



MEN AND NATURE IN ENVIRONMENTAL MEDIA

Ambivalent Anal: Revisiting the Queer Ecologic of "the Jackass Moment"

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The cultural roots of an aggrieved white masculinity—white man as victim—run deep in the popular imaginary. Media representation in particular has a long legacy of portraying white male bodies as injured or wounded, dating back to the bloody “hard bodies” of Reagan-era action films. This essay returns to another one of these earlier cultural moments, examining the vulgar physical comedy of the *Jackass* media franchise as a window into masculine formations in the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century. Specifically, I examine *Jackass*’s “stupid” white masculinity, which combines bloody self-injury with a scatological logic of bodily incoherence displayed by the show’s pissing, shitting, and puking white stuntmen. Viewed retrospectively—against the contemporary horrors of Charlottesville, El Paso, and other places memorialized by Trumpian eruptions of murderous white masculinity—the dumb white dudes of *Jackass* appear almost a blip in the rearview mirror, now superseded by a return to something far more sinister. Yet *Jackass* in its own time expressed a hegemonic white masculinity specific to neoliberal and neoconservative forces of the Clinton and Bush years, one organized ambivalently around an excessive anal. This ambivalent anal both parodied national and gendered fantasies of “hardness” at the same time that it drew on dynamics of racial and queer mimesis to reinscribe hegemonic (white/straight) masculinity.

However, the more recent development of a queer ecological perspective allows us to revisit the show’s scatology, also seeing in it what Nicole Seymour has described as an ethical “counter-phobia” which refuses the nature/culture binary that informs Western culture’s deeply embedded erotophobia and somatophobia. This essay takes up the ambivalent anal of *Jackass*, tracing the ways it has served as precursor to present-day logics of white male grievance, even as its spectacular scatology offers an undertheorized challenge to the cultural revulsion for embodiment and nature that informs all social (gendered, racial, sexual) logics of domination.

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Figure 1: Ryan Dunn prepares to snorkel in sewage for “The Poo Dive.”

Source: Video still from season 1 of the *Jackass* television series (Tremaine 2005).

In 2004, toward the start of the Iraq War, I visited the Cartoon Art Museum in the Mission District of San Francisco, catching the tail end of an exhibition called *Too Hot to Handle*. Not unsurprisingly, cartoons that addressed post-9/11 US/Middle East relations made up the bulk of the exhibition’s collection of controversial political cartoons, and one in particular caught my attention with its almost too-perfect cleverness. In a one-panel piece called “Iraqass: The Midterm Elections,” R. J. Matson spoofed *Jackass: The Movie* (2002), a film version of the popular MTV series in which white male twentysomethings perform outrageously injurious and scatological stunts. Riffing on the movie poster for the film, Matson’s “Iraqass” depicted an oversized grocery cart—a bull’s-eye bearing Saddam Hussein’s face affixed to the front—filled not with the shirtless, thong-wearing *Jackass* crew, but with a fist-pumping, howling passel of Bush administration officials, including W as *Jackass* ringleader Johnny Knoxville. For anyone familiar with the willful spirit of self-injury in which *Jackass* delights, Matson’s comment on the reckless foreign policy of the Bush administration was clear.

Perhaps less clear nearly two decades later is the political logic of what Jason Concepcion (2018) calls “the *Jackass* moment,” particularly its scatological white male bodies. For those unacquainted, *Jackass* began as a popular MTV series in 2000, followed by the blockbuster films *Jackass: The Movie* (2002), *Jackass Number Two* (2006), and *Jackass 3-D* (2010), along with a spate of straight-to-DVD media products (*Jackass 2.5*, *Jackass 3.5*, *Jackass: The Lost Tapes*) and spin-off films and television series (*Bad Grandpa*, *Wildboyz*, *Viva la Bam*). Part of a set of turn-of-the-millennium media texts that merged

an ethos of “extreme” sports with a “dumb” white masculinity, *Jackass* was arguably the culmination of a very specific media epoch that began in the early 1990s and was gone by the Obama years.¹ But even as its intensely physical slapstick epitomized white male dumbness, its over-the-top scatology was an interesting outlier. As one reviewer commented about the first film, *Jackass* is “a fecophiliac’s dream” (Yudkoff 2002, para. 19). In what other mainstream film or television show could you see a guy taking a shit in a hardware store display toilet, eating an omelet made of his own vomit, or scuba diving in raw sewage? This excretory logic also extends to an overall comedic aesthetic that centers on the hilarity of watching grown men fail to achieve bodily coherence. As Knoxville has pointed out, “[t]here’s nothing funnier than an untalented stuntman” (Breznican 2002, para. 7). This rationale carries over to the narrative logic of the *Jackass* franchise, which is similarly centerless and “ruthlessly efficient,” as described by one *Village Voice* film review: “no plot, no characters, no sets, and no downtime—just one sightgag right after another” (Halter 2002, para. 2).

As a fan and theorist of scatological humor, I found the original series and first film as hilarious as intended. But some sketches equally made me cringe: shots of Preston Lacy chasing Jason “Wee Man” Acuña through the streets of Tokyo in sumo wrestler outfits played for laughs on essentialist notions of Asians as inscrutable cultural outsiders, while sketches like “Ass Kicked by Girl”—in which female Japanese boxer Kumagai Naoko knocks out Ryan Dunn—were overtly sexist and racist in suggesting that under “ordinary” circumstances, women are inferior to men and Japan to the United States. However, across the *Jackass* oeuvre, such scenes are far more peripheral to constructions of white masculinity than the blatant homoeroticism informing many of its stunts, with numerous pranks involving anal penetration (and expulsion), the eating of bodily excretions, and nearly naked male bodies clad in leopard-print thong underwear, all accompanied by a troupe of laughing male spectators. Moreover, these interactions seem genuinely and generously affectionate, so that a warm-and-fuzzy aura surrounds pranks that might otherwise come across as mean-spirited or self-destructive.

Thus my reaction to *Jackass* was and still is ambivalent—as is, I argue here, its intense anality. On the one hand, the queer camaraderie surrounding the film’s scatological humor punctures and deflates a phallic, hard-bodied white heteromascularity; on the other hand, many of the self-injuring stunts engage in a racial mimesis, acting out the sorts of state terror historically inflicted on Black and Brown bodies. This essay thus focuses on the scatological comedy of *Jackass* as a window into formations of white masculinity in the United

¹ Mostly: [jackass forever](#), the franchise’s fourth theatrical installment, dropped in February 2022, followed shortly thereafter by the straight-to-Netflix *Jackass 4.5*.

States at the turn of the twenty-first century, and specifically into its “national masculinities” (Jeffords 1994). What is the cultural logic of the spectacularly scatological *Jackass* bodies? How did these incontinent, incoherent white male bodies, with their shift away from Reagan-era “hardness” and toward an ambivalent porousness, express certain dynamics of the neoliberal Clinton and neoconservative Bush years? More importantly, how has the national masculinity of the *Jackass* years paved the way (or not) for a Trump-era return to a violently racist politics of white male grievance?

An extensive body of academic theorizing has rightly viewed the self-injuring, masochistic white male body, with its bloody fluidity, as a reactionary response to perceived threats by feminism, civil rights, and queer liberation (Ashcraft and Flores 2003; Brayton 2007; Kusz 2007; Lindgren and Lélièvre 2009; Rehling 2009; Savran 1998). As I argue here, *Jackass*’s emphases on anality and scatological fluidity are part of but also distinct from this response; twenty years later, the *Jackass* moment remains undertheorized, for many of the same reasons it did at the time: spectatorial pleasure in the excretory body is simply too queer to be properly understood by analyses that focus on intersections of gender, race, and sexuality alone. But the queerness of *Jackass*’s anality lies not in the identities of its performers or even its fan cultures; rather, it is an ecological queerness, disrupting the hierarchical dualism of nature/culture that ecofeminist Val Plumwood (1993) has argued informs all logics of domination. And while the racial politics of *Jackass* militate against any easy read of this ecological anality as liberatory, I do think queer ecology gestures to a point both important and unappreciated—that contempt and loathing for body and nature are central to the operations of white male grievance, and any contestation of these politics will require us to challenge the somatophobia and ecophobia with which they are bound up.

In revisiting the *Jackass* moment through the lens of queer ecology—a framework largely unavailable at the time—I thus want to hold in tension *Jackass*’s role in passing down a cultural politics of white male grievance with the unrealized possibilities of its scatological play. Though its white male bodies undeniably symbolize historically specific configurations of state power, I follow Nicole Seymour’s discomfort with reading *Jackass* solely as reactionary. For *Jackass* also took a scenic detour from overarching historical continuities, hinting at the possibilities for unsettling if not hegemonic white masculinity itself, then at least its ideological disavowal of embodiment and ecological embeddedness. Perhaps no more than a gesture, it is nonetheless a queerly interesting one.

National Masochisms: Theorizing Self-Injuring White Masculinity

Before attending more directly to the ecological dimensions of *Jackass* scatology, I want to briefly review the origins of *Jackass*’s corporeal humor, which media critics and masculinity theorists have tended to locate within a

tradition of masochistic white masculinity that operates as cultural backlash. *Jackass* grew most directly out of skater media subcultures—specifically, a goofy, slapstick tradition of skater videos that lampoons the serious-minded proficiency of well-performed tricks (Shulgan 2002; Yochim 2010). But *Jackass* is equally linked both formally and thematically to a constellation of turn-of-the-millennium cultural forms. On the high-culture end of things, some have seen echoes of performance artists like the late “supermasochist” Bob Flanagan, who in his shows would frequently staple his penis to a board (Lee 2006, 8).² Likewise, *Jackass*’s guerrilla, nonnarrative format coupled with its life-threatening content recalls the paracinematic tradition of what Mikita Brottman (1997) calls “offensive films,” including snuff and the infamous *Faces of Death* series.³

Jackass also overlaps formally with reality television, with its emphasis on supposedly unmediated scenes of ordinary human bodies undergoing extraordinary sorts of competitive challenges. Reality television itself arguably is an outgrowth of a broader “extremization” of US culture that began with the rise of extreme sports, which sports sociologist Kyle Kusz describes as “non-traditional sporting activities ... performed mainly by ‘alternative’ young white male athletes” (2007, 63–64). Kusz suggests that what defines extreme sports is less the sort of activities that count as “extreme” and more *who* performs them—which kinds of sporting bodies are presented as simultaneously “everyday” and “supranormal.” But *Jackass* parodies the extreme sports ethos as much as it exemplifies it, and its slapstick comedy combined with its racial and gendered performance leads many academic commentators to situate the show within a “dumb” or “witless white male” genre, as queer theorist Jack Halberstam describes it (2004, 308), which starting in the 1990s proved popular with a young white male audience (e.g., *Bill and Ted*, *Beavis and Butthead*, *South Park*, *Dumb and Dumber*, *Dude, Where’s My Car?*).

Whether read in relation to high or popular culture, it is this defining spectacle of the “stupid” white man that has produced the most dramatic responses on the part of audiences, media commentators, and academics alike. Despite its fairly ephemeral run on MTV, *Jackass*’s self-injuring white masculinity proved immensely popular with television audiences; at the peak of its success, the show drew 3.9 million viewers per week to its Sunday night timeslot (Shulgan 2002). This figure made it not only one of the most popular programs on cable television at the time, but also one of the highest-rated shows in MTV’s history (Habib 2002). This popularity in fact became controversial following two separate incidents in which teenaged

2 See also Sweeny (2008) and Sahni (2013), who examine *Jackass* in relation to the performance art world.

3 *Faces of Death* (1978) is a mondo film famous for its footage (both real and faked) of violent deaths, which led to the film’s being “banned in 40 countries!” Knoxville has acknowledged this connection, stating that the filming of *Jackass: Number Two* came “dangerously close to snuff a couple times” (Tremaine 2006, 59).

boys injured themselves after attempting to imitate stunts seen on *Jackass*, prompting public censure by Senator Joseph Lieberman and a frenzy of media commentary about the meaning of a post-Columbine “rude boy culture” with a “determined self-loathing streak” (Poniewozik 2001). Not long after, *Jackass* co-creator Johnny Knoxville quit the show, citing regret over the injuries and a recognition that *Jackass* “had gone as far as it could go on MTV without losing its integrity” (Genovese 2002).

While popular media accounts at the time largely took at face value the idea that *Jackass*’s “stupid,” self-injuring white male body signaled a national crisis, media theorists have emphasized the historical nature of crisis discourses, looking at how images of masochistic or self-deprecating white masculinity arise during those times when social and economic shifts threaten the hegemonic status of white men as a group. While some theorists writing on male masochism view it as counterhegemonic,⁴ the more recent tendency has been to read it as a reactionary response to the demands of Black, feminist, and queer liberation movements, and to the late twentieth-century deindustrialization and outsourcing that have eliminated many once-stable blue-collar jobs, and with them an idealized self-image of the white male breadwinner. In “The Sadomasochist in the Closet,” for instance, David Savran describes the turn toward a degraded, humiliated representation of white masculinity as “reflexive sadomasochism.” Drawing from Freud, Savran explains that just as the ego of the traditional masochist is split between a sadistic element that enjoys inflicting pain and a masochistic element that enjoys receiving it, the sadomasochistic position taken up by white men at the turn of the century is likewise founded on a split “between a passive and humiliated self and an active and violent self” (1998, 86). In this way, “the white male subject [can] position himself both as an aggressive, authoritative individual and as a victim” (79). This split subjectivity functions as a cultural solution to the “problem” of challenges to hegemonic masculinity, in that it “allow[s] men to both cultivate a ‘feminine’ part of the self and at the same time to subjugate it violently” (90). In the wake of “a culture made uneasy by traditional machismo,” male masochists “[turn] violence upon themselves, by demonstrating their implacable toughness, their ability to savour their self-inflicted wounds” (91).

Kyle Kusz reads extreme sports as part of this turn toward reflexive sadomasochism, viewing them as a “new millennium American remasculinization project” in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks (2008, 210). For Kusz, the self-injuring stunts of *Jackass* epitomize this project, suggesting “both the presumed crisis state of white masculinity at the turn of the twenty-first century as well as the popularity of a particular

⁴ Kaja Silverman, for example, rereads Freud’s original formulation of masochism in order to point out that insofar as the masochist willfully takes up a condition of passivity, the male masochist defects from his prescribed social identity, “actually abandon[ing] the self ... and pass[ing] over into the ‘enemy terrain’ of femininity” (2002, 25).



Figure 2: Dave England in an anal parody of hardbodied masculinity.

Source: Photo included in the special features for *Jackass 2.5* (Tremaine 2007).

sadomasochistic response” (213). Though this self-deprecation on the one hand seems to parody hegemonic white masculinity, it simultaneously recenters and “valoriz[es] a white American everyman” (210). Performance theorists Karen Lee Ashcraft and Lisa A. Flores have argued that perceptions of masculine crisis and the gendered fantasies meant to assuage it have in fact arisen at the turn of both the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, surfacing at moments of capitalist transition where relations between men and work are undergoing reorganization. While the turn of the twentieth century saw a shift from a “communal manhood ... to a self-made manhood proven by individual work achievement,” it is precisely this self-made manhood that is now dissolving on account of the emasculating privatization of everyday life. In both cases, masculine crisis emerges from fears that economic forces are “overcivilizing” (i.e., feminizing) white men “to the point of extinction.” And in both cases, too, the solution has involved “fantasies of recovering an unspoiled, primitive masculinity” (2003, 7)—hence “extreme” sports with their everyday white *ubermensch*.

Thus theorists of millennial masculinities have largely posited that white male “stupidity” is ultimately a grasp at conserving the hegemonic status of white masculinity—despite its parodic rejection of an earlier cinematic era of national masculinity ruled by what Susan Jeffords famously called the “hard body.” As she argues about Hollywood film in the 1970s and ‘80s, “the depiction of the indefatigable, muscular, and invincible masculine body became the linchpin of the Reagan imaginary” (1994, 25), where the white musculature of action heroes such as Rambo compelled audiences to

understand that “the warrior hard body [*was*] the American identity” (46) and vice versa. The often gratuitous bloodshed of the *Rambo* movies did not contradict the hard-bodied image of Reaganist politics so much as reinforce the need for such policies: through “the portrayal of vulnerability[,] ... the national body can be shown capable of recovering from a past wound,” in this case the loss of the Vietnam War (51). To some extent, then, theories of white male self-injury suggest that the “stupid” white man revels in pain or abjection so as to affirm traditional constructions of white masculinity as phallic or “hard.” Many readings of *Jackass* make similar claims; for instance, Mary E. Pagano has argued that “the jackasses’ numerous unsuccessful attempts do not call their masculinity into question; on the contrary, they reveal to the audience their incredibly high tolerance for pain—their ability, in a sense, to *take it like a man*” (2006, 137).

It might be more accurate to say, however, that what theories of white male stupidity collectively propose is an understanding of white masculinity as elastic or flexible—able to shift over time to entertain subversive possibilities of softness, parody, or self-abjection without actually giving up supremacy (Lindgren and Lélièvre 2009; Tourino 2015; Yochim 2010). In the case of *Jackass* specifically, elasticity means an ability to accommodate a representational shift away from the hard-bodied phallic masculinity of the '70s and '80s to one that is anally absorbent and scatologically porous—an ambivalent analinity that presents a “simultaneous critique and reinscription of dominant masculinities” (Yochim 2010, 114). Sean Brayton presents the most compelling account to date of this ambivalence, positioning *Jackass* as part of the masochistic “backlash” texts that position white men as victims while also addressing its transgressive, carnivalesque element. The result is “an alternative version of white male victimhood” based on a humorous abjection of white masculinity, which yields a highly polysemic and complex text that “does not lend itself to one particular theoretical analysis” (2007, 57–58). For Brayton, reflexive sadomasochism does not fully account for the show’s anally focused homoeroticism, which exposes rather than represses “the inherent homoerotic contradictions within the supposed heterosexual bastion of athletics” (67). As carnivalesque, however, the homoerotic invitations of *Jackass* can only be a safety valve; the reflexive masochism of the show ultimately “reassures the ‘straight’ sensibilities of homosocial bonding by punishing not only the protagonist’s genitals [as in many of the sketches] but also the queer gaze of the male viewer” (64).

A deep dive into the first few installments of the *Jackass* film franchise largely bears out these arguments about the elasticity of white masculinity. In *Jackass: The Movie* (2002), we see the formation of a national masculinity organized around an analinity that both resists and reinscribes neoliberal dynamics of the Clinton years, as well as the neoconservative foreign policy of the second Bush administration. *Jackass Number Two* and *Jackass 2.5* further suggest that this anally expulsive masculinity is sustained by dynamics of racial and

queer mimesis—a comedic emulation of state violence typically or historically inflicted on bodies of color, as well as an almost self-conscious, knowing emulation of queer symbolism. Ultimately, then, Brayton, Kusz, and others are mostly correct that white, heteronormative masculinity undergoes recentering in *Jackass*, though here the fulcrum of this recentering is the ass, not the dick. At the same time, more recent readings of *Jackass* that add ecological considerations to the mix of their intersectional criticism provide a fresh lens on anal-ity that, as I ultimately argue, we should not be quick to dismiss—even in affirming earlier takes on the “*Jackass* moment.”

From Phallus to Anus, or *Jackass: The Movie*

Three months after the end of the television series, *Jackass* co-producers Jeff Tremaine and Spike Jonze contacted Johnny Knoxville about collaborating on an R-rated, no-holds-barred movie version of the MTV program. Knoxville agreed, and *Jackass: The Movie* opened at #1 at the box office in October 2002, despite “almost universally dreadful reviews” (R. Lyman 2002). Like the television show that preceded it, *Jackass: The Movie* parodies the phallocentrism of the hard body in its celebration of failed athleticism, but it also suggests the emergence of a new, anal formation of white masculinity. This is a “soft,” scatological masculinity whose hegemonic status (as white and straight) is defined in relation to other *men* (gay or racialized) rather than women, who are largely absent from the world of *Jackass*.⁵ While the hard-bodied movies of the 1980s were also primarily all-male spectacles, the cinematic move that recuperated wounded whiteness as unassailably powerful nonetheless depended on a heteronormative logic—one requiring the feminized status of “soft” bodies in order to construct masculine hardness as central and dominant. *Jackass* lacks women, but it also lacks this recuperative heteronormativity by which masculine identity forms at the expense of femininity.

This dynamic is not entirely absent, for as mentioned with regard to the sketch “Ass Kicked by Girl,” even as Kumagai Naoko humiliates white American Ryan Dunn by “kicking his ass”—knocking him out with a mouth-bloodying punch to the jaw—Dunn’s temporary feminization ultimately reaffirms his dominance. But most of the other stunts performed in the film break with a heteronormative “erotics of rule breaking” (P. Lyman 1998, 177)—whereby heterosexual men use sexist jokes to navigate the treacherous straits between homosocial bonds and homoerotic desire—and instead present a wounded white masculinity constructed in an openly affectionate relationship to other men. “Department Store Boxing,” for instance, features the same basic premise and same bloody result as “Ass

⁵ Landon Palmer (2010) suggests that this is because *Jackass* is infantile or puerile rather than queer: “The humor and camaraderie is prepubescent and, thus, asexual ... exemplified most often in their fascination with their penises ... not as a sexual appendage, but as absurd comic device that, when not being attached to mini helicopters or fireworks, only achieves a biological function in urination” (para. 6).

Kicked by Girl,” except that the person who punches out the Jackass is an affable, 350-pound heavyweight champion named Butterbean, who fells Johnny Knoxville in a department store with a couple of lackadaisical swings, landing him a woozy hospital trip for stitches to his concussed head. And while “Girl” relies for laughs on a frame that inverts “normal” gender and race relations, “Department Store Boxing” merely exaggerates what would happen in most situations where a smaller man takes on a harder, stronger man: Knoxville gets his ass kicked.

Moreover, this ass kicking introduces, perhaps less predictably, an erotic element between stunt participants. While Eric Clarke and Mathew Henson (1996) have discussed the “gay affect” of hard-bodiedness, in which the creation of gay niche markets has opened up otherwise heterosexual male bodies to queer-targeted marketing strategies, the department store boxing scene suggests a different erotics of spectatorship altogether. Prior to their department store jaunt, for example, Knoxville and Butterbean are shown joking with each other about what they both know will be the outcome of the fight, suggesting that the ass beatdown that ensues is consensual and even affectionate. In a stunt where heterosexuality is not the visual referent, then, being dominated through one’s metaphorical ass affirms an erotic (and largely unsublimated) bond between men, while in “Girl,” this metaphorical ass serves as site of abjection—ostensibly that of Ryan Dunn, but ultimately that of the Japanese as racial/cultural others and of women in general.

Jackass: The Movie is full of scenes that place anal wounding at the center of the male gaze. In “The Bungee Wedgie,” we see a mostly naked Raab Himself jump off the low branch of a tree, to which he’s been strapped by elastic cords attached to his underwear. To the delight of hysterically laughing male onlookers, he falls out of the underwear and onto the ground, leaving behind him a shredded pair of “bloody shitty underwear” (in the words of a giggling Johnny Knoxville as the camera pans in on the soiled and tattered briefs). Here the visual pleasures of looking center on the (bloody, shitty) anus, and are inextricable from the pleasures of associating with other men.⁶ These erotics of male spectatorship suggest what *Advocate* writer Dave White has called the “gay adjacent” status of *Jackass* (2002). Or, as perceptively stated by an article in *New York Magazine*, “it doesn’t take a leering queer-theory grad student to tell you that *Jackass: the Movie* has more than a little in common with gay porn” (Swanson 2002).

6 Other sketches where men’s butts serve as sites of both on- and off-screen (male) attention: Steve-O and Chris Pontius shooting bottle rockets out of their assholes; Ryan Dunn inserting a toy car into his rectum and then, playing dumb, going to the doctor for an X-ray; and pro skaters Bam Margera and Tony Hawk performing tricks while wearing fat suits, Sir Mix-a-Lot’s “Baby Got Back” playing in the background.



Figure 3: Anal wounding and the male gaze in “Ass Rockets.”

Source: Video stills from *Jackass: The Movie* (Tremaine 2002).

These scenes ultimately point to a millennial shift in constructions of white masculinity, one that arguably gives rise to a different national imaginary as well. If the white male body in the films and television of the 1980s symbolized the fantasy of an impermeable nation, a hardness made even harder through bloody fluidity, the anally oriented white male body on *Jackass* is not hard or soft so much as it is *absorbent*; the sort of national power it signifies lies in its ability to take a licking and keep on ticking, with an open-ended capacity to incorporate its threats rather than to expel them through force (“If you’re gonna be dumb, you gotta be tough,” intones one of the film’s end credit songs). A white male body with infinite capacity to absorb pain and injury can easily be read as an invulnerable white male body, a body with the right to do anything to anyone in any place with absolute impunity—as suggested in the film by the staging of many pranks and skits in Japan.⁷ But such a reading ignores the difference between a phallic logic of hardness, which seeks to expel or destroy otherness, and an anal logic of incoherence, which seeks to incorporate otherness by dissolving the

⁷ The pragmatic rationale for the decision to base parts of the movie outside the United States was that the fame of the *Jackass* guys preceded them, which on several occasions “ruin[ed] the sketch because it undermin[e]d the whole concept of *Jackass*: horrifying unsuspecting bystanders” (Stein 2002, par. 9).



Figure 4: Ehren McGhehey pisses on a snow cone and eats it.

Source: Video stills from *Jackass: The Movie* (Tremaine 2002).

social and bodily boundaries that separate it from self. Seeing *Jackass* only as imperialist or expansionist overlooks the extent to which it is also internally expansive—about the pleasures of taking things in—as well as the degree to which these pleasures blur the boundary between gayness and straightness upon which a hard-bodied, expansionist national masculinity depends. This, then, is a free-market homoeroticism or polymorphism: the more object choices and orifices, the better. Or as Chris Pontius’s alter ego Party Boy states when asked from off camera if he prefers men or women, “Party Boy doesn’t care. If a bear’s hungry, he’ll eat.”

I therefore want to suggest that the “stupid” (self-wounding and scatological) white male body reflects a shift away from nationalist metaphors of bodily hardness and toward neoliberal economic metaphors of bodily incorporation. This makes sense if we recall that forces of globalization have threatened perceptions of white/male dominance as much as overt calls for liberation. As a neoliberal form of global capital has destabilized manufacturing jobs and national boundaries, and as production and consumption practices move across borders, so too are men interpellated as target markets in ways they have not been previously.

Judith Kegan Gardiner argues that this development accounts for the scatological, and more specifically anal erotic character of “stupid” white masculinity. Focusing on *South Park* and performance collective *The Blue Man Group*, she views the anal character of millennial masculinities as distinct from “the familiar, compulsive character” of anal erotism as originally described by Freud, in that it is anally *expulsive* rather than “retentive and controlling” (2000, 252). As she argues, the shift from industrial modes of capitalist production (in which men are breadwinners) to postindustrial modes of capitalist production (in which men are consumers and target markets) has produced a new, anally expulsive masculinity that reacts to men’s positioning as “passive, sexually objectified” receivers of products and information. In “an apparently childish, homoerotic but homophobic, racist, cynical, and paranoid form of anal erotism[,] [t]his masculine anality is dedicated to fighting against taking things in by pushing things out” (258). Following Gardiner, we might view *Jackass*’s obsessive anality as one way the franchise references its own conditions of production and consumption. As suggested by skits like “Yellow Snowcone” (in which Ehren McGhehey pisses on a rolled-up paper cone filled with snow, begins to eat the yellow snow, pukes, continues to eat, pukes some more), the mechanisms of global capital contain both a forced incorporation and the inevitable resistance to it.

If the phallic bodily economy portrayed in Reagan-era action movies fantasized about national hardness, the anal bodily economy of *Jackass* presents a much more ambivalent response to the inflows and outputs of money and information destabilizing national boundaries during the neoliberal/neoconservative years of the Clinton and Bush administrations. As such, the Japanese setting for much of *Jackass: The Movie*, pragmatic reasons notwithstanding, becomes more intelligible. If Japan is the butt of jokes, this is because, as a postindustrial, information-based economy, it exists within the American cultural imaginary as a place at once phenotypically foreign but materially similar to the United States. As exemplified by a playing of The Vapors’ “Turning Japanese” during a segment where several cast members in panda suits raise skateboarding hell in the streets of Tokyo, the larger cultural anxiety motivating many of the cross-Pacific scenes has as much to do with a fear of the similarity that global capital has wrought as with a fear of “essential” difference. The scatological male body that travels from the United States to Japan to make a mess of things reflects the forces that have made messy the economic boundaries between “them” and “us,” even as it seeks to reinscribe the cultural and racial boundaries that confirm US dominance.

Racial and Queer Mimesis in *Jackass: Number Two* and *Jackass*

2.5

But the Japan sketches can be read another way—not as fear of homogenization but, conversely, as a desire to imitate the exotic other, to “go native.” Ashcraft and Flores have referred to this mimetic performance

as “civilized/primitive” masculinity, which they argue is a response to white men’s millennial anxieties around emasculation and extinction. This idea of “civilized/primitive” masculinity certainly helps explain certain persistent features of the *Jackass* films, such as the sideshow-flavored stunts with “wild” animals and those stunts presenting the colonialist trope of white men as adventurers penetrating exotic, foreign, and forbidden spaces (the Japan scenes, or domestic sketches set in Black barber shops or LA barrios).

I want to suggest that *Jackass* engages in two kinds of mimetic performances, racial and queer, which complicate its shift away from a phallogentric logic of hardness. Especially in *Jackass: Number Two* and the straight-to-DVD *Jackass 2.5*—a collection of outtakes whose frenzied compulsion for anal penetration and excremental excess verges on boring—this anal logic embodies a homonormative (racist, nationalist) queerness, and in some ways even a homophobic queerness (recall Gardiner’s description of anal expulsive masculinity as “homoerotic but homophobic”). By racial mimesis, I mean a performance of whiteness that mimes, imitates, or alludes to forms of violence historically experienced by racialized peoples in the United States or globally, or that makes whiteness visible as other or abject—a degradation of whiteness that in taking up the position of the racialized other simultaneously (and unconsciously) privileges the white subject.

The clearest example of this, recurrent across the franchise, are the sketches that test riot gear equipment and other implements of state and military violence historically used against racialized and criminalized bodies. This kind of sketch in fact launched *Jackass* as a television series, with never-aired footage featuring Knoxville testing a bulletproof vest by taking a gunshot to the chest ultimately catching the eye of MTV. Sketches that *were* aired on television include “Fire Hose Test,” in which Knoxville meets up in an alley with a fire truck so that its driver can spray him full force with the hose. The humor of this sketch assumes the viewer’s lack of historical memory of the fire hoses used against Black bodies during the civil rights movement; in light of such history, the sight of a white man reenacting what has become the ur-scene of Jim Crow segregation disturbs rather than amuses. Likewise, the *Jackass* films include several sketches entitled “Riot Control Test,” in which cast members subject their bodies to mechanisms of state power (a bean-bag projectile, a 40 mm grenade launcher, a 460 Stingmore Mine—the latter ordinarily used “on the outside of embassies to protect against break-ins,” its handler explains). Underscoring this connection, each of these performances is introduced by a weapons expert from a munitions company or private military contractor.

Visible to the viewer in these sketches, then, is both the apparatus of state power and the effects of its weaponry on human bodies; but because the stunts disassociate these effects from their usual context, *Jackass* mimics state violence only to dehistoricize and depoliticize it. As with the fire hose test,



Figure 4: Racial mimesis in *Jackass*. Johnny Knoxville voluntarily undergoes assault by state power in “The Fire Hose” and “Riot Control Test.”

Sources: Video stills from season 1 of the *Jackass* television series (Tremaine 2005) and *Jackass: The Movie* (Tremaine 2002).

what we see instead is a white male body voluntarily imitating the historical experiences of bodies that the state has violently marked by race and class (Brayton 2007; Tourino 2015).

Like *Jackass: The Movie*, *Number Two* involves travel to other countries to perform stunts, and in these scenes the object of racial mimesis shifts to a Global South deemed abject and “primitive” by legacies of European colonialism. In India, the *Jackass* crew visits the Igori tribe, a “religious sect”—according to Chris Pontius in *Jackass 2.5*—that “believe[s] they can reach Enlightenment by, um, throwing themselves into, like, all things that are, you know, like, *bad*, basically.” To illustrate, we see scenes of Dave England, Chris Pontius, and Steve-O sitting around a fire with the Igoris, one of whom cuts his own leg and then chases Steve-O with the bloody knife. The sketch culminates with one of the Igoris peeing in a cup and drinking it, which ironically skeeves out the *Jackass* guys. “Put it in a snowcone, then maybe we’ll talk,” says Dave England, only half-joking.

Not unexpectedly, this sketch recuperates the white Western subject as “civilized” in contrast to the dark Eastern Igoris, as when England points out that the latter are “worse than us.” But England’s “put it in a snowcone” remark also suggests an obvious similarity to the “Yellow Snowcone” stunt from *Jackass: The Movie*. In linking *Jackass* to the Igoris, the implication is that the *Jackass* stunts mime or replicate tribal ritual uses of abjection.⁸ While this mimesis is clearly colonialist in nature, it also seems to express a cultural urge to escape the distinctions that found colonialist discourse/practice (dirty/clean, light/dark) by taking up, in, and on the debased elements of those distinctions. Like the Igoris, the *Jackass* guys are people after Bataille’s heart, seeking liberation through what is heterogeneous and abject, and attempting to destroy a social order constituted through exclusion by embracing, plunging into, and embodying the excluded element.⁹

This liberatory potential, however, is overshadowed by the explicitly racist mimesis of “Terror Taxi,” the penultimate sketch from *Number Two*. In this sketch, cast and crew dress Ehren McGhehey in turban and robe, strap a fake bomb to his chest beneath the robe, and send him on a cab ride to the Burbank Airport in Los Angeles with instructions to prank the cab driver by suggesting he is about to commit a terrorist act. Thus, superficially, the joke is on US stereotypes of Arabs as terrorists. “We’re not making fun of anybody,” Jeff Tremaine says with deliberate vagueness as they apply brownface and fake beard to McGhehey; “we’re just trying to scare the cabdriver.” But unknown to McGhehey, the cab driver (Indian American actor Jay Chandrasekhar) is in on the prank. When McGhehey alludes to the fake explosives under his robe, Chandrasekhar pretends to veer off course into an empty parking lot, where he pulls a fake gun on McGhehey and forces him into the trunk of the car. Cast and crew surround the vehicle, loudly pretending to try to deescalate the situation. With McGhehey in the trunk, someone bangs together two clappers to imitate gunfire, while someone else screams out, “He shot me!”

But the real punch line is yet to come. Once McGhehey is released from the trunk, relieved to discover he’s been pranked, cast and crew drop their pants to reveal that the entire prank has been an elaborate means of applying pubic hair to McGhehey’s face. “Look where your beard came from,” they instruct as the camera pans across a row of shaved crotches. A look of growing horror creeping across his face, McGhehey pulls off his beard and gapes at it. “Oh my God, dude, that sucks,” he cries. “Every time it gets fucking worse and worse!” “I think some was from my ass!” Knoxville responds chirpily. When McGhehey is informed, and then shown in phone photos, that one of the guys involved had crabs, he doubles over and vomits in response.

⁸ Isher-Paul Sahni (2013) makes a similar claim in linking *Jackass* to performance art, seeing its nonnarrative repetition of stunts as a kind of post-traditional ritual.

⁹ In fact, Eric Robertson—whom I’ll come back to in just a bit—applies Bataille’s theory of surplus energy to argue that *Jackass* exemplifies an ecological ethic based on “queer nonproductive sexual exuberance” (2017, 33).



Figure 5: Queer mimesis in *Jackass*. Chris Pontius performs in “The Bear Trap.”

Source: Video still from *Jackass: Number Two* (Tremaine 2006).

In a Bush-era political context where male facial hair inscribed a racialized and essentialized difference between a purportedly free and democratic West and a purportedly barbarian and fundamentalist Middle East that “hates our freedom,” the explicit racial mimesis of this sketch is neither complicated nor convoluted; it expresses an unconcealed abjection of otherness that collapses into a self-loathing of the male body generally.

Yet “Terror Taxi” is only the second-to-last word of *Number Two*. The final sketch is “The Bear Trap,” in which Knoxville, dressed in a tuxedo shirt, plunges his hand into a steel bear trap before launching into a Busby Berkeley-style finale that draws on virtually every form of gay iconography in existence (men in hard hats, Chris Pontius in curlers and bathrobe leaping out of a burning building onto a trampoline held up by a ring of firemen, cowboys dancing in a chorus line). This finale caps a film that itself is full of self-consciously deployed gay iconography (an appearance by John Waters, Knoxville wrestling a giant snake dressed in sailor hat and rainbow suspenders to Josie Cotton’s “Johnny Are You Queer?”). The excessive nature of such references in *Number Two* and *2.5* suggests a kind of queer mimesis at work in addition to a racial mimesis—an appropriatively queer performance on the part of (ostensibly) straight performers. As with the Jackass-Igori encounter, this performance is not without its progressive possibilities, at times turning the otherwise unconscious mimesis of state power into a consciously queer carnivalization of “hard” masculinity and militarism. This self-referential queerness is highlighted in a discussion from a bonus segment on the *2.5* DVD, in which Pontius, Knoxville, and Steve-O ponder the difficulties of



Figure 6: Preston Lacy and Steve-O attempting “the poof.”

Source: Video still from *Jackass 2.5* (Tremaine 2007).

achieving something they call “the poof,” or a fart made visible by inserting powder into the ass of the farter, not to mention the cultural meanings of its gay-but-not-gay anal eroticism:

Pontius: Are we driving this culture forward? Because nobody else ... presents this in the way that we do. Like, there’s people that do this kind of crap. But those people, like, hang out in back alleys and basements and stuff. You know? We’re showboating it.

Steve-O: Eh, you know, men have been avoiding putting things up their butt for centuries. As if it were something to be ashamed of. You know? We’re just trying to take anal penetration and make it sexy again.

Pontius: It’s kinda like the rainbow. You know? Just cause gay people use it as a symbol doesn’t mean that...you know...that they own this shit [laughs].

On cue, the logo for Dickhouse Productions, a rooster’s head in front of a rainbow, appears onscreen to signal the end of the video, a wink and a nod whose knowing deployment suggests a moment of queer mimesis.

Thus we rub up against the limits of any radical potential in *Jackass*’s anality and scatology: the not infrequent racism of this performance, and its queer appropriations as well—a nod to queerness, a queer adjacency whose ultimate irony stops short of fully embracing a nonphallic sexuality.

Pontius positions *Jackass* as avant-garde performance (“showboating”), unlike people who are doing “this kind of crap” for real, “in back alleys and basements and stuff.” (Alternately, Steve-O voices a more progressive reading of *Jackass* as flouting the stigmatization that drives people to be closeted about practices that are really quite ordinary).¹⁰ In the end, this is what I think Gardiner means by anal expulsive masculinity being “homoeerotic but homophobic.” Ultimately, as Brayton argues, *Jackass* is not one thing; it is instead an incredibly complicated cultural text whose representation of the scatological white male body draws from a number of often-conflicting cultural formations, some potentially progressive but many reactionary. If the organizing principle of *Number Two* and *2.5* is anal penetration, this is an ambivalent analogy quite often in the service of a racial and queer mimesis that emulates the historical violence aimed at Black, Brown, and queer bodies in order to reaffirm the centrality and hegemony of white men.

The Queer Ecological Turn in Analogy

By the time this essay sees publication, I will have been watching, thinking, and writing about *Jackass* scatology for almost twenty years—first as a graduate student writing a seminar paper on the television series for a masculinity studies class; then as a PhD candidate expanding that paper into a dissertation chapter about the first two films; and finally as an environmental writer-activist revising the dissertation chapter into an essay for publication. Though *Jackass* itself as a media text has proved remarkably durable (especially given its aging performers, now in their gray-haired and bespectacled forties and fifties), pinning down what it means has proved slippery and iterative. Every time I’ve come back to it, there are additional films to write about, shifts in the scholarly literature to digest, a different historical context backlighting its construction of white masculinity. The last time I wrote about *Jackass*, I had the sense I was missing something; though I didn’t feel comfortable concluding with an analysis that dismissed its scatology as wholly reactionary, I couldn’t quite articulate why either. In the intervening years, the reason has become clearer, as the emergence of new ecocritical perspectives has made it possible to see the insufficiency of theorizing *Jackass* analogy solely in terms of gender, race, sexuality, and economics. Specifically, our intersectional lens must widen to examine the *ecological* queerness of analogy—or the ways articulations of sexuality, race, and gender are always-already bound up in how we imagine and relate to the body as “nature.” This theoretical lens was largely undeveloped when I first began writing about *Jackass* in 2004. Even several years later, when I expanded

¹⁰ For a truly radical example of the pleasures and liberatory powers of queer scatology, see *The Mad Man* (1994) by Samuel R. Delany, a whodunit-cum-“pornotopic fantasy” that presents a post-AIDS queer ethics grounded in a radical love of the body in its excretory ordinariness. In earlier versions of this article, I’ve suggested that the novel gives full expression to something *Jackass* wants but ultimately fails to say, its desire ultimately hampered by its hegemonic (white/straight) allegiances. Still, I find the mainstream presentation of this desire interesting.

on my initial reading, formal articulation of a specifically queer ecological framework was still a year off with the 2010 publication of Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson’s *Queer Ecologies*, followed by Nicole Seymour’s *Strange Natures* (2011). “A field that doesn’t quite exist—queer ecology,” ecocritic Tim Morton would pronounce at the time (2010, 273), explaining why my analysis then felt unfinished and incomplete.

As defined by Catriona Sandilands in *Keywords for Environmental Studies*, queer ecology refers to a body of scholarship that “develop[s] theoretical and activist connections between sexual and ecological politics, often drawing from ecofeminist and environmental justice perspectives and including concerted attention to the racialized, gendered, colonial, and species politics with which notions of sex and nature are articulated” (2016, para. 4). Less a privileging of either sexuality or nature as categories of analysis than an expansion of intersectional analysis to include consideration of non/more-than-human nature alongside the human politics of sexuality, gender, and race, the starting point of queer ecology is that “understandings of nature inform discourses of sexuality, and ... understandings of sex inform discourses of nature; they are linked, in fact, through a strongly evolutionary narrative that pits the perverse, the polluted, and the degenerate against the fit, the healthy, and the natural” (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010, 2–3). Historically, this has meant that queer sexuality—defined here not literally or only as same-gender desire but as “the sex of others,” meaning any sexuality outside the bounds of the reproductive, white, and genitally oriented—is often positioned against and even as toxic to “nature” (Gosine 2010, 156).

However, the most critical concept in a queer ecological reading of *Jackass*—which initially seems to have nothing to do with “nature” or “environment”—derives from one of the earliest efforts to link environmental philosophy to queer theory. In “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism” (1994), Greta Gaard argues that ecofeminists commit a “serious conceptual error” where they omit “the dualism of heterosexual/queer” from an analysis of the multiple hierarchical binaries (male/female, white/Black, culture/nature, mind/body) that conceptually ground material relationships of domination over nature. Correcting for this error entails recognizing the historical role “erotophobia” has played in what Simon Estok calls “ecophobia,” or “modernity’s *irrational* fear of nature” (2018, 1):

[T]he problem of oppression based on sexuality is not limited to the heterosexual/queer dualism. ... [T]he larger problem is the erotophobia of Western culture, a fear of the erotic so strong that only one form of sexuality is overtly allowed; only in one position; and only in the context of certain legal, religious, and social sanctions. (Gaard 1994, para. 11)

As Mortimer-Sandilands describes it, there is thus “an ideologically reinforcing relationship among the normalization of heterosexuality, the devaluation of the erotic, and the understanding of the supremacy of human culture over nonhuman nature” (Sandilands 2001, 177, quoted in Gosine 2010, 169–70).

Still, although erotophobia marks and suppresses a diverse range of human sexual expression, Gaard and many other queer theorists recognize that it is anal sexuality between men that is most often positioned as “the exemplar of a violation of nature” (Wilson 2018, 21)—most famously explored by Leo Bersani in “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (1987, 197). The anality of *Jackass*, then, might be viewed as queer disruption of the hierarchical dualism of nature/culture, secured ideologically by a deeply embedded erotophobia and by what Elizabeth Grosz (1994) calls somatophobia (or fear and loathing of the body generally). Its queerness, in other words, “operates at the level of polymorphous bodies and pleasures as well as (or instead of) identities and discourses” (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010, 29). *Jackass* anality is queer, in other words, not because its performers identify as such or engage in literal same-gender sexual contact—but because taking pleasure in the body’s excretory capacities is stigmatized as perverse, disgusting, or shameful by an ecophobic culture that regards body and nature with a similar contempt. The playfully pissing, shitting, puking *Jackass* bodies thus point out the ways bodies are orificial, porous, and transmaterial as they interface with the ecologies in which they are embedded—jumping into sewage tanks, inhaling worms deep into their nasal cavities, inviting a variety of creatures to lick, chew, bite, and kick them in the ass or groin. This vision of embodiment spoils dominant fantasies of what Ladelle McWhorter calls “sovereign or managerial bodies,” which imagine the (white, male) body as masterfully separate from and above nature by virtue of its sealed-off, self-contained autonomy (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010, 30).

As concepts of nature have themselves undergone queering,¹¹ this is in fact how more recent theorists have read the corporeal comedy of *Jackass*. Nicole Seymour, for instance, sees *Jackass* as part of “an irreverent turn in ecocriticism” (2012, 57), which “allow[s] us to read or reread texts that do not seem to take ecological issues ‘seriously’” (64), and by extension read texts that seem to have nothing to do, on their face, with “nature.” Maybe not on its face, then, but on its *ass*, more recent queer theorists have suggested that *Jackass* does in fact have something to do with both queerness and nature—not necessarily in the literal identities of its performers, but in its scatological refusal of erotophobia and somatophobia. Drawing from Bataille’s theory of surplus energy, for instance, Eric Robertson argues that

11 See physicist/queer theorist Karen Barad, for instance: “the discourse on ‘crimes against nature’ always already takes liberty in the confidence that Nature is herself a good Christian, or at least traffics in a kind of purity that the human has been excluded from ever since the Edenic fall of man. But what if Nature herself is a commie, a pervert, or a queer?” (2012, 29).

the inclusive, generous laughter generated by Jackassian play engenders a “corporeal empathy” that informs an ultimately ecological ethic. “When one pisses one’s pants on the playground,” he writes, “when you fart during sex, when you vomit at a party—adopting a queer body ambivalence creates a moral leveling that places all bodies on similar material ground. ... Laughter of this kind is the burn-off of negative social excess stored in bodies through guilt, shame, disgust, embarrassment—all wasteful stores of energy used by social mechanisms to control and direct human behavior” (2017, 36–37). And while laughter of this sort “is certainly not an exclusively queer domain,” Robertson continues, “laughter directed toward degraded bodies, laughter that makes absurd the assertion that a human body is exceptional, sovereign, and *made in the image of*, certainly falls into the queer project of reminding the human subject of its less-than-straight, not-always-productive status” (38). This is not dissimilar from the idea of carnivalesque laughter as socially leveling and generous.¹² However, instead of leveling only social hierarchies, a queer ecological perspective such as Robertson’s views the erotocomedic anality of *Jackass* as leveling the far less visible hierarchical binary of nature/culture that co-produces human social hierarchies.

Seymour similarly considers *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* to be “unlikely sources of ethical precepts,” their visceral humor evoking an empathy that is trans-corporeal in nature—first in the way their performers open themselves officially to encounters with more-than-human others; and secondly in the way we as audiences are affectively moved to wince, laugh, and gag alongside these puking, shitting, bleeding, laughing performances (2015, 267). This display of “grossness” gives the lie to the managerial body (always implicitly white, male, straight, and economically productive), expressing an ecological ethic that presents a “good-natured, counterphobic vision of trans-ing” which admits “that we are animals, that our bodily boundaries are not secure, that our gender and sexual identities are malleable” (274).

In later work, Seymour (2018) further examines the *Jackass* spin-off *Wildboyz* alongside other irony-tinged ecomedia as paragons of what she calls “bad environmentalism,” or texts that reject affective modes common to mainstream environmentalism—“gloom and doom, ... guilt, shame, didacticism, prescriptiveness, sentimentality, reverence, seriousness, sincerity, earnestness, sanctimony, self-righteousness, and wonder” (4)—which not only fail to inspire action but in fact evoke “negativity toward activism” (5). Bad environmentalism thus does not jettison environmental action but rather proposes an “alternative environmentalism” (7) which in the face of environmental crisis understands that “self-righteous conviction ... is part of the problem,” and thus reaches for “dissident affects” like “irreverence,

¹² See Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* (1984) for the original presentation of this idea, much applied to analyses of popular culture, including many readings of *Jackass* (see Palmer 2010).

ambivalence, camp, frivolity, indecorum, awkwardness, sardonicism, perversity, playfulness, and glee” (4). In this context, Seymour views *Wildboyz* as an ironic species of wildlife/nature documentary that “marries the *Jackass* penchant for shock tactics to an interest in animals and the environment” (73). Read against “proper” nature shows that traffic in reverence for the nonhuman and heavy-handed didactic aims, *Wildboyz* “pervert[s] the affective, aesthetic, and moralist conventions of nature/wildlife programming,” displaying an irreverence toward nature that “delight[s] in the obscene, queer, and repulsive features of animals.” Here the antisentimentalism of *Wildboyz* functions similarly for Seymour as the gross corporeality of *Jackass*, reflecting an empathetic recognition of the ways human bodies are embedded within and connected to nonhuman worlds.

Wildboyz, though, is a far more recognizably “environmental” text than its predecessor given its generic nods to nature programming, begging the question of whether we can read Seymour’s bad environmentalist framework backward onto *Jackass*. Although the latter has a similar affect of playfulness, irreverence, and repulsiveness, *Jackass* in other regards seems a different animal than its animal-themed cousin, especially given the racial/queer mimesis figured in its self-injuring white male prankishness. Stated another way, we might ask: If the irreverent anality of *Jackass* disrupts the nature/culture binary, does it necessarily disrupt other binaries (gender, race, sexuality) that collectively uphold a hegemonic white masculinity? Or does the ecological embeddedness on display in *Jackass* reinforce these other binaries, deploying a vision of nature and body that reconstitutes the power of white masculinity?

Robertson’s analysis is problematically mute on the questions of race and gender that have been top of mind for other theorists, including this analysis; Seymour’s response to this question, however, deserves careful parsing. While she acknowledges “that there is much in the show to find objectionable” (2012, 66), both her earlier work and *Bad Environmentalism* depart from “the relatively small extant scholarship on *Jackass* and *Wildboyz*,” which tends to “insist on the antiprogressive character of these texts” (2017, 272). Read instead through the lens of a queerly irreverent bad ecocriticism, *Jackass* and *Wildboyz* “allow us to reflect, more broadly, on how privileged humans normally attempt to insulate themselves from interactions with the gross or the nonhuman, unless those interactions are regulatory or disciplinary, and from trans-ing processes in general” (269). Read ecologically, the privileges of white masculinity are, in other words, the power to deny embodiment and ecological embeddedness by displacing responsibility for both onto others (racial, gendered, colonial, more-than-human).

Thus, in reading self-abjection as a disavowal of ecophobic disavowal, Seymour does not deny the significance of *Jackass*’s hegemonic white masculinity. But her queer ecological read does make new claims about this

significance; namely, that it is precisely what makes the show’s “undermining of masculine human sovereignty, [its] self-abjection, so striking and so relevant to our contemporary moment—in which continued white male supremacy, escalating environmental devastation, and human and animal suffering are intertwined—not to mention so pleasurable to watch” (275). This is also what makes a queer *ecological* perspective—one that adds nature to intersectional analyses of race, gender, economics, and sexuality—so valuable in any understanding of the show’s ambivalent analogy.

From *Jackass* to El Paso (and Back)

From the belly of the Trump years that begot the churning chaos of 2020, I don’t know if this queer ecological revisiting of the *Jackass* moment is just nostalgia, like looking back fondly on George W. Bush—once a war criminal, now apparently an outsider artist.¹³ It does seem reasonable to ask how an earlier era of self-injuring white masculinity (however ambivalent or comedic) might have prepared ground for the current return of a violently hard mode of white masculine grievance. Too, we might ask whether the outrageous scatological pranks of *Jackass* and similar media texts have over time anesthetized us to even the most nakedly autocratic and patriarchal grabs for power (and pussies). Certainly it makes sense to ask how subversive the ecological queerness of *Jackass* could have been, given that it did not prevent at least one of the *Jackass* crew from publicly supporting Trump; nor did it lead other crew members to publicly oppose him or the aggrieved white masculinity he has fomented and exploited.¹⁴ Indeed, just as *Jackass* in 2004 came to figure the recklessness of neoconservative state power under Bush (“Iraqass”), it also became in 2016 an extended political metaphor for the narcissistic and nihilistic chaos of Trumpian politics.¹⁵

On the other hand, I would contend there *is* something different—less masochistic, ironic, comedic, conflicted; more militant, serious, sadistic—about current formations of white masculinity. As Thomas B. Byers points out in a reading of recent postapocalyptic texts like *The Walking Dead*, this is a national masculinity that longs “to bring everything crashing down,” in the words of Steve Bannon, ushering in “a state of exception in which the white patriarch is (re-)installed as the sovereign” (2017, 53). Whereas an anal economy, with its scatological parodies of hegemonic white masculinity, seems specific to a neoliberal/neoconservative order, the latter

13 See [my 2018 discussion](#) of W’s touring *Portraits of Courage* exhibition.

14 See Bam Margera’s Facebook post [here](#), which suggests support for (or at least nonopposition to) Trump in 2015. On the other hand, Steve-O seems [here](#) to imply opposition not only to a 2016 Trump presidency, but also to the larger problem of half the electorate supporting him even were he to lose the election. In 2020 he released a vlog on his YouTube channel seeming to revel in finding himself sitting behind Trump at a UFC event (“[Insane Night with Donald Trump and the NELKBOYS!](#)”), but a closer view presents (at least to my eye) the possibility that he’s laughing at Trump behind his back rather than celebrating him, even as he maintains an official posture of “not taking any political position.” Still, not taking an official position also creates a tacit association with what Trump represents.

15 See [Lawrence O’Donnell’s MSNBC commentary](#) on the eve of the 2016 election, back when it was still possible to find the prospect of a Trump presidency laughable.

has been supplanted (or at least supplemented and complicated) by a return to an explicitly fascist discourse of white masculine victimization and “extinction.” And with it, we see the return of an equally serious, militant revulsion for the body that is central to Trumpian necropolitics and fascism generally, which historically has marked its enemies as “filth” in order to imagine the nation as a racially pure, white ethnostate.¹⁶ Under Trumpism, a variety of gendered and racialized bodies have once more been inscribed within public discourse and policy as filthy and disgusting—from the Brown bodies targeted for mass slaughter in an El Paso Walmart to the Central American asylum seekers on the other side of the border, left to live and die in their own waste under the “Remain in Mexico” program¹⁷; and from the Black and Native bodies allowed to die disproportionately from COVID-19 (despite Trump’s famed germophobia) to those of even white conservative women like Megyn Kelly, reviled for having “blood coming out of her wherever.”

To be clear, I am not suggesting that we overlook or minimize the reflexive masochism of *Jackass*, whose unconscious racial mimesis seems merely a less obvious version of today’s explicit rhetorics of white male victimization. Nor would it be accurate to view the queer ecological analysis offered here as backgrounding race or gender so as to foreground sexuality or nature—as though such considerations *could* be bracketed or analyzed in isolation. In fact, what a queer ecological reading can offer is an understanding that we *cannot* isolate understanding of white masculine formations from an analysis of how we imagine and live out relations of ecological domination. To that degree, a queer ecological reading of *Jackass* helps us understand why, despite its limitations, there remains something significant about its scatological excess. It would be too simple to say that *Jackass* is in this regard resistive or subversive; it’s more to say that where it appears in spite of cultural norms of shame and disgust, scatology opens up an undertheorized space for thinking about the ideological centrality of somatophobia and ecophobia to cultural imaginaries of white male dominance. Though it provides just a glimpse, the ambivalent anality of *Jackass* gestures toward the possibility of a “counter-phobic” recognition that we cannot challenge various and interlinked social dominations without also challenging our contempt and disgust for that which is erotically and excretorily embodied and embedded, which is to say: that which is queerly ecological.

¹⁶ See Willow Lloyd (2017): “Such a motif accords with a general somatophobia found in fascist texts and which characterises Trump. Trump has a seeming general disgust with the body: he is said to be a germophobe, obsessed with washing his hands, clearly fearing bodily abjection.”

¹⁷ Reporter Bob Moore has pointed out that El Paso is, in so many ways, ground zero for Trumpian abjection: “Family separations started here. ... Then we had the terror attack from a white supremacist last Aug. 3, and now COVID,” which as of this writing is claiming the equivalent of one Walmart massacre every day. See Mary Harris (2020).



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