

Intersectionality Matters

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Mel Y. Chen. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Duke University Press, 2012. 312 pp.

The title of Mel Y. Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* immediately announces to readers that this is not a book that can be easily disciplined. "Animacies," for readers who are unfamiliar with the term, might sound like a portmanteau of "animal" and "intimacies." The rest of the title evokes a compendium of areas of inquiry, namely biopolitics, critical race theory, new materialism, queer studies, and affect theory. And though this list may seem, already, to include more fields than one book can satisfactorily address, it is in fact only a subset of this book's concerns (it fails to indicate, for example, disability theory or environmentalism). Perhaps ironically, *Animacies'* transgression of modern disciplinary categories makes it a perfect fit for inclusion in Duke University Press's radically interdisciplinary *Perverse Modernities* series. *Animacies* traverses a range of theoretical discourses to identify an element common to the maintenance of all kinds of privilege: the sustenance of a *hierarchy of animacy*.

Chen draws the term animacy from linguistics, where it refers to an entity's degree of agency, awareness, sentience, liveliness, or mobility. Across languages, grammatical structures indicate speakers' views about the animate and the inanimate. A simple example in English is the distinction between "he" or "she" and "it." The latter is reserved for inanimate objects, so that calling a person "it" conspicuously performs his or her demotion on the animacy hierarchy. Likewise, whether one refers to a pet as "she" or "it" expresses a view about that pet's place in the world. Animacy is also communicated by expressions of possession; thus, we prefer "the eye of the needle" to "the needle's eye," but we say "my eye" rather than "the eye of me."

What makes animacy particularly interesting for political analysis is that it is not a fixed attribute, but a relative one. Generally, speakers treat humans as having the highest degree of animacy, followed by nonhuman animals, then inanimate objects, followed by concepts. Within these categories are further divisions: adults are higher than children, large animals are higher than insects, etc. An entity cannot behave, syntactically, as if it were more animate than an entity above it, without violating the hierarchy. For example, the phrase "the child that toys hide" is confusing. It violates English speakers' expectations that the animate child should act as the agent of the

verb *hide*, and the inanimate rock should be the passive object of the phrase (as in “the toys that the child hides”). Animacy expresses beliefs about who (and what) has the power to affect others, and who (and what) do not: through it, speakers make claims about which lives matter.

Animacies works deconstructively. Chen traces the dominant animacy hierarchy negatively, through moments of slippage and failure, to show “how animacy is defined, tested, and configured via its ostensible opposite: the inanimate, deadness, lowness, nonhuman animals (rendered as insensate), the abject, the object” (30). The book develops this argument with reference to an eclectic “shifting archive” of examples drawn from twentieth- and twenty-first century American cultural production, frequently those that articulate transnational encounters between the United States and Asia (18). Such examples range from avant-garde performance art to the sexual subculture of “furies,” and from linguistic philosophy lectures to knock-off Thomas the Tank Engine toys. In three sections, “Words,” “Animals,” and “Metals,” Chen explores the difference that subtends and enlivens normative Western cultural life.

Language is one of those surprisingly lively entities that bears affect, and effects change. The first section of *Animacies* focuses on the linguistic insult and the history of the word *queer* to demonstrate the animacy and materiality of words. Chen’s discussion of the word *queer* draws on her background in cognitive linguistics, showing how the word has been refigured along two trajectories. As a noun, she argues, *queer* has been de-animated. She associates its nominalization with essentializing identity politics that elide radical, trans and intersex queers, and queers of colour; its reclamation, she argues, has led to its “deflated neutrality, essentially a loss of the word’s affective valences” (65). Chen suggests that this neutral, “neutered” form limits the political potential of *queer*. In its verb form, *queer* is re-animated, taking on life in its ability to set other objects in motion. Queering and animating are closely related for Chen, who argues that “animacy can *itself* be queer, for animacy can work to blur the tenuous hierarchy of human-animal-vegetable-mineral with which it is associated” (98, emphasis in the original). Chen’s discussion of *queer*—as a word and as a concept—is clearly based in rigorous scholarship and, in her commendable desire to foreground a non-essentialist, interstitial conception of the term, she is supported by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and David M. Halperin, amongst others. Still, her own analysis raises the question of what happens to the animacy of *queering* when it becomes a “veering-away from dominant ontologies and the normativities they promulgate” (11): when *queer* broadly stands for difference, does the term itself continue to be queer?

Nonhuman animals have been the ground against and out of which human identity has been defined—an operation that Giorgio Agamben refers to as the working of the “anthropological machine.” The second section of *Animacies* considers how this

machine overdetermines animality, particularly in relation to anxieties about race and nation. The argument that humans alone possess language has been, from Aristotle to Heidegger, a major basis for claims to the singularity of human sentience—Akira Mizuta Lippit goes so far as to describe the ontology of animals as the very “antithesis” of language (163). Chen historicizes and calls into question the validity and usefulness of this distinction. She shows how it has historically been used to render sexual, racial, and national others less animate, via comparison to animals. Such comparisons are not only verbal but also visual and, accordingly, Chen models “animacy theory” as an optic, analyzing (in the third chapter of the book) turn-of-the-century political images and depictions of the fictional character Fu Manchu for interplay amongst their constellated signifiers of race, gender, sexuality, and geopolitics.

This intersectional mode of reading is sustained in a chapter that draws on trans and animacy theory to discuss neutering, reproductivity, and the visual culture of animal genitalia. Physical or figural interventions into an animal’s sexual and reproductive capacity here are made to resonate with China’s one-child policy, heteronormative, racist, classist and ableist sterilizations within the United States, and the homonormative suppression of queerness in the fight against California’s Proposition 8. Chen defends against possible charges that analyzing the genitalia of animal costumes is an “indulgence” or “nonserious joke,” arguing that “any decision about including or excluding genitals on a figured nonhuman animal cannot help but be loaded [since] species difference itself is fraught with anxieties about race and reproduction” (148). The thrust of this section is to suggest that *shifts* (voluntary or otherwise) in the matter and affects of bodies can be a fulcrum for collaboration, as they evince the regulatory regimes in which all bodies are caught. That Chen identifies all such shifts as forms of *trans*- recalls her basis in linguistics; like her use of *queer*, readers may take this breadth as generative or appropriative.

Lead is a synonym for inert, spiritless, and lifeless, and yet in the third section of *Animacies* Chen shows us how lead, from the bottom of the animacy hierarchy, came to circulate as a lively figure in the imagination of the American public. In 2007, the United States was gripped by panic that the paint on Chinese-manufactured toys posed a threat of lead poisoning to (mostly white) American children. Chen argues that in this scare, “a new material-semiotic form of lead emerged” (166) that was racialized as Chinese, and animated by anxieties about the porosity of bodily *and* national borders. This new lead threatened to contaminate the upper echelons of the animacy hierarchy via its associations with ideas about black violence, queer orality, and cognitive disability; Chen contends that lead provoked such intense anxiety because it destabilized race, class, sexuality and ability, performing the vulnerability of these categories of privilege. Lead, having become animate itself, threatened to drag other bodies down on the animacy hierarchy.

Like *animatedness*, which Sianne Ngai describes as an excessive, overemotional capacity to be moved or manipulated, *mercurial*—to be changeable, volatile, or fickle—seems to bespeak an excessive animacy, albeit without the associations with Asianness and blackness that Ngai locates in animatedness. Chen’s discussion of mercury and the mercurial considers “mobile, molecular” animacy (16) to discuss how we are changed by our ostensibly inanimate environments, from the smoke we inhale to the affection we may feel for a favourite couch. Pushing on the notion of intersubjectivity, this chapter calls on readers to recognize also the intercorporeal assemblages by which we are constituted—though surprisingly (given her own sense of the interplay between materiality and figuration), Chen distances herself from Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the assemblage, for its insufficient discrimination “between ‘actual’ and ‘abstract’” (206). Mercury animates Chen’s investigation of toxicity, as a metaphor and as embodied experience. After considering how toxicity operates in the construction of threatened immunitary bodies, she proceeds to an autobiographical narration of how mercury “intoxication” has shaped her own sociality, cognition, and embodiment. This unique section of the book explores the manifold intimacies between the author’s own body and the environments around her. These intimacies are illuminated by her extreme chemical sensitivity, which, though disabling in many ways, opens channels for unexpected affects. This leads Chen to consider toxicity as akin to queerness, as a means by which nonhuman matter can trouble normative intimacies.

Animacies concludes with the hope that animacy theory can queer the reified—yet contingent and mobile—animacy hierarchies that support the privilege of only a few. We might mitigate our “vexed and often painful complicity” with such hierarchies by becoming vulnerable and receptive to affiliations across the animacy hierarchy (233). *Animacies* calls for “an ethic of care and sensitivity, queerings of objects and affects accompanied by political revision, reworldings that challenge the order of things” (237).

This is an admirable aim, and in animacy theory, Chen has offered a canny theoretical lens for thinking through the consequences of human exceptionalism—that is, if readers are able and willing to meet the demands *Animacies* places upon them. The self-conscious prose style of the book may frustrate some readers, with its heavy signposting and rationalization of its aims and rhetorical moves. The book’s phrasings (and, occasionally, diagrams) deliberately leave room for interpretive play, but this indeterminacy does at times risk vagueness. This tension also applies to the ambiguity (or animacy) of the central concepts *animacy*, *queer*, and *toxic*, but, if drawing conclusions is not this book’s strength, neither is that its aim.

Chen’s fluency in the many theoretical fields she addresses is apparent, and her eclec-

tic choice of objects is entertaining. The dispersion of her critical attention, however, at times leaves some areas under-elaborated. For instance, the connection between animals and trans and disability theory in the “Animals” section is tantalizing but somewhat latent, and the notion of “mercurial” largely drops away after the introduction of its eponymous chapter. Most conspicuous is the lack of substantive, explicit discussion of biopolitics. Chen refers on the first page to the importance of deconstructing the *life* implicit in Achille Mbembe’s necropolitics and Agamben’s figure of “bare life,” and in the sixth chapter briefly glosses Roberto Esposito’s paradigm of immunity, but for the most part the biopolitical enters the text as an unremarked-upon adjective. Readers fluent in biopolitical theory may appreciate being spared the lengthy excursus that precedes many works drawing on that field; however, the extent to which *Animacies* leaves biopolitics’ insights and debates unspoken is perplexing in an otherwise theoretically rigorous, ambitious, and intellectually inventive book. *Animacies* is positively queer, as described by Chen: it “animates too much, exacerbates rather than contains frisson, [and] soars beyond its bounds” (67).

Works Cited

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