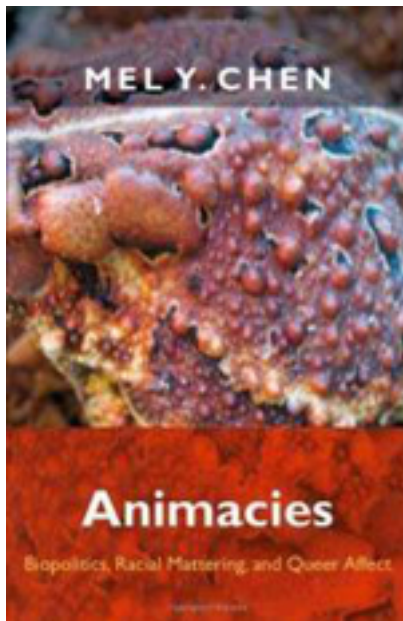


***Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, Queer Affect*, by Mel Y. Chen**

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Beginning in the 1970s, a number of cognitive linguists developed the concept of the “animacy hierarchy” to describe how a language registers the agency, sentience, and affectability of nouns and pronouns in its grammatical structure. In English, for example, animacy hierarchies can be used to account for the grammatical consequences of the distinction between “it” and “he/she,” or to track the use of the possessive “of” vs. “my”—“the face of me” sounds forced, whereas “my face” less so; “the face of the clock” is standard and familiar, while “the clock’s face” is uncomfortably personifying. Animacy hierarchies typically place human subjects (quite often adult, able-bodied, and male) at the top of the grammatical pecking order; below (sometimes far below) human subjects are nonhuman sentient animals, followed by nonsentient objects and abstract concepts and ideas.

Drawing from her training in linguistics, Mel Y. Chen’s book *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, Queer Affect* moves the concept of the animacy hierarchy beyond its original disciplinary meaning and uses it to develop what she describes as an “ontology of affect.” Animacy hierarchies, Chen suggests, “are precisely about which things can or cannot affect—or be affected by—which other things within a specific scheme of possible action” (30). Proceeding from this grounding sense of the *material* status of language and linguistic acts, Chen goes on to describe the way “language users use animacy hierarchies to

manipulate, affirm, and shift the ontologies that matter the world” (42). In doing so, the book seeks to challenge the hierarchical logics that often subtend conventional accounts of matter, and urges us to think about the ways that matter itself can come to attain an affective dimension.

These processes, Chen argues, are inevitably political: they have ramifications within and across various axes of social difference. “Animacy,” she writes, is “shaped by what or who counts as human, and what or who does not” (30). Chen thus focuses on questions of race, nation, sexuality, species, and disability—categories that have long and contested histories around the problem of human definition. Referencing an admirably eclectic range of examples, from 19th-century print advertisements and contemporary video art to recent American anxieties about lead toxins in toys imported from China, Chen considers how nonhuman creatures, objects, and even abstract concepts can be “queered” and “racialized,” and how the expansively applied concept of “animacy” might enhance our critical accounts of such processes.

Perhaps most excitingly, Chen draws from the emerging fields of disability and animal studies to show how both can make important contributions to what has been described as a new materialist turn in cultural studies. Recent attention within the humanities to matters of life and agency beyond the human—from the ongoing invocations of affect to the contemporary philosophical interest in “speculative realism”—have notoriously been less attentive to the racialized, heteronormative, and ableist dimensions of their accounts of materiality. Chen’s work offers an important corrective to these conversations, highlighting the way that, as Chen has written elsewhere, “abstract concepts, inanimate objects, and things in between can be queered and racialized without human bodies present, quite beyond questions of personification.” (Chen 2011, 265)

Chen organizes the book itself according to the structure of an animacy hierarchy. Divided into three parts, Chen begins with a discussion of language (“Words”), supposedly an exclusively human domain; she next turns to a section about nonhuman animals; and she concludes with several chapters devoted to examining the animacy of non-living elements (“Metals”). The advantages of this organizational strategy emerge as the book progresses: “descending” the animacy ladder allows Chen to gradually draw out hidden or overlooked pockets of liveliness, agency, and mutability of the nonhuman, the un sentient, and the “basely” material. This trajectory encourages us to become more acutely attuned to forms of animacy that dwell in places we wouldn’t necessarily expect, and to think more carefully about the ways that “matter that is considered insensate, immobile, deathly, or otherwise ‘wrong’ animates cultural life in important ways” (2).

The book’s first section, “Words,” includes an innovative chapter on what Chen calls the “political uptake as a *linguistic* object” of the word “queer” (58). In treating this specific word as a kind of materially grounded entity, with a delimited—and contested—recent history, Chen

revitalizes questions about an allegedly “settled” theoretical and political term. In fact, it is the very settled status of “queer” in both academic and political discourse that Chen seeks to trouble and upend through a discussion of its current grammatical usage. Chen suggests that the relatively sedimented linguistic status of “queer” reflects and confirms “the observations made by queers/gays/lesbians of color that queer identity and nomination tend toward white essentialisms” (71). This tendency, she argues, has led to both a political and linguistic “deadening”: “an atemporal staticization, a lack of cognitive dynamism, an essential death, and a future imaginable only according to its modification by something else” (83). Chen thus suggests that as queer has become grammatically standardized, its political effectiveness has in turn become staid and regimented. Drawing from the insights of queer of color critique, Chen thus describes the “deadening” of queer as a kind of grammatical fallout of broader political and social transformations—and particular of the failures of queer identity politics to account for those populations biopolitically foreclosed from neoliberal logics of recognition and redress. In closing the chapter, Chen asks, “what are the possibilities of rejoinder, or revitalization, for this contested term”? The rubric of animacy theory that Chen sets out offers provocative options for answering this pressing question.

The middle section of the book is devoted to a tracking a series of historical and contemporary mediations between human and animal, largely through the lenses of race and nation. Focusing primarily upon the transnational US since the 19th century, Chen’s guiding thesis here is that animality has “played a visibly mediating conceptual role within the unstable landscape of racialization” (107). Chen examines a range of visual and print materials to make this argument, including advertisements from the late 19th century that played upon white anxieties about both Chinese immigration and African American enfranchisement by depicting nonwhite human figures as decidedly animalistic. An advertisement for rat poison from 1870, for example, depicts a caricatured Chinese man with a long, ratlike ponytail beneath the words “Rats Out—They Must Go.” Such images, Chen argues, use “the animacy hierarchy to secure the very status of ‘the human’ itself” (114).

Chen’s examination of the role of “animality” in animacy theory also makes important interventions in both queer and trans studies. In a chapter that playfully revolves around the surprising subject of popular (non)representations of animal genitalia, Chen manages to draw connections between interspecies, human/nonhuman forms of sociality and queer and transgender modes of embodiment by suggesting that “animacy *itself* can be queer, for animacy can work to blur the tenuous hierarchy of human-animal-vegetable-mineral with which it is associated” (98). Riffing on Deleuze and Guattari’s “body without organs,” Chen highlights resonances between controversies over animal neutering, the racialized history of eugenics, and contemporary relevance for both trans and “crip” (disability) theories of what Chen calls “transubstantiation”: “how bodies of all sorts undergo regimes of regulation, and how they resist those regimes” (154). Again here, the framework of “animacy theory” allows Chen to draw conceptual and thematic connections between seemingly disparate practices and concerns. Some of these resonances and connections are sometimes only hinted at—the

overlaps in animacy between disability and trans forms of embodiment seem foreshortened in relation to the examples she invokes, and might benefit from further elaboration by Chen or other scholars.

The final section of the book, “Metals,” has the most immediate implications for the recently revitalized interest within the humanities and social sciences in a “new materialism.” In two chapters on metallic elements, lead and mercury, Chen wants to ask what happens “once the object distinctions between animate and inanimate collapse, when we move beyond the exclusionary zone made up of the perceptual operands of phenomenology” (209). Chen’s bravura reading of the lead-poisoning scare of the late-2000s, which focused on toys containing lead paint imported to the US from China, attends to the way a seemingly non-active chemical element was able to mobilize an almost hysterical range of affective anxieties about race, nation, childhood, and sexuality. Chen is particularly astute when describing what she calls “queer licking”: the (mostly unrealized) specter of the white, middle-class child sucking and physically ingesting his Thomas the Tank Engine toy. In this image, Chen demonstrates how a whole range of contemporary political concerns become activated through the animating potency of lead—which, she suggests, “appears to undo the purported mapping of lifelines-deadliness scales onto an animate hierarchy. Not only can dead lead appear and feel alive; it can fix itself atop the hierarchy, sitting cozily amid healthy white subjects” (167).

Finally, Chen’s take on mercury and the “mercurial” as a kind of “biopolitical metaphor” (190) offers an intriguing new direction for queer and disability studies. In a welcome departure from the impersonal protocols of academic writing, Chen describes her own, often debilitating, experiences as a person with heightened sensitivities to environmental toxins as a paradoxically fecund position from which to think through her own relationship to unexpected forms that animate affection can take. Chen writes movingly about the intimacies that her environmental sensitivities have occasioned with nonhuman and nonsentient objects, such as her couch, which can provide ballast and support in ways that more normative or expected human forms of social attachment cannot. Chen provocatively advocates for “the queer productivity of toxins and toxicity, a productivity that extends beyond an enumerable set of addictive or pleasure-inducing substances,” and she encourages us to think more expansively about “the pleasures, the loves, the rehabilitations, the affections, the assets that toxic conditions induce” (211). Chen’s attention to the productive and generative affordances of toxicity should prove valuable to efforts across a range of disciplinary perspectives to rethink forms of relation and being in common with human, animal, and material others.

The range of examples and theoretical discourses Chen draws from throughout the book are impressively vast, so much so that the speed and density with which she deploys them often induce a kind of whiplash. Readers may wish that Chen spent more time unpacking and discussing the fuller implications of some of her more provocative examples, as opposed to piling up new ones. Chen’s use of the word “biopolitics,” for example, remains largely undefined and vague: readers unfamiliar

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with current debates surrounding this concept, and its usefulness (or irrelevance) for the contemporary political moment, might find themselves struggling to keep track of Chen's intervention in these discussions. And while much attention is given to disability theory in the text, I found myself wishing that the experiences and perspectives of specific individuals with disabilities had been more thoroughly integrated. An exception is Chen's discussion of the autistic poet Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay, whose writing on the intense presence and vibrancy of objects for neuro-atypical people Chen perceptively links to her own account of the animacy of matter itself. Like Mukhopadhyay, Chen's work encourages a productive displacement of the terms upon which so many assumptions about the category of the human are based. For those of us committed to thinking again, and anew, about the human, its demands, and its limitations as a political category, *Animacies* will be a powerful ally.

Leon Hilton is a PhD candidate in the Department of Performance Studies at New York University. His dissertation project, "The Smallest Gesture: Autism, Performance, and the Politics of Relationality," brings together performance studies, critical disability studies, and queer theory to explore neuro-atypical forms of communication, sensation, and perception within the context of performance. His writing has appeared in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, *Women & Performance*, and *Dance Research Journal*, and is forthcoming in *GLQ*. He is currently the Managing Editor of *TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies*.

Works Cited

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