In October 2009, Lizard Man was performing at Fright Dome (Circus Circus) in Las Vegas, and in Sweden with the touring sideshow Hellzapoppin in June 2010; see Lizard Man's homepage, available at <http://www.thelizardman.com> (accessed 4 July 2010), and his blog, “The Lizardman's Posterous” (<http://thelizardman.posterous.com>).

¹⁹See Tanya Augsborg, “Orlan's Performative Transformations of Subjectivity,” in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 285–314; Jill O'Bryan, “Saint Orlan Faces Reincarnation,” *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (1997): 50–56.

Whereas Orlan articulates her cultural critique as an explicit part of her performance work, other modified bodies perform an implicit critique by virtue of their marginality. This would seem to be the case for Lizard Man, who performed from 1999 through 2001 with the Jim Rose Circus Sideshow, one of the five or so sideshows touring the country at the end of the twentieth century, this one traveling with Lollapalooza. The sideshow features congenitally anomalous bodies alongside those modified by choice, and both may demonstrate unusual skills such as fire-eating, sword-swallowing, and feats of strength, agility, or endurance. There had been hundreds of shows like this early in the century, but they disappeared under economic competition from automated carnival rides and increasing moral opprobrium from those who viewed the so-called freaks as nothing more than exploited unfortunates. In his fascinating analysis of their heyday, decline, and relation to disability discourse, Michael Chemers argues convincingly that many sideshow performers possessed skills and professional accomplishments comparable to entertainers whose appearances fit social norms and who often enough attract fans through their own sort of freakishness.²⁰ Like the cyborg and the animal, the freak performer inhabits the borders of the Human—and that is why these categories exist, because they bracket off varieties of life in order to define humanity.²¹

Sage Blevins, a journalist and curator at the now-closed Freakatorium in New York City, observed to Chemers that “many individuals in American culture are revolted by the *vulgarity* of their own normality. These individuals sometimes compensate for this vulgarity by engaging in the controlled self-mutilations of body building, body piercing, tattoos, and implants.”²² As a subcultural style, body modification stresses “customization, individuality, and personal freedom,” as Victoria Pitts points out; for example, the discourse that one finds in *Body Modification E-zine* “denaturalizes the body and endorses an ethic of individualism.”²³ Dick Hebdige defines “subculture” as a form that uses style to figuratively express “a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second-class lives.”²⁴ Like the safety pins that serve Hebdige as an emblem of punk style, modifications “take on a symbolic dimension, becoming a form of stigmata, tokens of a self-imposed exile.”²⁵ These symbols draw the scorn of the dominant culture, reinforcing abject identity. At the same time, though, they affirm that identity’s positive valence. Hebdige draws upon Gramsci and Althusser for his explanation that both hegemony and ideology operate by remaining invisible—by making the power of the dominant social coalition seem to be natural, making categories and patterns of thought seem to be immutable mental structures.²⁶

²⁰ Michael M. Chemers, *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 114–16.

²¹ For a discussion that brings together these notions in ways that parallel my own, see Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, “Becoming-Animate: On the Performed Limits of ‘Human,’” *Theatre Journal* 58, no. 4 (2006): 649–68.

²² Chemers, *Staging Stigma*, 135 (emphasis in original). Chemers interviewed Blevins in 2000 and mentions that she is “herself possessed of an anomalous body” (8).

²³ Victoria Pitts, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 169.

²⁴ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979; reprint, London: Routledge, 2002), 132.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 15–17. Hebdige writes of subculture as coherent and bounded. I alter these ideas slightly in order to conceptualize them nomadically and for a better fit with global culture in the twenty-first century.

These are the categories that torque us, however much we may pull in other directions. The medical and psychiatric discourse around body modification shows this process in action. As Potts points out, medical experts consider modifications that contravene social norms to be a form of self-mutilation, but they are much less likely to make such judgments about cosmetic surgeries intended to align appearance more closely with norms.²⁷ Thus a medical ethicist who has never spoken with Stalking Cat was willing to state for publication the fear that he is “seriously risking his health” and thus being “harmed by medicine,”²⁸ although Cat tells me that he has experienced no such health effects. Likewise, Lizard Man says that tongue-splitting is perfectly safe, with no negative consequences. Although Cat’s alterations meet more often with patronizing dismissal than overt hostility, Orlan makes people quite angry, even when they are favorably disposed to her gender critique.²⁹

Orlan denaturalizes the ability to suffer—which Jeremy Bentham proposed as the fundamental distinction between humans and other species.³⁰ She repeatedly explains that she has no desire to suffer. She acknowledges the spectator’s discomfort and apologizes but claims not to suffer during the surgery, which is carried out with the help of local anesthetics. Yet critics focus upon the pain and the cut.³¹ And indeed, Orlan’s protestations of regret are somewhat hard to credit when she not only publishes photos of her face peeled back, but meticulously stages the surgery as a performance. Orlan’s flayed face gives a glimpse of the abject—as Julia Kristeva defines it, everything that one must “permanently thrust aside in order to live,” an effect produced by “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”³² Any unusual facial modification, such as Stalking Cat’s, can produce a subliminal image of the fleshy inside of the face, even without directly displaying it. One might be tempted to view the emergence into visibility of the abject as accomplishing something politically significant. But Braidotti has demonstrated the ways in which such an apparent collapse of binaries serves, in fact, to generate profit. She thus notes the extent to which, paradoxically, the “queering of identities . . . goes hand in hand with the return of sexual polarizations and stricter gender roles.”³³ The global economy depends upon and encourages local differences to enhance marketing opportunities. Therefore along with “fat-free ice creams and

²⁷ Potts, “Mark of the Beast,” 135n3.

²⁸ Glenn McGee, director of the Center for Bioethics at Albany Medical College in New York, quoted in Vanessa Renée Casavant, “Catman’s Transformation Raises Concerns Over Extreme Surgery,” *Seattle Times*, 16 August 2005, available at http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/localnews/2002441727_catman16.html (accessed 11 April 2011).

²⁹ The impulse to diagnose is hardly limited to medical and psychiatric professionals. Art historian Kristine Stiles has gone on at length about the self-destructive impulse behind the surgeries that she terms “life-threatening”; see Stiles, “Never Enough Is *Something Else*: Feminist Performance Art, Avant-Gardes, and Probity,” in *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality*, ed. James M. Harding (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 239–89.

³⁰ See Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 395–97.

³¹ See, for example, Carey Lovelace, “Orlan: Offensive Acts,” *Performing Arts Journal* 17 (1995): 13; Parveen Adams, “Operation Orlan,” in *The Emptiness of the Image: Psychoanalysis and Sexual Difference* (London: Routledge, 1996), 143.

³² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. and ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3–4.

³³ Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 49.

alcohol-free beer," we have "feminism without women, racism without races, natural laws without nature,"³⁴ and animals without nonhuman species.

Performing with Companion Species

Given the extent to which we have been "worlded as species,"³⁵ we might reconfigure the collapse of categories as a positive flight of desire directed toward nonhuman species without Animal. Drawing upon Heidegger, Giorgio Agamben articulates the difference among the inanimate, the animal, and man in terms of relation to the world. The stone has no world. The animal has an environment, a "circle of disinhibitors"; that is, it is aware of the things with which its life is intertwined and they cause it to act. But because it has no awareness of a world beyond these inciting entities, Agamben asserts that it has "poverty in world." The animal is captivated by its environment, whereas a man is aware of things with which he has no necessary relation, and he is aware of the degree to which he does not fully know them. He discovers ("disconceals") the world as a process and thus creates it.³⁶ Agamben proposes stopping the "anthropological machine" so that it "no longer articulates nature and man in order to produce the human through the suspension and capture of the inhuman." In the resulting "standstill," he suggests that "something for which we perhaps have no name and which is neither animal nor man settles in between nature and humanity."³⁷

Donna Haraway builds upon Agamben in rejecting the separation of humanity from other species and argues convincingly for the dog's (and the sheep's) rich openness to the world. She describes "the open" as "the space of what is not yet and may or may not ever be; it is a making available to events."³⁸ She points out that there is no such thing as the human or the individual, but instead a constant process of becoming *with*, a dance between multiple "critters" of the same species or of different ones.³⁹ Haraway asserts that we are indeed "able to communicate with and to know one another and other critters." Even if the knowledge and communication remain imperfect, they create "mortal entanglements (the open) for which we are responsible and in which we respond."⁴⁰ As a way to visualize the future, Haraway has largely abandoned the cyborg for agility training with her Australian shepherd, and reconceptualizing the past coevolution of species plays an important role in that process of visualization.

According to DNA sequencing, the domestic dog and the wolf had a single ancestor species and most likely began to diverge around 135,000 years ago. The fact that canid and hominid bones have been found together dating from the Middle Pleistocene stage, roughly 400,000 years ago, suggests that these companion species coevolved to

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 55, 58.

³⁵ Gane, "When We Have Never Been Human," 144.

³⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 49–56.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 83. For another useful treatment of this material, see Martin Puchner, "Performing the Open: Actors, Animals, Philosophers," *TDR: The Drama Review* 51, no. 1 (2007): 21–32. This special issue of *TDR* includes many articles with concerns similar to my own; see, for example, Una Chaudhuri's article "(De)Facing the Animals: Zooësis and Performance" (8–20).

³⁸ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 34.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 28–29.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

become humans and dogs. Archaeologists think that dogs have been domesticated for about 14,000 years, based on the oldest canine bones found buried beneath human dwellings,⁴¹ and Haraway argues that dogs domesticated themselves, perceiving the clear advantage of hanging around humans, their garbage, and their excrement.⁴² Temple Grandin goes considerably further, proposing that our species survived while Neanderthals disappeared because coevolving wolf companions taught early humans to cooperate with people to whom they weren't related.⁴³ She proposes that early humans began to diverge from other primates precisely because "they learned to act and think like wolves": hunting in groups, developing complex social structures and territorial behaviors, and maintaining loyal same-sex and nonkin friendships. Grandin cites the Aboriginal saying "[D]ogs make us human"—a notion close to Alphonso Lingis's proposal that we learn much of what we consider to be human behavior from animals.⁴⁴ Even as they (and I) acknowledge that their extrapolations go far beyond what current scientific research can support, Haraway and Grandin write from a particular location of intense emotional engagement with nonhuman species.

We can trace a line of flight passing through the location that their writing helps to define and also through as-animal performance within furry fandom, including the fur-con as a fundraising venue for critter causes. None of the furies whom I interviewed at FWA were actively engaged in animal rescue or advocacy, but this was a very small sample with no statistical validity. Most of them did say that they either donate money to such causes or would do so if their circumstances permit, and a few expressed the desire to be more actively involved—again, given a change in their current material circumstances. Millie raised show rabbits as a teenager and used to have a rabbit rescue, for example, but her nine-hour shifts loading trucks at Walmart now limit the time she can spend with animals. She lives with a roommate who is active in animal rescue and has seven dogs. Stalking Cat participates in animal rescues and does fundraising appearances for big-cat sanctuaries. In contrast to Millie's involvement with bunnies or Cat's with cats of all sizes, however, the primary affinity for many furies is, in fact, to cartoons. Zorin Fox, for example, chose his fursuit in order to emulate a favorite cartoon character from childhood.

One might well wonder why so many people at this particular cultural moment choose pets and cartoons as cathectic objects. Psychological diagnoses might focus upon anthropomorphic emotional sustenance as a compensation for human isolation. But perhaps what we are missing is not only meaningful relationships with other people, but also with the other species from whom we learn to be human—whatever that is or will be. Among other instructive interactions, Lingis talks about stroking hens and getting kissed by calves.⁴⁵ Few children in either of my two neighborhoods—Brooklyn and Athens, Georgia—have experienced either, although urban chickens have recently

⁴¹ Robert K. Wayne et al., "Multiple and Ancient Origins of the Domestic Dog," *Science* 276, no. 5319 (1997): 1689.

⁴² Donna Haraway, "Cyborgs to Companion Species: Reconfiguring Kinship in Technoscience," in *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 295–320.

⁴³ Temple Grandin, with Catherine Johnson, *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 305.

⁴⁴ Grandin, *Animals in Translation*, 304–6; Alphonso Lingis, "Animal Body, Inhuman Face," in *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 165–82.

⁴⁵ Lingis, "Animal Body, Inhuman Face."

taken up residence next door in each place. The disappearance of other species with whom the lives of humans were formerly intertwined increasingly impoverishes our worlds. We lack what Lingis would consider essential emotional teachers. We know our pets. We know zoos; nature films; anthropomorphic fiction, film, and art; toys; cartoons. Many scholars point out that the current fascination with and investment in substitute species, such as robot dogs and reanimated dinosaurs, in both popular and high culture go hand in hand with the extinction of real species.⁴⁶ The coincidence of Jerry Seinfeld's 2007 *Bee Movie* with the massive disappearance of honeybees being a case in point. Our ever-increasing poverty in world squeezes human animals into an ever-more-restricted range of development and behavior considered normal.

Performing as Human

The notion that animals make us human bears a fraught relation to the mythology of children raised by animals, most commonly wolves or bears. Such factual accounts began in the seventeenth century, a time of philosophical concern with human nature and the state of nature. Up through the end of eighteenth century, as Adriana Benzaquén observes, such accounts stressed that the children were isolated from human civilization and raised by animals. Starting in the early nineteenth, a conception of norms for human development became more important to the narratives. In addition to children abandoned by parents and raised by animals, other accounts featured imbeciles, with wild children being confined, mistreated, and abused and receiving no particular animal nurture.⁴⁷ Accepting the suggestion that these children very likely became feral because they were abandoned due to disability and that their stories serve as mythic and Romantic tropes to delimit human experience and negotiate humanity's relation to so-called nature, Olga Solomon argues that the notion of children raised by wolves when their parents fail them also points to the potential for canine facilitation of human interaction.⁴⁸ For example, dogs have been used therapeutically for nearly fifty years. Solomon notes that dogs perform social actions that are "highly anticipatory, unhurried, structurally simple and easy to interpret," thus creating a well-organized background for interaction that helps children with autism to easily anticipate the next move. As she puts it, "[t]he dogs reside not only in [the] 'here and now' but also in a 'here and now' that happens over and over, allowing the children to practice being intentional, intersubjective agents."⁴⁹

This particular therapeutic entanglement between human and nonhuman species highlights the roughly coincident expansion of autism spectrum disorders to include a variety of difficulties in communication and the dog's transformation from pet or working animal to companion species. Haraway notes that this latter change in terminology indicates a shift in power that came about as psychologists and social

⁴⁶ See, for example, Ursula K. Heise, "From Extinction to Electronics: Dead Frogs, Live Dinosaurs, and Electric Sheep," in *Zoontologies*, 59–82.

⁴⁷ Adriana S. Benzaquén, *Encounters with Wild Children: Temptation and Disappointment in the Study of Human Nature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 55–56; see also Michael Newton, *Savage Girls and Wild Boys: A History of Feral Children* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2003).

⁴⁸ Olga Solomon, "What a Dog Can Do: Children with Autism and Therapy Dogs in Social Interaction," *Ethos* 38, no. 1 (2010): 144.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

scientists began to investigate “the relations of animals such as dogs to human health and well-being” in the late 1970s.⁵⁰ The popular conception that we are experiencing an autism epidemic results from a number of factors that cannot be fully disentangled. Leo Kanner’s 1943 definition pictures an autistic wild child, closed off and “all but impervious to culture,” as Karen Sirota puts it.⁵¹ In addition to being characterized as feral, such children were typically discussed with animal imagery: for instance, one parent described an autistic child reacting to face-to-face interaction “like a foal who had been let out of the enclosure.”⁵² This relatively rare condition was considered a form of childhood schizophrenia, and the narrow definition of autism limited the diagnosis to approximately one child in 2,000.

Then in 1980, the American Psychiatric Association for the first time included autistic disorder in its third edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III). The subsequent DSM-IV (1994) changed the term to “autism spectrum disorder” (ASD) and expanded its diagnostic criteria to include autistic disorder, Asperger syndrome, and “pervasive developmental disorder—not otherwise specified” (PDD NOS). By 2006, the incidence of ASD in the United States had grown to one child in 110.⁵³ A changing conception of diagnosably deviant human communication thus emerged at the same time as a transformation in the communicative relation between human and nonhuman animals—and at roughly the same time as furry fandom began to coalesce and body modification began to move into the mainstream. In addition to temporal coincidence, all of these phenomena change what it means to perform as Human.

For classic autism, there may be no verbal communication at all and thus uncertainty about whether the autistic person thinks,⁵⁴ much like uncertainty about animal thought. Thus the controversy concerning facilitated communication resembles that about ape sign-language research: Does the facilitator, who maintains some degree of physical contact that enables the autistic person to type, actually produce the communication’s content in Ouija-board fashion? Did Koko the gorilla learn more than a thousand signs and communicate meaningfully with them, or did her trainer extract meaningful sequences from what was essentially a stream of babble? Such questions interest many people who have no particular involvement with autism, gorillas, or the professional study of communication and language acquisition. And, of course, we now have enough alternative communications systems to establish that many humans who do not speak do indeed think. Therapists, teachers, and families communicate using diagrams or other pictures, objects, systems of sign language, touch, or facilitated communication. Writing may be possible even if speech is not. Soma Mukhopadhyay, for example, invented a “Rapid Prompting Method” to teach her son Tito how to com-

⁵⁰ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 134.

⁵¹ Karen Gainer Sirota, “Narratives of Distinction: Personal Life Narrative as a Technology of the Self in the Everyday Lives and Relational Worlds of Children with Autism,” *Ethos* 38, no.1 (2010): 93.

⁵² *Ibid.*, quoting Leo Kanner, “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact,” *Nervous Child* 2 (1943): 247.

⁵³ Catherine Rice et al., “Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders—Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, United States, 2006,” in *MMWR Surveillance Summaries*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services, 18 December 2009, available at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss5810a1.htm> (accessed 18 March 2011). See also Roy Richard Grinker, “Diagnostic Criteria for Autism through the Years,” in *Unstrange Minds*, 2007, available at <http://www.unstrange.com/dsm1.html> (accessed 18 March 2011).

⁵⁴ Sirota, “Narratives of Distinction,” 93.

municate. Although he still does not speak, he can now write independently.⁵⁵ The many autobiographical accounts written by individuals with high-functioning autism or Asperger syndrome convey a vivid sense of their cognitive styles and struggles to communicate.⁵⁶ They describe thinking in pictures or in movement and sound rather than in words, for example, and synesthesia that contributes to math-savant abilities or, conversely, exacerbates a math incapacity but enhances linguistic ability. The variation among their self-descriptions of cognition belies any simple stereotype of autism.⁵⁷

Balancing out difficulties with human communication, Grandin has recently popularized the notion that ASDs can produce a special understanding of animal consciousness and contribute to enhanced interspecies communication. She believes that animals think in pictures, as she herself does, and she attributes her ability to design more humane animal-handling equipment to the fact that she notices the things that they notice, details that “neurotypicals” overlook.⁵⁸ Following a similar trajectory, Dawn Prince-Hughes says that the comfort she found in being with the gorillas at the zoo enabled her to learn from her interactions with them how to interact with other humans. The extended periods of time she spent at the zoo led to employment and an assignment to observe the gorillas, because, like Grandin, she would notice things that others would not.⁵⁹ Both of these women have earned doctoral degrees related to their work with other species—Grandin in animal science, and Prince-Hughes in anthropology. Solomon points out that “what is at stake in [their] accounts of human–animal relationships . . . appears to go beyond concerns for animal welfare; their own wellbeing is intrinsically connected to the wellbeing of the animals.”⁶⁰

The notion that autistic people have a special affinity with animals is so oft-repeated that it constitutes an important contemporary trope regardless of its actual substance. This perceived closeness to animals led journalist Rupert Isaacson to Mongolia in search of a shamanic cure for his autistic son Rowan, having been surprised when contact with horses not only ended a tantrum but enabled the boy, who had retreated into silence, to speak again. His wife Kristin Neff, a professor of human development at the University of Texas in Austin, initially considered the proposition crazy. As shown in the auto-documentary of this family’s journey *The Horse Boy*, the Mongolian horses did not have the same effect on Rowan as the horses at home did, and the efficacy of the two shamanic ceremonies is entirely uncertain, even to the parents. The boy does not get cured of his autism, but he does get over the physical and emotional incontinence,

⁵⁵ Olga Bogdashina, *Communication Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome: Do We Speak the Same Language?* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005), 219–43, 107.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Temple Grandin, with Margaret M. Scariano, *Emergence: Labeled Autistic* (Novato, CA: Arena Press, 1986); Donna Williams, *Nobody Nowhere: The Extraordinary Autobiography of an Autistic* (New York: Times Books, 1992); Dawn Prince-Hughes, *Songs of the Gorilla Nation: My Journey through Autism* (New York: Harmony Books, 2004); Daniel Tammet, *Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant—A Memoir* (New York: Free Press, 2007); Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay, *How Can I Talk If My Lips Don’t Move?: Inside My Autistic Mind* (New York: Arcade, 2008).

⁵⁷ For further discussion, see Bogdashina, *Communication Issues*; Olga Solomon and Nancy Bagatell, “Introduction: Autism: Rethinking the Possibilities,” *Ethos* 38, no.1 (2010): 1–7; Victoria McGeer, “Autistic Self-Awareness,” *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 11, no. 3 (2004): 235–51.

⁵⁸ Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures: And Other Reports from My Life with Autism* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

⁵⁹ Prince-Hughes, *Songs of the Gorilla Nation*, 104.

⁶⁰ Solomon, “What a Dog Can Do,” 162n2.

to paraphrase Rupert. The family travels to Mongolia hurting and sick but returns home without the problems that accompanied the autism and made it intolerable.⁶¹

I would suggest that the film's public intimacy facilitates a shift in as-family performance for Rupert, Kristin, and Rowan, and this shift centers on behavioral control—the other primary linkage between animals and autism. We raise our children to navigate the society within which they must live, and we train our domestic animals, particularly dogs and horses. In the most positive sense, training is the sort of mutual and pleasurable co-adaptation that Haraway understands herself to be engaged in with her dog. Human and nonhuman perform a harmonious duet. Viewed in the most negative light, training develops the kinds of habits that Braidotti (speaking of humans) defines as “cumulated toxins which by sheer uncreative repetition engender forms of behaviour that can be socially accepted as ‘normal’ or even ‘natural.’”⁶² Deleuze and Guattari glimpse in feral-child narratives an existence “outside the programmed body” available to all children but not fully accessed when the programming proceeds according to plan: “an inhuman connivance with the animal, rather than an Oedipal symbolic community.”⁶³ But the lives of individual children and dogs are a different matter. One may presume that Deleuze and Guattari do not advocate either autistic mutism for humans or uncontrolled defecation for either species, any more than they recommend actual schizophrenia as a route to freedom.

Toilet training carries a heavy load of shame, not only being one of the most important means by which we bring young children into culture, but also the means by which we ourselves were enculturated. Significantly, the only feces with which most of us engage closely are those of our small children or our pets. Rupert and Kristin talk openly in their film about changing four-year-old Rowan's soiled underpants and express the fear that he will be continuing to soil them as a teenager. They actually film the cleanup and then finally the success. The unruly, incontinent body still defines the boundaries of culture. *The Horse Boy* not only brings this body into focus but pictures it enmeshed in the Oedipal family, showing autism as a condition to which the family must adapt. Their adaptation includes a film, a Horse Boy Foundation, and a trademarked “Horse Boy Method”⁶⁴—seemingly an adaptation to the structures provided by capitalism. The most perfunctory internet search will reveal that Grandin is no less well-adapted. The fact is that the increase in diagnosis, public concern, and the formation of useful linkages via the internet have facilitated a subculture of persons connected to ASDs. In positive terms, Roy Richard Grinker describes this increase in diagnosis as evidence that “we are finally seeing and appreciating a kind of human difference that we once turned away from and that many other cultures still hide away in homes or institutions or denigrate as bizarre.”⁶⁵ In the context of this essay's argument, we might see the marketing of ASD-related therapies, lectures, and support groups as a recapture of the formerly “feral” in the nets of global commodity culture.

⁶¹ *The Horse Boy*, directed by Michel Orion Scott, DVD (New York: Zeitgeist Films Ltd., 2009).

⁶² Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 9.

⁶³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 274.

⁶⁴ For more information, see the websites linked to <http://www.horseboyfoundation.org/>.

⁶⁵ Roy Richard Grinker, *Unstrange Minds: Remapping the World of Autism* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 5.

Conclusions about Performing: Tangles and Snares

As Deleuze and Guattari describe the desiring-machines that power capitalism, “one machine is always coupled with another” in such a way that the first produces a flow that is interrupted or drained by the second, and that the “binary series is linear in every direction.”⁶⁶ The first interruption structuring the Judeo-Christian psychic economy is woman, who steps in-between man and the rest of animate creation. Derrida points out that man’s naming of the animals occurs only in the second version of Genesis, and that it there precedes the creation of woman. The dominion of man over animal that this naming manifests thus comes before original sin and the Fall,⁶⁷ and thus also before the Oedipal triangle. Woman sets in motion—significantly, through illicit interaction with a snake—a long series of further interruptions, (monkey) wrenches thrown into the gears of Western culture’s desiring-machines. The desire for an imagined wholeness powers these machines, but the interruptions set them in motion: desire would evaporate if man coexisted in peaceful unity with nature or if the mother–infant dyad remained in symbiotic union. But woman steps in with her snaky temptation and, in another part of the shared imaginary, the father fears for his life and exposes baby Oedipus on the mountainside to die. Desire flows along different vectors, all pointing toward that which is imagined as lost.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the notion of becoming-animal (or the alternatives, such as becoming-intense and becoming-imperceptible) is a politically strategic mental operation, a way to imagine alternative assemblages—that is, alternatives to the family or the state.⁶⁸ Becoming-animal is a metaphor that can help us to understand the vectors of desire along which as-animal performance and engagement with companion species travel. Whether metaphorical or material, border crossings between species threaten the conceptual categories that structure the psyche. But we need to move beyond the metaphor in considering as-animal performance within contemporary culture, which involves—to borrow Braidotti’s formulation—“something less sophisticated and more material” than what Deleuze and Guattari were taking about.⁶⁹ As she so nicely glosses their conception of capitalism as schizophrenia, contemporary mass culture is shaped by “a conflict between, on the one hand, the rising demands for subjective singularities, or autonomy and, on the other hand, the conservative re-territorialization of desires for the purpose of commercial profit.”⁷⁰ In other words, one must be an individual, but one actualizes that individuality through the purchase of appropriate name-brand products. Thus furry fandom structures as-animal performance for some as an expression of an inner essence and for others as escape from a restrictive human persona, the fandom manages its public image in order to remain edgy but not out of bounds, and all of this performance fuels the buying and selling of commodities both real and virtual. Although extreme body modifications make it difficult to blend into the mainstream, Orlan continues to thrive as an artist and Lizard Man maintains a busy performance schedule. Engagements with companion species such as agility training

⁶⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 5.

⁶⁷ Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am,” 384, 390.

⁶⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 247.

⁶⁹ Rosi Braidotti, “Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, nos. 7–8 (2006): 202.

⁷⁰ Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 3.

fuel the exchange of fees for training services, competitions, and equipment. Efforts to create better lives for individuals with autism fuel a growing and varied industry for diagnosis and therapy.

My own necessary (and fortunate) ensnarement in the nets of employment make me fully aware that escape from the circulation of commodities is certainly possible. But we must not romanticize the dangers that it presents on a personal level, as illustrated by Stalking Cat's struggles to either market his perpetual performance or to make a living by other means. Disappearing from the marketplace, whether intentional or not, runs the danger of turning into more complete disappearance.