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Lead's Racial Matters

Here I pluck an object from the lowest end of the animacy hierarchy: lead metal, a chemical element, an exemplar of inanimate matter. In the two previous chapters, I detailed how animality is coarticulated with humanity in ways that are soundly implicated in regimes of race, nation, and gender, disrupting clear divisions and categories that have profound implications ramifying from the linguistic to the bio-political. In this final part, I bring animacy theory to bear on metals; first by looking at recent racialized discourses around lead, and in the next chapter by focusing on mercury toxicity to discuss the vulnerability of human subjects in the face of ostensibly inanimate particles. These particles are critically mobile and their status as toxins derives from their potential threat to valued human integrities. They further threaten to overrun what an animacy hierarchy would wish to lock in place.

Toys off Track

This chapter considers the case of “lead panic” in the United States in 2007 regarding potentially toxic toys associated with Chinese manufacture. I label this recent lead case a “panic” to suggest a disproportionate relationship between its purportedly unique threat to children’s health and the relative paucity of evidence at its onset that the contaminated toys themselves had already caused severe health consequences.¹ I measure this panic against other domestic public health

lead concerns, including spectacles of contagion, to investigate lead's role in the complex play of domestic security and sovereign fantasy (defined here as the national or imperial project of absolute rule and authority). I suggest that an inanimate but migrant entity such as industrial lead can become racialized, even as it can only lie in a notionally peripheral relationship to biological life. Rather than focus exclusively on the concrete dangers to living bodies of environmental lead, which are significant and well documented, I consider lead as a cultural phenomenon over and above its material and physio-medical character.

In the summer of 2007 in the United States, a spate of specific recalls and generalized warnings about preschool toys, pet food, sea-food, lunchboxes, and other items began to appear in national and local papers and television and radio news.² In this geopolitical and cultural moment, the most urgent warnings were issued regarding toys. Lead's identity as a neurotoxic "heavy metal" was attributed to a set of toys whose decomposable surfaces when touched yielded up the lead for transit into the bloodstreams of young children, giving it a means for its circulatory march toward the vulnerable, developing brain. Nancy A. Nord, acting chair of the Consumer Product Safety Commission, issued a statement that declared, "These recalled toys have accessible lead in the paint, and parents should not hesitate in taking them away from children."³

Descriptions of the items recalled tended to have three common characteristics. First, they pointed to the dangers of lead intoxication as opposed to other toxins. Second, they emphasized the vulnerability of American children to this toxin. Third, they had a common point of origination: China, for decades a major supplier of consumer products to the United States and responsible for various stages in the production stream: "As More Toys Are Recalled, Trail Ends in China," reported the *New York Times* in June 2007.⁴ These alerts arose out of direct testing of the toys rather than from medical reports of children's intoxication by lead content in the indicated toys; as one *Consumer Reports* article said, "our latest tests find the toxic metal in more products."⁵ In other words, no children had yet to fall demonstrably ill from playing with these specific toys. One image for a lead testing kit, shown on the company's website, shows the Abotex Lead Inspector, shown on the company's website, shows a smiling white baby seated next to a plush toy (figure 13). The baby's right sleeve appears to have been pushed farther up its arm, so that its

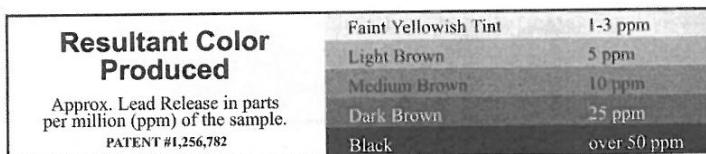


13. Abotex Lead Inspector Lead Test Kit.
From the promotional website, 2007.

prominent skin contact with the toy can visibly indicate the intimate bodily contact between toys and children in the course of everyday play.

The toy's obviously facial front naturalizes the toy's status as a primary interlocutor for the infant. Its anthropomorphization reifies parents' fantasy that the toy must be a familiar and safe substitute for a "person." If the toy flower presents a friendly face to the socializing infant, the testing kit suggests that this idealized scene of interactivity has a threatening undercurrent. The logo features a silhouette of a man's face and a magnifying glass, a deliberate anachronism that makes it seem as if this kit will turn a parent into Sherlock Holmes, able to hunt down clues, searching for visible traces of lead as if looking for fingerprints in a board game murder mystery.

The Abotex Lead Inspector can investigate for a consumer which toys and other personal effects have toxic levels of lead. Its color-

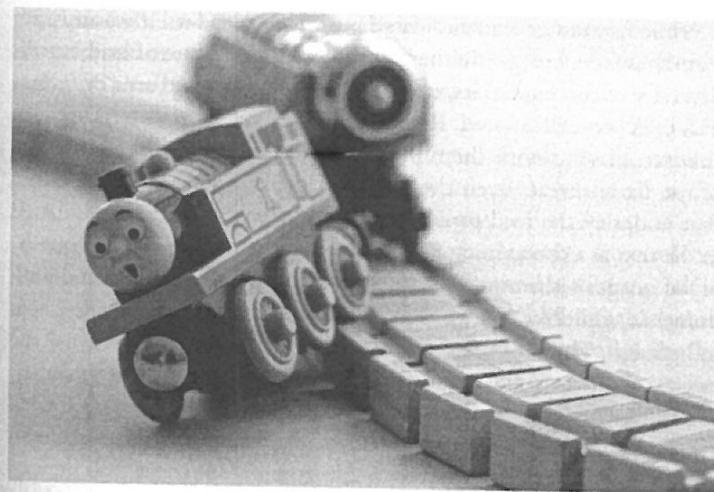


14. Abotex lead color chart. From the promotional website, 2007.

coded test strips can be bought in quantities of eight to one hundred. Once one uses the testing strip, they can refer to a reference color guide (figure 14), for which the diagnostic colors range from a “faint yellowish tint” (the least toxic range) to “medium brown” to “black” (most toxic). Critical race scholars have usefully parsed the distinctions between “colorism” and “racism,” investigating how regionally and culturally specific discourses (including legal ones) regarding tones, shades, and colors may or may not synch up with relevant discussions on race.⁶ Yet the graded valuation of color—the higher valuation of light shades and lower valuation of darker shades—remains a popular habit of mainstream colorism in the United States, and the Abotex reference chart complies with this chromatic logic.

At the height of the lead toy scare, media outlets paraded images of plastic and painted children’s toys as possibly lead-tainted and hence possible hosts of an invisible threat; guest doctors repeated caveats about the dangers of “brain damage,” “lowered IQs,” and “developmental delay,” directing their comments to concerned parents of vulnerable children. Toy testing centers were set up across the country, and sales of inexpensive lead test kits like the Abotex Lead Inspector rose as concerned parents were urged to test their toys in time for the holiday season in 2007, in effect privatizing and individualizing responsibility for toxicity in the face of the faltering dysfunction of the FDA and EPA, whose apparent failure to regulate these objects was thrown into sharp relief.

One of the more prominent visual symbols of this recall debacle was that of toy trains, generally smiling, in different colors and identities. In this illustrative photograph accompanying an article on the toy recall in 2007 in the *New York Times*, an anthropomorphized engine is graphically headed off the tracks (figure 15). The photograph affiliates the toy panic with one particular toy, Thomas the Tank Engine, the eponymous head of the Thomas & Friends series. Originally

15. Thomas the Tank Engine headed off the tracks. Lars Klove, *New York Times*, June 19, 2007, from “RC2’s Train Wreck,” by David Barboza and Louise Story.

a creation of the British author Wilbert Awdry in a book published in 1946, Thomas the Tank Engine has spawned an entertainment industry that today spans the globe; its central significance to the toy panic is discussed later in this chapter. In this photograph, Thomas’s open mouth and raised eyebrows suggest surprise at his derailing as the wooden tracks under his wheels gently curve away. The “maker” of Thomas & Friends toys, the U.S. company RC2 (whose manufacturing is outsourced to China), also produces Bob the Builder and John Deere toys, model kits, and the Lamaze Infant Development System; the prevalence of toys related to construction and industrial transportation reflects a slant toward fostering young masculinities.⁷

Other media images specific to lead-tainted toys abounded: stuffed animals, plastic charms, necklaces and bracelets, teething aids, and toy medical accessories such as fake blood pressure cuffs (these medicalized playthings were particularly ironic, since this toxic toy transposed expected subjects and objects: children were turned from future doctors and nurses back into the patients of public health). Pictures of the decontextualized toys alternated with images that included overwhelmingly white and generally middle-class children playing with the suspect toys.

While notions of lead circulated prolifically, lead itself was missing from these renderings. Neither the molecular structure of lead, nor its naturally occurring colors, nor its appearance in raw form or industrial bulk were illustrated. Rather, images of the suspect toys and the children playing with them predominated in visual representations of the toxic threat. Even the feared image of a sick American child that underlay the lead panic was not visually shown, only discussed in the text as a threatening possibility. Together, the associative panoply of images—the nursery-school primary color toys associated with domestic, childlike innocence and security—served as a contrastive indictment. The lead toxicity of painted and plastic toys became the newest addition to the mainstream U.S. parental (in)security map.

The ensemble of images seemed to accelerate the explosive construction of a “master toxicity narrative” about Chinese products in general, one that had been quietly simmering since the recalls in 2005 of soft Chinese-made lunchboxes tainted with dangerous levels of lead. Journalists, government offices, and parents drew alarming connections between Chinese-made products and environmental toxins apace. Their lists now included heparin in Chinese-made medicines, industrial melamine in pet food, even Chinese smog, which had become unleashed from its geographic borders and was migrating to other territories. The visual representations of Chinese toxicities not related to lead that flourished in 2007 included rare-earth magnets haphazardly arrayed in the intestines of a child’s X-rayed body; medicine vials; toothpaste tubes; cans of dog food; lipstick tubes; dogs lying on veterinary tables; and Chinese female workers in factory rows, in what Laura Hyun Yi Kang has called “one of the emblematic images of the global assembly line.”⁸ If RC2 shared legal responsibility for the lead found in Thomas the train, this fact seemed lost on the news media; it was the Chinese site of assembly (and the U.S. child as the site of contact or ingestion) that received the lion’s share of attention.⁹

A generalized narrative about the inherent health risk of Chinese products to U.S. denizens thus crystallized. But this narrative is a highly selective one dependent on a resolutely exceptionalist victimization of the United States. Chinese residents are continually affected by the factories called their “own,” through the pollution of water, air, food, and soil. A growing awareness of the regular failure of local and national governments to strengthen protections for residents and workers from industrial toxins has led to a dramatic rise in commu-

nity protests, lawsuits, and organized activist movements.¹⁰ These industries are deeply bound up with transnational industrialization, in which China has been a major participant for decades, as well as the vulnerabilities it generates. According to David Harvey, the governments of industrializing nations are tempted to “race to the bottom” in their striving for participation in systems of transnational capital. In the process, they are more than willing to overlook unjust labor remunerations or benefits and the lack of protection from adverse labor conditions. As a result, local populations and industry workers, because they are deeply tied to the very environments in which these industries are animated, must forcibly consume (literally) the by-products of those industries.¹¹

Within the United States in 2007, mass media stories pitched Chinese environmental threats neither as harmful to actual Chinese people or landscapes, nor as products of a global industrialization that the United States itself eagerly promotes, but as invasive dangers to the U.S. territory from other national territories. These environmental toxins were supposed to be “there” but were found “here.” Other countries, including Mexico, were named in relation to manufacturing hazards; yet, perhaps in proportion to its predominance in world markets, China remained the focus of concern for the vulnerability of the United States to consumer product toxicities. It seems no coincidence that just before this year, in 2006, China overtook the United States in global exports, a fact documented by the World Trade Organization and widely reported throughout 2006 and 2007.¹² This rise in manufacturing led to fears about the trade deficit, fears hardly contained—and in fact in some sense paradoxically fueled—by Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez’s proclamation that the swelling Chinese output was “not a threat.”¹³

Alarm about the safety of Chinese products entered all form of discourse, from casual conversations to talk shows to news reports. In what might be called a new, shrewd form of unofficial protectionism, Stateside citizens were urged to avoid buying Chinese products in general, even though such products are essentially ubiquitous given the longtime entrenchment of trade relations between the United States and China. That an estimated 80 percent of all toys bought in the United States are made in China is the sign of such entrenchment. An investigative reporter recounted that attempting to avoid anything “made in China” for one week was all but futile. He wrote, “Poi-

soned pet food. Seafood laced with potentially dangerous antibiotics. Toothpaste tainted with an ingredient in antifreeze. Tires missing a key safety component. U.S. shoppers may be forgiven if they are becoming leery of Chinese-made goods and are trying to fill their shopping carts with products free of ingredients from that country. The trouble is, that may be almost impossible.¹⁴ One lesson of this panic was that inanimate pollutants could now “invade” all kinds of consumer products, and other pollutants could always climb on board.

The Chinese toy panic in 2007 was a twist on an earlier theme in recent U.S. history regarding the toxicity of lead. Since 1978, the year that the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission banned residential paint containing lead, there have been public-awareness campaigns and legislation regarding exposure from house paint. Lead-based paint is present in many buildings constructed before 1978, though public-awareness campaigns and municipal abatement programs have been quite successful in reducing the threat of residential lead to the middle and upper classes. More recently, however, environmental justice activists from polluted neighborhoods and public health advocates have insisted that lead toxicity remains a problem for children in impoverished neighborhoods. Lead poisoning among black children was thus figured as an epidemiological crisis linked to the pollution of neighborhoods populated largely by people of color, including older buildings whose once-widespread lead paint had not been remediated, and where lead-polluting industrial centers were located. But in 2007, news media coverage this kind of lead toxicity began to float and fade, overtaken by the heightened transnational significance of lead. Toys from China quickly became the primary source of threat, displacing this previous concern.¹⁵

I thus argue that a new material-semiotic form of lead emerged in 2007. This new lead was, despite its physiological identity to the old lead, taking on a new meaning and political character and becoming animated in novel ways. Why were painted trains and beaming middle-class white children chosen to represent the lead toxicity this time? If the spread of transnational commodities reached into all classes and privileges, how did middle-class white children morph into the primary victims of *this* environmental lead, when poor black children had previously been represented as subject to the dangers of domestic lead? Why could only China, or occasionally a few other industrial sites not in the United States such as Mexico and India, be

imagined as lead's source? Ultimately, what, or who, had this new lead become?

Animate Contaminants

At first glance, lead is not integral to the biological or social body. In the biomythography of the United States, lead is “dead.” Rather than being imagined as integral to life, and despite its occurrence in both inorganic and organic forms, lead notionally lies in marginal, exterior and instrumental, and impactful relation to biological life units, such as organic bodies of value. The concept of animacy suggests there can be gradations of lifeliness. If viruses, also nonliving, nevertheless seem “closer” to life because they require living cells for their own continued existence, lead seems more uncontroversially “dead” and is imagined as more molecular than cellular. The meta-rubric of “animacy theory” proves useful here, as lead appears to undo the purported mapping of lifeliness-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.

Furthermore, lead deterritorializes, emphasizing its mobility through and against imperialistic spatializations of “here” and “there.” The lead that constitutes today’s health and security panic in the United States is figured as all around us, in our toys, our dog food, and the air we breathe, streaming in as if uncontrollably from elsewhere. Lead is not supposed to, in other words, belong “here.” Even popular reports of the export of electronics waste to developing countries for resource mining still locate the toxicity of lead, mercury, and cadmium away from “here”; their disassembled state is where the health hazard is located, and disassembly happens elsewhere.¹⁶ Now, however, the new lead is “here,” having perversely returned in the form of toxic toys. Lead’s seeming return to the middle and upper classes exemplifies the “boomerang effect” of what the sociologist Ulrich Beck calls a “risk society”: “Risks of modernization sooner or later also strike those who profit from them. . . . Even the rich and the powerful are not safe from them.”¹⁷ The new lead thus represents a kind of “involuntary environmental justice,” if we read justice as not the extension of remedy but a kind of revenge.¹⁸

While the new lead fears indicate an apparent progressive development of the interrelations of threat, biology, race, geographic speci-

ficity, and sovereign symbolization, lead's present-day embodiment may not be such an unusual admixture. It is instructive to trace lead's imbrication in the rhetorics of political sovereignty and globalized capital, remaining attentive to what is present and what is absent. If lead is at the present moment imagined to come from places *outside* the geographic West—in spite of the longtime complexity of transnational relations—and to threaten definitive U.S. citizenry, then how might we assess its status against a history of race rendered as biological threat, and a present that intensifies the possibilities of biological terrorism? How might we contextualize the panic around lead as a hyper-stimulated war machine in which the U.S. government perceives and surveils increasing numbers and types of “terrorist” bodies? And how does a context of an increasingly fragile U.S. global economic power texture and condition this panic, one that sits adjacent to discussions of contamination and contagion?

While lead has long worn an identity as a pollutant, associated with industry and targeted in environmentalist efforts, today's lead might first suggest a new development in the domain of contagion discourse. Contagion can be invoked precisely because the touching and ingestion of lead represents, for children, a primary route of exposure, just as with “live” biological agents. Yet there may be still further structural forces at play. Priscilla Wald, writing about complex narratives of biological contagion, has shown how epidemiology itself can be informed by circulating “myths,” understood as stories that are authoritative and serve to buttress communitarian identity.¹⁹ One could argue that the black children who disappeared from the lead representations did so precisely because the new lead was tied to ideas of vulnerable sovereignty and xenophobia, ideas that demanded an elsewhere (or at least not interior North America) as their ground. However, as I will argue later, black children did not quite disappear. In the United States, the genuine challenge of representing the microcosmic toxicity of lead and a human group's vulnerability to it defers to a logic of panics, falling back on simplified, racially coded narratives. Such narratives, by offering ready objects, doubly conceal the deeper transnational, generational, and economic complexity of the life of lead.

The behavior of lead as a contaminating, but not technically contagious, toxin (but, again, not necessarily as a pollutant in wall paint or as an airborne dust) contains many of the elements of Wald's “outbreak narrative,” a contemporary trope of disease emergence involv-

ing multiple discourses (including popular and scientific) that has been present since the late 1980s. Wald asserts that the specific form of the outbreak narrative represented a shift in epidemiological panics because it invoked tales that reflected the global and transnational character of the emerging infection and involved the use of popular epidemiological discourses to track the success of actions against the disease. Lead, however, is not a microbe, not an infectious agent; it does not involve human carriers like those profiled in Wald's examples of outbreak narratives. The lead panic depends not on human communicability but the toxicity of inanimate objects, so it is technically not the stuff of contagion. What it does clearly and by necessity involve, however, is transnational narratives of the movement of contaminants in the epidemiology of human sickness. In migration (the Pacific Rim) and source (China), the lead story significantly resembles the SARS epidemiological and journalistic trajectories of 2002, when the “outbreak” occurred. Finally, lead's major route of contamination is by ingestion, and it is epidemiologically mappable; when lead is attached to human producers, even if transnationally located far away, a kind of disease vectoring still can happen, even if its condition is not (even transitively) communicable.

Yellow Terrors

There is in fact very little that is new about the “lead panic” in 2007 in the United States. At least, we can say that it is not sufficient to turn to popular and scientific epidemiology's overapplied cry that contemporary ailments bear the mark of this globalizing world's heightened interconnectivities (a cry that says, for instance, that lead travels more than it used to, which would require us to accept, somehow, that lead came only from China). In fact, anxieties about intoxications, mixings, and Chinese agents have steadily accompanied U.S. cultural productions and echo the Yellow Peril fears articulated earlier in the twentieth century. That lead was subject to an outbreak narrative works synergistically with these anxieties, and these narratives may indeed have been partially incited or facilitated by them. One wonders in particular about the haunted vulnerability of “Western” sites that Elizabeth Povinelli incisively describes as ghoul health:

Ghoul health refers to the global organization of the biomedical establishment, and its imaginary, around the idea that the big scary

bug, the new plague, is the real threat that haunts the contemporary global division, distribution, and circulation of health, that it will decisively render the distribution of *jus vitae ac necris*, and that this big scary bug will track empire back to its source in an end-game of geophysical bad faith. Ghoul health plays on the real fear that the material distribution of life and death arising from the structural impoverishment of postcolonial and settler colonial worlds may have accidentally or purposefully brewed an unstoppable bio-virulence from the bad faith of liberal capital and its multiple geo-physical tactics and partners.²⁰

Povinelli traces a kind of looming materialization, in the form of threatened health, of the latent affects of imperialist “just deserts.”

The recent lead panic echoes, yet is a variation of, the turn-of-the-century Orientalized threat to white domesticity, as detailed by Nayan Shah in relation to San Francisco Chinatown in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth.²¹ Shah describes local investments in white domesticity in this period and its connection to nationalism and citizenship. Two perceived threats to white domesticity came in the form of activities believed to reside exclusively in Chinatown: prostitution and opium dens. Significant among concerned white residents’ and policy makers’ fears at the time was the contractibility of syphilis and leprosy, which was imagined to happen in direct contact with the Chinese, whether this contact was sexual or sensual in nature. Notably, they also worried that the passing of opium pipes “from lip to lip” was a major route of disease transmission; this image resonates with the licking scene of contamination of the lead-covered toys, a scene to which I return later.²² This indirect mode of imagined transmission resonates with the nature of the lead panic, for the relation of contamination in the case of both the opium pipes (disease contagion) and the new lead (pollution, poisoning) is one of transitivity. While the imagined disease transmission mediated by an opium pipe was more or less immediate and depended on proximity, if not direct contact, between human bodies, the new lead is imagined to be associated with national or human culprits somewhere far away.

Since the current reference to lead produces an urgent appeal to reject Chinese-made products, and since mentions of China arouse fantasies of toxins such as lead, heparin, and so on, then in effect, lead has in this moment become just slightly Chinese (without being personified as such). That is to say, on top of the racialization of those in-

volved, including whites and Chinese, lead itself takes on the tinge of racialization. This is particularly so because lead’s racialization, I suggest, is intensified by the *non*-proximity of the Chinese who are “responsible” for putting the lead in the toys: that is, lead’s presence in the absence of the Chinese, in a contested space of U.S. self-preservation, effectively forces lead to bear its own toxic racialization. As toys become threatening health risks, they are rhetorically constructed as racialized threats. This racialization of lead and other substances both replicates a fear of racialized immigration into the vulnerable national body at a time when its economic sovereignty is in question and inherits a racialization of disease assisted by a history of public health discourse.

The corrupted Chinatown arguably still lives, albeit now understood as an entire nature covered in irresponsible factories that spread their poisons far and wide. In the twenty-first-century lead panic, exogenous (that is, “unassimilated”) mainland Chinese still stand to face the old accusations of ill hygiene and moral defect. Thus, today’s images of toy-painting laborers too readily attract narratives of moral contagion: they demonstrate irresponsibility toward “our” consumers and blithe ignorance of the consequences of their work, properties that effectively reinforce their unfitness for American citizenship. This is a moral standard that has already been increasingly imposed on the working class by legal and social expressions of U.S. neoliberalism.

Chinese lead panics are sticky; they are generated by, and further borrow from, many already interlaced narratives. The spread of war discourse within the West and of the imaginary fount of bioterrorist plotting, dramatized by the U.S. government in its second Gulf war, was a convenient additive to narrations about toxins.²³ Bioterrorism involves the intentional use of toxic agents that are biologically active, even if not “live” themselves, against populations. They often cannot be perceived by the naked eye. While bioterrorist intentionality cannot be attached to the lead narrative (the China case might more aptly be called “bioterrorist negligence”), it is nevertheless fairly easy to read the discourses on lead as a *biosecurity threat*, conflating the safety of individual bodies with the safety of national concerns.²⁴ Other biosecurity threats have also been recruited as “Asian,” in the case of contagious diseases such as SARS and bird flu. Consultants and safety advocates deemed red and yellow colors—precisely those colors used to indicate heightened levels of “security threat” in U.S. airports—to

have particularly dangerous levels of lead and suggested color as an effective criterion ("profile") by which toys should be identified and returned.²⁵

Thus, lead was an invisible threat whose material loci and physical provenance, much like a terrorist "sleeper cell," needed to be presumed in advance and mapped—not only geographically but sensorily, sometimes through visual coding schemes like color itself (recall the Abotex lead test color chart which codes faint yellow the least toxic, black the most).²⁶ Popular responses both in the United States and in other countries affected by the China toy recall bore this out; one blog entry's title, for instance, was the indignant "Why Is China Poisoning Our Babies?"²⁷ News about heparin contamination in pharmaceuticals originating from China became particularly explosive when it was thought to be deliberate, highlighting the sense of insidious invasion in the same way that bioterrorism does.²⁸ Given the apparent, blithe disregard or dysfunction of both the Chinese and U.S. governmental safety controls along the way, the sign of biosecurity and protection falls on the head of a young child who wishes to play with a toy, and by implication, that child's parents. Indeed, the body of the young white child using a toy train is not signified innocently of its larger symbolic value at the level of the nation; its specific popularity suggests this metonymic connection.

The last few decades have seen a strengthening of affects around terrorism, associating it with radical extraterritoriality as well as nonstate agentivity. Jasbir Puar has incisively examined the escalating agitation around purported "terrorism," particularly its potential to consolidate national interests (including white and neoliberal homonationalisms) in the face of such a perceived threat.²⁹ Indeed, nonstatehood, while always potentially unstable, has come into a mature relationship with the imagined possibility of terrorism. This is evidenced, for example, by the fact that in 2010, Senator Joe Lieberman proposed that Congress enact the revocation of citizenship from those who demonstrate financial support or other forms of allegiance to organizations deemed "terrorist" by the United States. Under these conditions, the invisible threat of cognitive and social degradation in the case of lead meant that the abiding, relatively more methodical, and diversified work of environmental justice activists on lead toxicity was here transformed into something that looked less "environmental" and increasingly like another figure in the war on terror, a war that marked the diffuseness,

unpredictability, and sleeper-cell provenance of enemy material and its biological vectors.³⁰

This "war on terror" was doubly pitched as a neomissionary insistence on the dissemination of the "American way," including its habits of free choice and its access to a free market at its core defined by the proliferation of consumer products. Thus, the very title of a *New York Times* article by Leslie Wayne published in 2009 about corrosive drywall for new homebuilding sourced from China, "The Enemy at Home," betrays toxic drywall's coding as a biological threat metaphorized as war (itself not at great notional distance from "biological warfare").³¹ The idea of this "enemy at home" makes lead into a symptomatic signifier of a war of capital flows, particularly the struggle over trade protectionism and the Chinese resistance to allow the Chinese yuan to float against the dollar, a resistance that has only recently seen a measured lessening as of this date of writing (2011). Lead is animated to become simultaneously an instrument of heightened domestic panic, drawing from and recycling languages of "terror," and a rhetorical weapon in the rehearsal of the economic sovereignty of the United States. A story by the financial-interest magazine *Forbes* at the height of the toy recall made these slippages baldly evident: "Chinese Toy Terror."³²

What are blended in this collapse of narratives, and what are of particular interest here for animacy, are precisely the subjects and objects, recipients and perpetrators, terrorists and innocents, of lead toxicity. In other words, the fused stories about lead *displace* the normal agents of the contagion narratives and scramble the normal pairings between protector and protected and self and other. As such, they cannot rhetorically function as effectively as they might strive to function. This easily recognizable failure of boundaries may be the sole rehabilitative counterthrust of the new lead panic.

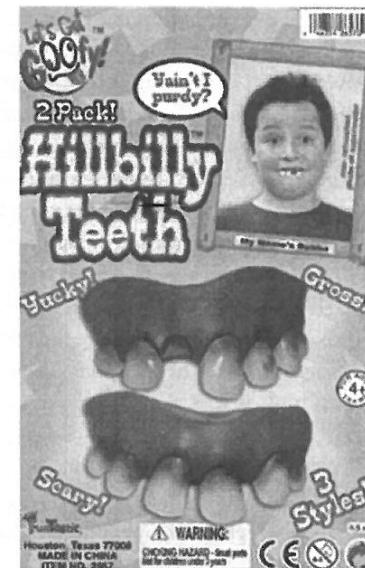
Lead's Labors

The image of the vulnerable white child is relentlessly promoted over and against an enduring and blatant background (that is, unacknowledged) condition of labor and of racism: the ongoing exposure of immigrants and people of color to risk that sets them up for conditions of bodily work and residence that dramatize the body burdens that projects of white nationalism can hardly refuse to perceive. Blithely

overlooked—or steadfastly ignored—are the toxic conditions of labor and of manufacture, such as inattention to harmful transnational labor and industrial practices that poison, in many cases, badly protected or unprotected workers.³³ Other persistent conditions include the invisibility within the United States of the working, destitute, or agrarian poor in favor of idealized consumers who are white and middle or upper middle class; electronic wastes as extravagant and unattended exports of the United States to countries willing to take the cash to mine it; the dumping of toxic wastes and high-polluting industries into poorer neighborhoods within municipalities; and common practices in the United States of exporting products of greater toxicity than is permitted within its own borders.³⁴ Here, the cynical calculus of risk, race, and international trade continually reproduces a specific configuration of toxic expulsion to othered lands or peoples. As Cheri Lucas Jennings and Bruce H. Jennings report, the international economic director of the World Bank suggested that third-world countries might be better off trading for the toxic waste of first-world countries, since “poverty or imminent starvation” were a greater threat to life expectancy than the toxicity of the waste they would receive.³⁵ Within the United States, these authors point to the greater access to less persistent toxins (such as pesticides) by those with economic privilege, leading to a bifurcated distribution of greater and lesser toxic infusion along lines of both class and race.

The contemporary fears in the United States about lead contamination and mental degradation are complexly interwoven with race, class, and cognitive ability, both as they externally manifest (that is, the racialization of imports from China) and as they dovetail with internal registers of classism and regional stereotyping. Take, for example, one toy, Hillbilly Teeth, made in China and distributed by the company Funtastic (of Houston, Texas), which was recalled due to concerns about lead in 2008 (figure 16). The recall notice of this product issued by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission singled out the gray paint on the teeth as the source of lead.³⁶ Though it was coded as threatening or harmful due to its potentially tainted plastic (which would by design be placed in the child’s mouth), one could equally find alarm in its perpetration of classed, ableist, and ruralized violence in its identity as a toy.

The package’s cardboard backing depicts a smiling, presumably “nonhillbilly” white male child wearing the denture insert, and the



16. Funtastic's "Let's Get Goofy" Hillbilly Teeth, made in China, recalled in 2008.
Source unknown.

discolored, out of proportion, and otherwise imperfect teeth are designated “yucky,” “gross,” and “scary.” An inset fake frame, labeled “My Name’s Bubba,” has a cartoon speech bubble (“Yain’t I purdy?”) that uses a distorted caricature of rural or Southern accents. The prefatory and framing “Let’s Get Goofy!” resembles the youthful refrain “Let’s Get Retarded!” and signifies a willful and temporary loss of rationality and cognitive measure. The extant class coding of the “bad teeth” further builds on the myth of rural and working-class degradation by hinting at the acute dental issues that often accompany addiction to methamphetamines (aka “meth mouth”). Methamphetamines are the most recognized drug problem in “hillbilly country,” that is, the rural South and Midwest. The juxtaposition of *Hillbilly* and *Teeth* reminds us that both the urban gentrified center and the pastoral myths of the United States have their own white undersides.³⁷ Against such a consolidated scenario, the leaden gray-tinted tooth paint seems even more intent on the protection of a limited few, the urban kids who

have the voluntary luxury, every year on Halloween, of assuming the mask of fallen class and intellectual ability, only to snap it off later.

A different toy, however, sat at the center of the lead panic in 2007: the expensive toy series Thomas the Tank Engine, seen earlier. Thomas and his “friends” are immensely popular objects and are accompanied by a range of lucrative tie-ins, including a television show, games, activity books, candy, and other merchandise bearing Thomas’s characteristic blue “body” and round gray and black face. These are not only meant for children. The series is marketed to middle-class parents who insist on high-status “quality” products, which in this case are tuned toward boys and quite explicitly direct their proper masculine development. An article from the *New York Times* in 2007 explicitly associated the toys’ high prices with their presumed quality and safety. The article bears one visual image, a photograph of the “James Engine” from the Thomas series, and a description of one member of the vulnerable population (identified as children), a white four-year-old boy whose mother points to the expectation of “quality” for these toys and whose class membership appears to be middle to upper middle class: “The affected Thomas toys were manufactured in China. . . . ‘These are not cheap, plastic McDonald’s toys,’ said Marian Goldstein of Maplewood, N.J., who spent more than \$1,000 on her son’s Thomas collection, for toys that can cost \$10 to \$70 apiece. ‘But these are what is supposed to be a high-quality children’s toy.’”³⁸ Presumably, the “cheap,” working-class McDonald’s toys are the toxic ground on which the nontoxic quality toys are to be built and compared.

Goldstein may have a point about the train’s symbolic privilege, at least. Trains occupy an iconic place in the mythology and economic actuality of the creation of the American West. Symbolically and materially, trains are intrinsically connected to commerce and the circulation of economic goods as well as, in the United States, to a hidden history of Chinese labor. Both the extension of railroad systems to the American West and the development of the Sacramento River Delta in California heavily depended on imported Chinese labor that was rendered invisible in certain interested histories of labor.³⁹ Narratives about lead toxicity in toys from China largely obscure the conditions of Chinese labor in the production of these toy trains.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, these narratives deploy the fact of labor obliquely, in an explication of the pathway of toxicity (lead must be painted on). How to explain this incipient visibility?

An accusatory narrative in which Chinese are the criminal painters of the toy Thomas trains sets things up differently from the story of the Chinese laborers who extended the railroads to the American West: while the latter were made invisible in the interest of the white ownership of land, property, and history, for the toy painters the conditions of labor needed to be made just visible enough to facilitate the territorial, state, and racial assignation of blame, but not enough to generally extend the ring of sympathetic concern around the workers themselves.⁴¹ Indeed, I found very few instances among concerned parents or journalists in the United States in which lead was also understood to be a source of toxicity for the immigrant or transnational laboring subjects who take part in the manufacture of the product.

So, the story of lead, a story of toxicity, security, and nationality, is also necessarily about labor: when it is registered, and when it is hidden, and who pays what kind of attention to whose labor. The regular erasure, or continued invisibility, in the lead narratives of the textile sweatshops, device assemblers, and toy painters, who are largely young women who have migrated into the Chinese cities from rural satellites, renders quite ironic the care work that is so poignantly provided by the toys—and transitively by the women who make them. The transitive criminalization of Chinese toy assemblers is all the more ironic when we consider the routinization of childcare inside the United States by African Americans and immigrants from Central and South America, the Philippines, South Asia, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, for middle-class parents of all ethnicities.⁴² In some respects, the economy itself and changing kinship structures have increasingly meant that parents hire help while they work away from home, a creep of the care crisis into higher echelons of society, as feminist labor scholar Evelyn Nakano Glenn notes.⁴³ From the 1980s, middle-class mothers increasingly joined the labor force as neoliberalism took hold in the racialized sphere of the care of children: as they increasingly left the house and their children, “mothers had to accomplish more intimate care in less time,” suggesting that care work be taken up by others in their place.⁴⁴ The racial mapping of the desirable subjects in the United States thus occurs in the context of the erasure of its disposable ones; I refer here to Grace Chang’s notion of (immigrant female) “disposable domestics.”⁴⁵

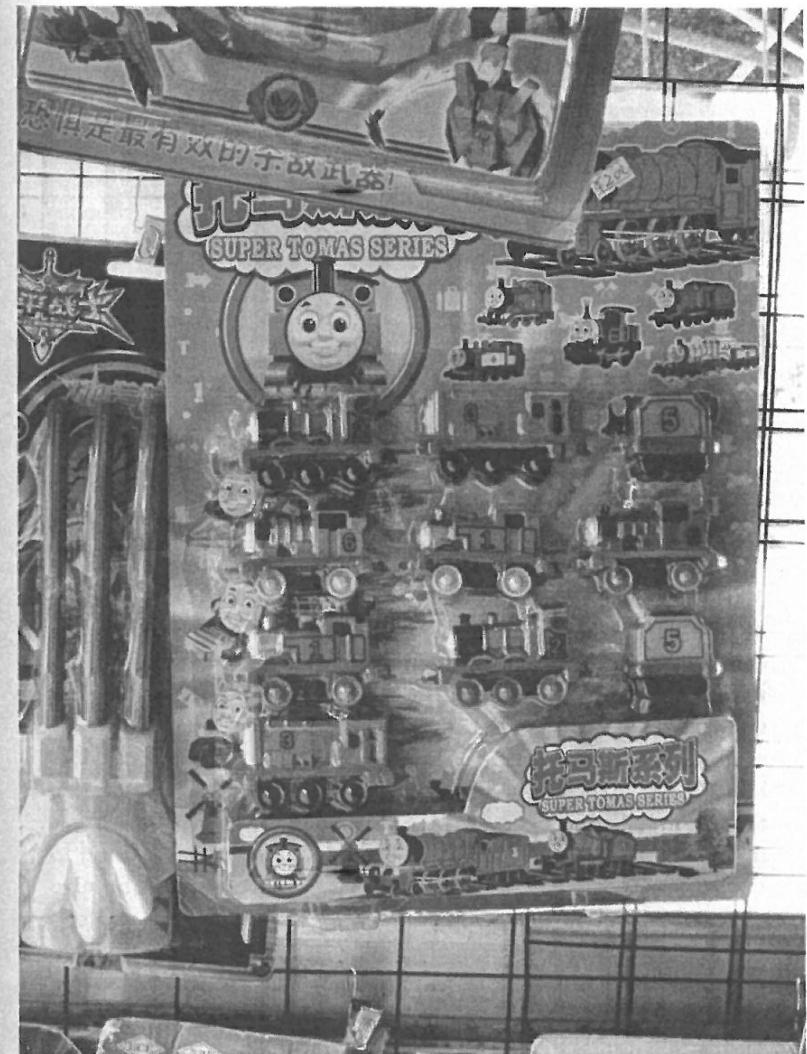
Just as lead particles travel, so too does Thomas the train. It is a mobile vehicle, not only symbolically but also materially, one that has

Chapter Five

journeyed from England to the United States to China and back again. And indeed, a trip I took to China in 2010 revealed many knock-offs of Thomas, who is just as popular there as he is in the United States. These packaged toys, puzzle books, and candies were immediately recognizable but had slightly incorrect English spellings of his name, such as “Tomas,” or “Tomas” (figure 17), as if to match the impossibility of perfect translation. These “illegal” copies show that, like the lead he allegedly carries with him on his back, Thomas is not containable within a given trajectory of movement and desire. The global spread of this commodity complicates the one-way vector of contamination from China to the United States, indicating a multi-directional flow. And yet, little is still known within the United States about how these toys may or may not harm Chinese children or the Chinese workers who produce them.

I referred earlier to a mode of transmission—from contaminated toy to child—as one of transitivity. For the late-capitalist, high-consumption, and highly networked sectors of the world, transitivity has arguably become a default mode not only of representation but of world-relating. The asymmetry of this world-relation is no barrier to the toxic effectivity of simmering racial panics. The sphere of the world that is well rehearsed in the flow of transnational commodities, services, and communications has become the perfect “host” for such transitivity, or at least the collapsing of transitive relations into conceptualizations of immediate contact. Patricia Clough, in her theorization of the complex, even nonhuman, agencies and affects participating in television and computer-consuming information societies, aptly writes that “even as the transnational or the global become visible, proposing themselves as far-flung extensions of social structure, they are ungrounded by that upon which they depend: the speed of the exchange of information, capital, bodies, and abstract knowledge and the vulnerability of exposure to media event-ness.”⁴⁶

An advertisement on the airport trolleys in Shanghai Pudong Airport (figure 18) in June 2010 demonstrates this relentlessly productive metonymic and economic transitivity. The text reads, “Your Eyes in the Factory! Book and Manage your Quality Control on www.AsiaInspection.com,” in stark white letters on a red background; below the website name is an icon of inspection, the magnifying glass. In an inset picture, a male worker—possibly an inspector, possibly an assembler—handles a product. The transitivity here is not between the Chinese workers and the toys they have assembled, but rather



17. Super Tomas Series toy train set, outdoor market, Guilin, China, 2010. At lower right, the first three Chinese characters are *to-ma-sz*, a phonetic spelling of Thomas. Photograph by the author.



18. Airport trolley ad for AsiaInspection.
Photograph by the author, June 26, 2010.

of participants in production monitoring. It exists between the eyes of international corporate managers, the advertisement's English-reading addressees, and another set of eyes that is ambiguously either that of local Chinese inspectors or that of remote cameras that focus on Chinese workers. The ad further represents the interest in surveillance, glossed here as more benign "quality control," that arose after the toxicity of Chinese products illuminated Chinese production as a troubled site.⁴⁷

Blackened Lead

Some years ago, as I indicated earlier, before the domestic narrative largely disappeared in favor of the Chinese one, the greater public was invited to consider the vulnerability of black children to lead intoxication. What happened to this association? Did it simply disappear, as I first hinted? Or did it meaningfully recede? I turn here to take a closer look at the medicalization of lead. Lead toxicity is medically characterized as at least partly neural; that is, it involves the nerve system, most notably comprising the brain and nerve pathways throughout the body. Medical accounts of lead toxicity, including those in-

voked in the toy lead panic of 2007, invoke its ability to lower the intelligence quotient (IQ) of a child. The IQ measure bears a distinctly eugenics history and remains the subject of controversy regarding whether it has adequately shed its originary racial and socioeconomic biases.⁴⁸ Indeed, to what extent might we imagine that lead-induced IQ loss not only threatens the promise of success in an information economy, but also involves subtle racial movement away from whiteness, where the greatest horror is not death but disablement, that is, mental alteration and the loss of rational control?

Julian B. Carter's study of neurasthenia, or "nervous exhaustion," and its characterization in the 1880s by the neurologist George Beard as a specific property of genteel, sensitive, intelligent, well-bred whiteness (rather than, it was assumed, as a property of the working or peasant classes) gives us a more specific backdrop against which to consider neurotoxicity and its connection to the new lead's poster boy, the white middle-class child. Carter argues that the very vulnerability expressed by neurasthenia as a property cultivated primarily in privileged whites, both men and women, is what legitimated their claim to power in modernity, even as industrialization was blamed as a cause of the condition.⁴⁹

Within the United States, "blackness" has its own specific history with regard to rhetorics of contamination, not least the "one drop of blood" policies against racial mixing and miscegenation. Later policies of racial segregation in the Jim Crow South were also linked to white fears of contamination. Referring to the debates in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Saidiya Hartman writes of white concerns about the "integrity of bodily boundaries and racial self-certainty." She notes, "As *Plessy* evinced, sitting next to a black person on a train, sleeping in a hotel bed formerly used by a black patron, or dining with a black party seated at a nearby table not only diminished white enjoyment but also incited fears of engulfment and contamination."⁵⁰

Lead contamination in the United States continues to be scrutinized for its racial bias, albeit unevenly. One recent contested conjunction of African American populations and lead was a study led by the Kennedy Krieger Institute. This study, conducted between 1993 and 1995, tracked lead levels in the children of Baltimore public housing occupants (primarily African Americans) who were exposed to various degrees of lead toxicity in residential paint, without adequate warning of the dangers of that lead. A storm of debate erupted around

this study, in which healthy families were recruited to live in lead-contaminated houses. (This experiment harked back to the notorious Tuskegee Institute study, conducted between 1932 and 1972, which monitored poor black men who had syphilis but neither treated nor informed them in any way about the disease.)⁵¹

I have claimed that the year 2007 represented a year of transition, as a new and imaginatively more dominant, exogenous Chinese lead was entering the public domain. In this very same year, National Public Radio symptomatically both remembered and forgot received knowledge about domestic lead toxicity. First, a National Public Radio (NPR) show called "Living on Earth" updated its coverage of a longitudinal study on the urban poor and lead toxicity. That same year, another NPR show noted the higher levels of lead toxicity among African American children and pronounced these statistics "puzzling," leaving it at that.⁵² "Puzzling": this illogic or failure of deduction occurred despite all kinds of widely available evidence pointing to increased urban regional pollution, lower access to information, and lower financial capacity to remediate or conceal lead paint. This easy disregard explains how black children in representations of toxic lead largely disappear and are replaced by white children; the national security project of the United States is less interested in profiling African American children as victims of lead poisoning, especially when the "new" lead is now situated as an externally derived attack.

Even the "remembering" of urban toxicity in the NPR "Living on Earth" show in 2007 is of a certain kind. This show updated its audience on an acclaimed longitudinal study on lead's effects on children that was begun in the 1970s, led by Kim Dietrich of the University of Cincinnati, and revisited over the years by NPR. Dietrich reported that early exposure to lead toxicity can be linked to later criminal behavior. By design, the study was focused on "inner-city" children, according to Dietrich, "who are largely minority."⁵³ In the NPR update in 2007, which functions as a symptomatic piling-up of racial constructs, Dietrich actively legitimated the interviewer's prompts, gathering a stunning assemblage: poverty, proximity of weapons, violence, lead, and poor nutrition together as collective determining factors for inner-city criminality:

GELLERMAN (interviewer): So if you look at inner cities, if you look at the poor, if you look at their exposure to weapons, you look at their exposure to violence, you look at their exposure to lead, and

their poor nutrition. Is this sort of the perfect combination of factors for crime?

DIETRICH: Yes, it's in a sense, the perfect storm. Uh, the environment provides a lot of incentives for crime. The child is in a community where he or she sees violence—the availability of guns, the availability of illicit drugs. So I would say that the inner-city environment provides the weapon, lead pulls the trigger.

"Lead pulls the trigger." This metaphor of weaponry is used to characterize a latent violent criminality domestic to the United States, naturalized to an urban underclass of color, using a co-construction of guns, "ghettos," and racialized pathology. In some sense, it is an old story: to pump someone full of lead is to kill them. But the form and objects of death have become molecular, and intentionality has shifted to neglect, and a fragile self-identification rather than potency reshapes the threat into the other person, conflated with the lead that afflicts them.

Contrast this metaphor of weaponry to the title of the *New York Times* article on toxic Chinese drywall, "The Enemy at Home," which partakes of a war metaphor not because of some naturalizing co-construction of guns, "ghetto," and racialized pathology, but in relation to a *transnational* (that is, extra-domestic) exchange that simultaneously seems to threaten representative individual bodies and criminalize Chinese trade participation. This enemy, that is, should not be at "home," with this word understood both as a generalized national body and as the domicile of family units (who are in a position to afford the construction of new homes).

One wonders to what degree any newfound alarmism about the vulnerability of black children to environmental lead can succeed, given the abiding construction of *affinities* between racist constructions of blackness and those of lead, long integral to the American racial and gendered corporeal imaginary.⁵⁴ A racial construction of blacks as already unruly, violent, contaminated, and mentally deficient lies inherent in the current neoliberal economy, which not only positions people of color in a labor hierarchy that matches them with literally disabling forms of manual labor, but is also conditioned and supported by a growing and incredibly powerful prison industrial complex structured according to race, class, and gender.⁵⁵ If lead exposure itself is associated with cognitive delay, enhanced aggressivity, impulsivity, convulsions, and mental lethargy, then we might read

such characterizations of blackness as attributions, or intimations, of disability, as much as we already understand them as damaging racial profiles. Eric Lott's study of blackface minstrelsy relates the suturing of impulsivity or sudden bodily displacement to fears about black masculinity in this performance culture in the United States. Lott reads Charles Dickens's account of the dancing in a New York black-face performance as stunned by its spasticity: "the whole passage reads as if Dickens did not really know what to do with such energy, where to put it."⁵⁶ Would lead toxicity, hence overdetermined with legacies of the negative characteristics of blackness, succeed quite so successfully as an imagined property of other racialized bodies, such as the Mexican braceros of the Second World War and modern-day maquiladora workers, both of whom have suffered from lead toxicity?⁵⁷ If disability can be read into constructs of blackness, disability itself is also a critically important axis of difference. Scholars such as Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear point out the dangers of being both black *and* disabled; the authors suggest that within critical race feminism, while disability is sometimes recognized, it can often analytically function for scholars as a "nuance" of intensity rather than its own structural difference, leading to a loss of complexity in the reading: "the omission of disability as a critical category in discussions of intersectionality has disastrous and sometimes deadly consequences for disabled people of color caught at the interstices of multiple differences." These are just some ways in which criminality, race, and disability can be mutually produced and reproduced.

Thus, it is not necessarily correct to judge that African American youth are now no longer viewed as vulnerable to lead. Rather, it is easier to imagine that in this pointedly transnational struggle between major economic powers, black children are now the less-urgent population under threat. It is, instead, as if black children are constructed as more proximate to lead itself, as naturalized to lead; they serve as new ground to the newest figure.

In the case of the Thomas trains, lead toxicity is racialized, not only because the threatened future has the color of a white boy, but also because that boy must not change color. The boy can change color in two ways: First, lead lurks as a dirty toxin, as a pollutant, and it is persistently racialized as anything but white. Second, black children are assumed to be toxic; and lead's threat to white children is not only that they risk becoming dull and cognitively defective, but precisely that

they lose their class-elaborated white racial cerebrality, and that they become suited racially to living in the ghettos.⁵⁸

Queer Licking

Let me return to the visual symbolic of media coverage of lead toxicity. The florid palette of toy-panic images yielded two prominent and repeating icons. The media representations favored a pairing of images: on the one hand, the vulnerable child, more frequently a young, white, middle-class boy; and on the other hand, the dangerous party: Thomas the Tank Engine. The iconic white boy's lead toxicity must be avoided: he should not be mentally deficient, delayed, or lethargic. His intellectual capabilities must be assured to consolidate a futurity of heteronormative (white) masculinity; that is to say, he must not be queer. This is not only because one of lead's toxicities reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is reproductive disability and infertility; I suggest here that one aspect of the threat of lead toxicity is its origin in a forbidden sexuality, for the frightening originary scene of intoxication is one of a *queer licking*. Here again is the example of the white boy, who in the threatening and frightening scene is precisely licking the painted train, a train whose name is Thomas, a train that is also one of the West's preeminent Freudian phallic icons.⁵⁹ This image of a boy licking the train, though clearly the feared scene of contamination, never appears literally, or least I have not found it appearing literally; rather, if a boy and a train are present, the boy and the train are depicted proximately, and that is enough to represent the threat (the licking boy would be too much, would too directly represent the forbidden). But suggestions are sometimes loaded onto the proximities. In one representative image from a website alerting its readers to RC2's recall of Thomas the Tank Engine trains, we see the head and chest of a blond boy lying alongside a train that is in the foreground. The boy's moist lips are parted and smiling, his eyes intent and alert; he grasps a dark-hued train car with his right hand, gazing slightly upward at it. The other cars, receding toward the camera, fall out of focus. The scene is—at the very least—physically and emotionally intimate, pleasurable, and desirous.⁶⁰

On its website, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a fact sheet about lead, including the following statement under

the heading “how your child may be exposed”: “Lead is invisible to the naked eye and has no smell. Children may be exposed to it from consumer products through normal hand-to-mouth activity, which is part of their normal development. They often place toys, fingers, and other objects in their mouth, exposing themselves to lead paint or dust.”⁶¹ The language here, which means to reassure anxious parents, twice uses the word *normal* in describing children’s orality: their hand-to-mouth activity is “normal . . . part of their normal development.” This redundancy betrays a nervousness about children, with its language of proper development and its delineation of what is or is not permissible in normal play.

Returning to that fantasy that images could only approximate: what precisely is wrong with the boy licking the train? Two things are wrong: one, the boy licking Thomas the Tank Engine is playing improperly with the phallic toy, not thrusting it forward along the floor, but putting it into his mouth. Such late-exhibited orality bears the sheen of that “retarded” stage of development known as homosexuality. I am invoking the impossible juncture between the queernesses “naturally” afforded to children and the fear of a truly queer child.⁶² I recently had a conversation with a British man in his seventies about the lead panic within the United States. With a twinkle in his eye, he said, “We had that lead in toys when I was young! Perhaps we just didn’t suck them?” To me, his comment highlights the kind of temporal limitations on some kinds of national memory, the invested forgetting that is necessary for such a lead panic to become so enlivened.

Given that lead’s very threat is that it produces cognitive disabilities, the scene of the child licking his toxic train slides further into queerness, as queer and disabled bodies alike trouble the capitalist marriage of domesticity, heterosexuality, and ability. The queer disability theorist Robert McRuer writes of the development of domesticity within capitalism that the “ideological reconsolidation of the home as a site of intimacy and heterosexuality was also the reconsolidation of the home as a site for the development of able-bodied identities, practices, and relations.”⁶³ Exhibiting telltale signs of homosexuality and lead toxicity alike is simultaneously to alert a protected, domestic sphere to the threat of disability. One could say that lead itself is queered here as a microcosmic pollutant that, almost of its own accord, invades the body through plenitudes of microcosmic holes (a child’s skin), sites the state cannot afford to acknowledge, for the queer vulnerabilities they portend.

Animacy theory embraces the ramified sites and traces of shifting being. It claims first that the tropes by which lead threatens to contaminate “healthy” privileged subjects relies fundamentally on animacy hierarchies. Lead can drag vulnerable people *down*, through variously “lesser” positions of animateness, into the realms of the “vegetable” or the nonsentient. At the same time, it has already weighed on some bodies more than others. The strength of anxieties about lead toxicity microcosmically, and very compactly, demonstrates that race, class, sexuality, and ability are unstable. These are not assured categories or properties that could operate intersectionally in a binary analysis, but are rather variably “mattering participants” in dominant ontologies that cannot therefore securely or finally attach to any body. Animacy theory objectifies animate hierarchies, assessing their diverse truth effects against the mobilities and slippages that too easily occur within them, and asks what paths the slippages trace. The next chapter focuses on the peculiar affective mediations wrought by toxicity, expanding beyond the paranoid images of altered bodies and minds produced by the fearful ensembles of U.S. biosecurity that are recounted in this chapter.

Notwithstanding my claims about lead’s racialization in relation to a Chinese context, lead is of course not always specific to China. Rather, like any toxin, perhaps especially because it is not alive, it can be detached and reattached to diverse cultural and biological forms. This means that it is readily racialized, but with a set of preferences provided by the discursive structures it inhabits. Lead as a toxin, more generally, has already become in this global context racialized in excess as nonwhite; for instance, Mexican lead-tinged candy also received much media attention in 2007.⁶⁴ Yet lead’s attachment preferences are perhaps not so flighty as one might first think; the “yellow hue” of today’s lead seems to swirl in with the “brown” and “black” layers of lead’s naturalized image.

I have suggested here that the mediation of lead in and around categories of “life” in turn undoes lead’s deadness by reanimating it. In other words, lead has the capacity to poison definitively animate beings, and as such achieves its own animacy as an agent of harm. By examining the signifying economies of health, imperialism, and degradation that paint race onto different bodies, and by directing attention to the multiplicity of “contact zones” of those engaging lead—from working on the assembly line, to using the new products that contain them, to the downstream use of the products, to the re-

cycling and mining of them—we witness the inherent brokenness of “races,” “geographics,” and “bodies” as systems of segregation, even as they remain numbingly effective in informing discourses of combat, health, and privilege. An environmental history of toxic objects must minimally register the gendered, laboring, and chronically toxically exposed bodies of globalized capital, which systematically bear less frequent mention in narratives of toxicity than the cautionary warnings from the seat of U.S. empire. With this registration, lead’s spectacle remains connected to the possible forging of justice.

6

Following Mercurial Affect

Toxins are everywhere. The story goes they weren’t here before. They lurk in personal products, our industry-spawn air, our soil, our food, below houses, and in waste receptacles where they will not degrade for years. They reside inside our bodies. They are blamed for disabilities and death, including autism, asthma, chronic illness, cancer. In the attention to worldwide pollution, human bodies and ecosystems alike have entered its broad arc of toxic destruction. Though Lawrence Buell in 1998 identified the early period of contemporary “toxic discourse” in the United States with the emergence of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962, notions and discursive sites of toxicity seem to have blossomed and transmogrified somewhat beyond Buell’s astute literary mapping of the rhetorical underpinnings of toxic discourse: rude awakenings, nostalgic yearnings for pastoral purity.¹ Recent years have witnessed a tremendous growth of knowledge productions relating to the toxic ecology of the human body, which is linked to an industry of toxin-testing private and nonprofit agencies that hope to manage safety dangers regarding threats to home and body. These are accompanied by stories about the toxic load that people in various geographies at various life stages carry.² Coverage of toxic catastrophes compulsively refers to other such events.

The previous chapter on lead attended to medicalized representations of lead toxicity and their collusion with discourses about race and human development. While the discussion of lead introduced the figure of lead toxicity as a measure of public fear, this chapter focuses

squarely on toxicity itself, in both its cultural structures and its affects, this time with attention to mercury and the “mercurial.”

Here I move from exploring toxicity’s contemporary pervasiveness as a notion, to exploring its purported and experienced mechanisms in the human body. This shift concerns the role of metaphor in biopolitics, since the seemingly metaphorical productions of cultural expressions of toxicity are not necessarily more concrete than the literal ones, which are themselves composed of complex cultures of immunity thinking. Reflecting on the ambiguous subject-object relations of toxicity, I use animacy theory to ask how the flexible subjectness or objectness of an actant raises important questions about the contingencies of humanness and animateness. These contingencies are eminently contestable within critical queer and race and disability approaches that, for instance, disaggregate verbal patients from the bottom of the hierarchy. Since, as I argued in chapter 1, animacy hierarchies are simultaneously ontologies of affect, then such ontologies might benefit from a reconceptualization of “the order of things,” particularly along unconventional lines of race, sexuality, and ability.³

Toxicity’s Reach

Toxins have moved well beyond their specific range of biological attribution, leaking out of nominal and literal bounds. A politician will decry the “toxic” political atmosphere;⁴ Britney Spears will sing “Don’t you know that you’re toxic / And I love what you do”;⁵ an advice columnist will caution us to keep a healthy distance from “toxic” acquaintances.⁶ One book is written for workers “suffering the ravages of a toxic personality,” describing what they do as “poison, corrupt, pollute, and contaminate. . . . We define the toxic personality as anyone who demonstrates a pattern of counterproductive work behaviors that debilitate individuals, teams, and even organizations over the long term.”⁷ Thus, toxic people, not just chemicals, are appearing in popular social discourse, suggesting a shift in national sentiment that registers an increasing interest in individual bodily, emotional, and psychic security. For the rhetoric of security inevitably has ramifications not simply related to health: as the previous chapter delineated, recent concerns about the toxicity of lead were especially charged in terms of race, sexuality, ability, and nation.

Let us probe the affective dynamics of one example in detail, the

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paradoxical conceit of the now-popular phrase “toxic assets,” associated with policies of financial deregulation in the United States that entered a new phase in the early 1990s. Notably, the toxic assets of significance that originated at that time and that are held responsible for global economic fallout are the financial products composed of grouped mortgages tied to a hypervalued and unstable residential real estate market. We might say that this complex financial product, this “toxic asset,” is a “good” precisely because it entails capital value; yet it has unfortunately become—considering the discourse in which “toxic asset” has meaning—not only “toxic” but also perhaps “untouchable” (as an affective stance), “unengageable” (as tokens of exchange with limited commensurability), and perhaps even “disabling” (that is, it renders the corporation that buys it up also invalid). The term *toxic assets* thus reflects an effort to externalize—but also to indict for their threatening closeness (to home)—corrupt layers of financial organization.

These examples illustrate that there seems to be a basic semantic schema for toxicity: in this schema, two bodies are proximate; the first body, living or abstract, is under threat by the second; the second has the effect of poisoning, and altering, the first, causing a degree of damage, disability, or even death. In English, this adjectival meaning of *toxic*—of or related to poison, which means that a body or its blood could be harmed by an external agent—has endured since the 1600s, according to the *OED*, and it was concretized into the noun *toxin* in 1890; it is debatable when the metaphorical use emerged. If we are willing to assign “literal” to toxicity’s application to the human body and “metaphoric” to all others, then these metaphorical mappings are not always very sound. Linnda Durre, author of *Surviving the Toxic Workplace*, identifies certain personalities as toxic; among them is one she dubs “The Delicate Flower”: “If someone is sitting there constantly saying: ‘You’re wearing perfume. I’m going to have an allergy attack,’ or: ‘You’re eating meat. That’s so disgusting,’ it’s like grinding, grinding, whining, whining every day of your life.”⁸ Durre would rather expunge the workplace of such complaints; she fails to consider that the design of a workplace might well place certain people, including those susceptible to allergy attacks, at a radical disadvantage. If the definition of *toxin* has always been the outcome of political negotiation and a threshold value on a set of selected tests, its conditional nature is no more true in medical discourse than in social discourse,

in which one's definition of a toxic irritant coincides with habitual scapegoats of ableist, sexist, and racist systems. Toxicity's "first" (under threat) and "second" (threatening) bodies are thus in the eye of the beholder.

Faced with toxicity's broad and hungry reach, the contemporary culture of the United States is witnessing both the notional release and proliferation of the metaphor of toxicity, while also marking its biopolitical entrainment as an instrument of difference. While the first seems important for allowing a kind of associative theorizing, it is simultaneously important to retain a fine sensitivity to the vastly different sites in which toxicity involves itself in very different lived experiences (or deaths), for instance, a broker's relation to "toxic bonds" versus a farm worker's relation to pesticides. Furthermore, the deployment of the first can leave untouched—or even depend on—the naturalized logic of the second. Disability scholars have discussed the deployment of disability as a trope that ultimately reconsolidates ability; David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have elucidated the idea of "narrative prosthesis," a kind of narrative deployment of disability that entrenches a kind of *ableist* idealization of privileged subject positions.⁹ Indeed, we might argue that the workplace psychologist Linnda Durre is doing just that in her formulation of "The Delicate Flower." As Michael Davidson reminds us, we cannot consider the prosthesis only at the level of narrative trope, given the widespread problems around access to such essential medical devices; he writes, "sometimes a prosthesis is *still* a prosthesis."¹⁰ Think about how often culture recruits languages of disability: "the corporation was crippled"; "don't use me as a crutch." The "toxic" people debated in self-help guides and pop songs should not be detached from an understanding of how toxins function in, and impair, actual bodies and systems. Furthermore, such "impairment," as some scholars and activists assert, should be understood as a societal production, and not (only or even) as a problem proper to an individual that must be cured or corrected.

Immunity Fabric

All cultural productions of toxicity must be rethought as an integral part of the affective fabric of immunity nationalism. When immunity nationalism is individuated through biopower, in a culture of responsibility, self-care, anxious monitoring, and the like, toxicity becomes

a predictable figure. The apprehension of a toxin relies minimally on two discourses: "science" and "the body." Science studies and feminist studies have worked to study and materially reground these two figures which often stand as both ontologically basal and hence unindictable. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler engages the biological insofar as she asks us to reconsider the discursive pinning of "sex" to biology and of "gender" to the realm of social and cultural life; but as she warns us, assigning originary status to "sex" or biology obfuscates gender's contribution to (and ontologizing of) sex; that is, both gender and sex "matter."¹¹ Rather than displacing the extant materiality of the body, she focuses on its partially ontologizing figurations. It is often hard to get a grip on what, precisely, "the body" is supposed to mean and what we ask it to do, and on how we demand of it so much symbolically, materially, and theoretically.

Questions of "the body" become particularly complex when taking into account the various mixings, hybridizations, and impurities that accompany contemporary bodily forms, from genetically modified food to the cyborg triumphed by Donna Haraway.¹² What, indeed, becomes of life now that Haraway's vision has in some regard prevailed? Though her "Manifesto for Cyborgs" is over twenty-five years old, it has proved eerily prescient in its view of the ever-seamless integration of machines, humans, animals, and structures of capital. Human bodies, those preeminent containers of life, are themselves pervaded by xenobiotic substances and nanotechnologies. Toxicity becomes significant now for reasons beyond the pressing environmental hazards that encroach into zones of privilege, beyond late-transnational capitalism doing violence to national integrities. Because of debates around abortion (such as those about when life is technically said to begin) and around the lifeliness or deathliness of those in "persistent vegetative states," not only can we not tell what is alive or dead, but the diagnostic *promise* of the categories of life and death is itself in crisis, not least when thinking through the "necropolitics" that Achille Mbembe proposes for postcolonial modes of analysis.¹³ For when biopolitics builds itself upon "life" or "death" or even Agamben's "bare life"¹⁴—much like kinship notions that build only upon humans and hence fail to recognize integral presences of nonhuman animals—it risks missing its cosubstantiating contingencies in which not only the dead have died for life, but the inanimate and animate are both subject to the biopolitical hand.

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Nan Enstad notes that toxicity forces us “to bridge the analytical polarization of global and local by placing the body in the picture” and to consider commodities in new ways in the context of global capitalism, for instance, “capitalism’s remarkable success at infusing lives and bodies around the world with its products and by-products.”¹⁵ Yet, considering the reach of toxicity thinking described earlier, I would like to expand her fairly concrete take on “the body” (for all the discursive complication she admits) by suggesting that many bodies are subject to the toxic—even toxins themselves—and that it is worth examining the toxicities that seem to trouble more than human bodies. Indeed, it is one way for us to challenge the conceptual integrity of our notions of “the body.” For biopolitical governance to remain effective, there must be porous or even co-constituting bonds between human individual bodies and the body of a nation, a state, and even a racial locus like “whiteness.” This is especially salient within the complex political, legal, and medical developments of immunity.

For toxicity’s coextant figure is immunity: to be more precise, *threatened immunity*. Immune systems are themselves constituted by the intertwinings of scientific, public, and political cultures together.¹⁶ Even further, we know that the medicalized notion of immunity was derived from political brokerages. It is no surprise that discourses on sickness bleed from medical immunity discourse into nationalist rhetoric. Ed Cohen’s *A Body Worth Defending* details the history of immunity as a legal concept, tracking its eventual adoption into medicine, a step that eventually enabled people to speak of immune systems with a singular possessive, as in “my immune system.”¹⁷ Cohen’s historicization of immunity gives insight into the breadth of contemporary expressions of immunity and toxicity, and their many affects in relation to threat. Analyzing the period after this discursive migration, Emily Martin’s anthropological study of twentieth-century immune systems, *Flexible Bodies*, details a twentieth-century shift in contemporary thinking about immunity to something private or personal—“maintained by internal processes”—away from a previous focus on public hygiene, in which immunity was seen as “related to unconnected factors from the outside.”¹⁸ This internalization, even privatization, of immunity helps to explain the particular indignation that toxicity evokes, since it is understood as an *unnaturally* external force that violates (rather than informs) an integral and bounded self. This is what Cohen calls the “apotheosis of the modern body,” the aban-

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donment of humans’ integral relation to their environments and the insistence on a radical segregation of self and world fueled by a belligerent antagonism.

We can further consider the Italian political philosopher Ricardo Esposito’s elucidation of the ways in which immunity seems to work as a kind of destructive “negative protection of life.”¹⁹ In Esposito’s “immunizing paradigm,” immunity is contracted on a “poisoned” affect of gratitude (on the basis of membership in a community) that undercuts the final possibility of individual immunity. Esposito identifies the shaky prescription of the introjection of the negative agent as a way to defend against its exterior identity. Intriguingly, through “poisoned” affect, or an affect of gratitude that is somehow fatally compromised, toxicity thus sneaks into Esposito’s elaboration of immunity in the realm of affect rather than as a formal object; it is thus never fully addressed beyond the given questions of negativity in relation to immunity. This may not be surprising, as the history of immunity does not confirm that toxicity was there from the start. But if it was not there, then what was?

It could be productive, I think, to use this theorization of immunity to ask questions of the absence or presence of toxicity (both are here) as a means of approaching immunity, and particularly to take the consideration of “poisoned” affect and its compromise to individual immunity further. I suggest that toxicity incontrovertibly meddles with the relations of subject and object required for even the kind of contractual immunitary ordering that Esposito suggests. Thus, while the *threat* of toxicity is held to a clear subject-object relation, *intoxication* (of an object by a toxin) is never held to an advantageous “homeopathic” quantity (in light of the biopolitical interjection of negativity): indeed, this is the function of poisoned affect seen fully through. Not only is political immunity challenged, the very nature of this alteration cannot be fully known. Who is, after all, the subject here? What if the object, which is itself a subject, has been substantively and subjectively altered by the toxin? Could we tell a history of intoxication in relation to political immunity that sits next to Esposito’s? There are clearly many more questions than answers here about the history of the political affect of immunity.

Toxic Worlding

Recall that matters of life and death have arguably underlain queer theory from the early 1990s, when radical queer activism in relation to AIDS blended saliently with academic theorizing on politics of gender and sexuality. More recently, Lee Edelman takes up a psychoanalytic analysis of queerness's figural deathly assignment in relation to a relentless "reproductive futurism."²⁰ Jasbir Puar points to life and death economies that place some queer subjects in the privileged realm of a biopolitically "optimized life," while other perverse subjects are consigned to the realm of death, as a "result of the successes of queer incorporation into the domains of consumer markets and social recognition in the post-civil rights, late twentieth century."²¹ Similar affective pulses of surging liveness or morbid resignation might reflect the legacy of the deathly impact of AIDS in queer scholarship. Suggesting a "horizontal" imagining whose terms are pointedly not foretold by a pragmatic limitation on the present, José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia* offers a way around the false promise of a neoliberal, homo-normative utopia whose major concerns are limited to gay marriage and gay service in the military: lifely for a few, deathly for others.²²

To enact a method that prioritizes a queer reach for toxicity's "worlding," I want to interleave considerations of toxicity and intoxication with a "toxic sensorium": a sense memory of objects and affects that was my felt orientation to the world when I was recently categorized as "ill." It seems never a simple matter to discuss toxicity, to objectify it. It is yet another matter to experience something that seems by one measure or another to be categorized as a toxin, to undergo intoxication, intoxicification. This difference raises questions about toxic methodology, which in some way inherits anthropology's question about what can be done to respond to crises of objectivity. While no simple solution exists, it is my interest to attenuate the exceptionalisms that attain all too easily in, for instance, the previous chapter's assessment of lead toxicity's discursive range: it is possible for a reader to comfortably reside in a certain sense of integral, nontoxic security in that analysis.

To intensify toxicity's intuitive reach, I engage toxicity as a *condition*, one that is too complex to imagine as a property of one or another individual or group or something that could itself be so easily bounded. I would like to deemphasize the borders of the immune

system and its concomitant attachments to "life" and "death," such that the immune system's aim is to realize and protect life. How can we think more broadly about synthesis and symbiosis, including toxic vapors, interspersals, intrinsic mixings, and alterations, favoring inter-absorption over corporeal exceptionalism? I will not address these questions from a point of view of mythic health. Rather, I will tell a tale from the perspective of the existence that I have recently claimed, one that has been quite accurately considered "toxic."

In other words, I move now from a theoretical discussion of metaphors about threat into what feels, for me personally, like riskier terrain, the terrain of the autobiographical. As academics are often trained to avoid writing in anything resembling a confessional mode, such a turn is fraught with ambivalence. I theorize toxicity as it has profoundly impacted my own health, my own queerness, and my own ability to forge bonds, and in so doing, I offer a means to reapproach questions of animacy with a different lens. This theorization through the "personal" is not intended as a perfect subjectivity that opposes an idealized objectivity. Rather, it is meant as a complementary kind of knowledge production, one that in this context invites both the sympathetic ingestion (or intoxication) of what remains a marked experience, and the empathetic memory of past association. It centers on a set of states and experiences that have been diagnosed as "multiple chemical sensitivity" and "heavy metal poisoning," and can be used to think more deeply about this condition and what it offers to thinking about bodies and affect. As such, my repository of thoughts, experiences, and theorizations while ill—ones that queerly and profoundly changed my relationship to intimacy—could be considered a kind of "archive of feelings," to use Ann Cvetkovich's important terminology.²³ These are feelings that are neither exclusively traumatic, nor exclusively private, nor a social archive proper to certain groups: they are feelings whose publics and intimacies are not clearly bounded or determinable. Such feelings—and their intimacies—offer a way to come at normative affect's margins. Where Lauren Berlant notes, of less institutionalized interactions, that "intimacy names the enigma of this range of attachments . . . and it poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective," I mean to destabilize where the toxic and its affects can be located.²⁴

I have for the last few years suffered from the effects of mercury toxicity, perhaps related to receiving for a decade in my childhood

weekly allergy shots which were preserved with mercury, and having a mouth full of “metal” fillings which were composed of mercury amalgam. That said, I am not invested in tracing or even asserting a certain cause and effect of my intoxication, not least because such an endeavor would require its own science studies of Western medicine’s ambivalent materialization of heavy metal intoxication as an identifiable health concern. Rather, I wish to chart such intoxications with and against sexuality, as both of these are treated as biologized and cultural forms with specific ethical politics. In early-twenty-first-century U.S. culture, queer subjects are in many ways treated as toxic assets, participating in the flow of capital as a new niche market, yet also threatening to dismantle marriage or infiltrate the military, and thus potentially damaging the very economic and moral stability of the nation. But what happens when queers become intoxicated? Recall the earlier secondary *Oxford English Dictionary* meanings of *queer* as both “unwell” and “drunk,” the latter of which is now proclaimed to be obsolete; such meanings shadow queerness with the cast of both illness and inebriation. While Muñoz meditates on the possibilities of ecstasy—the drug—as a metaphor for pleasurable queer temporalities,²⁵ I explore an intoxication that is not voluntary, is potentially permanent, is ambivalent toward its own affective uptake, and produces an altered affect that may not register its own pleasure or negativity in recognizable terms.

Let me get specific and narrate what my “toxic” cognitive and bodily state means, how it limits, delimits, frames, and undoes. Today I am having a day of relative well-being and am eager to explore my neighborhood on foot; I have forgotten for the moment that I just don’t go places “on foot,” because the results can be catastrophic. Having moved to a new place, with the fresh and heady defamiliarization that comes with uprooting and replanting, my body has forgotten some of its belabored environmental repertoire, its micronarratives of movement and response, of engagement and return, of provocation and injury. It is for a moment free—in its scriptless version of its future—to return to former ways of inhabiting space when I was in better health. Some passenger cars whiz by; instinctively my body retracts and my corporeal-sensory vocabulary starts to kick back in. A few pedestrians cross my path, and before they near, I quickly assess whether they are likely (or might be the “kind of people”) to wear perfumes or colognes or to be wearing sunscreen. I scan their heads for smoke puffs

or pursed lips pre-release; I scan their hands for a long white object, even a stub. In an instant, quicker than I thought anything could reach my organs, my liver refuses to process these inhalations and screams hate, a hate whose intensity each time shocks me.

I am accustomed to this; the glancing scans kick in from habit whenever I am witnessing proximate human movement, and I have learned to prepare to be disappointed. This preparation for disappointment is something like the preparation for the feeling I would get as a young person when I looked, however glancingly, into the eyes of a racist passerby who expressed apparent disgust at my Asian off-gendered form. I imagined myself as the queer child who was simultaneously a walking piece of dirt from Chinatown. For the sake of survival, I now have a strategy of temporally displaced imaginations; if my future includes places and people, I pattern-match them to past experiences with chemically similar places and chemically similar people. I run through the script to see if it would result in continuity or discontinuity. This system of simultaneous conditionals and the time-space planning that results runs counter to my other practice for survival, an investment in a refusal of conditions for my existence, a rejection of a history of racial tuning and internalized vigilance.

To my relief, the pedestrians pass, uneventfully for my body. I realize then that I should have taken my chemical respirator with me. When I used to walk maskless with unsuspecting acquaintances, they had no idea that I was privately enacting my own bodily concert of breath-holding, speech, and movement; that while concentrating on the topic of conversation, I was also highly alert to our environment and still affecting full involvement by limiting movements of my head while I scanned. Sometimes I had no breath stored and had to scoot ahead to a clearer zone while explaining hastily “I can’t do the smoke.” Indeed, the grammatical responsibility is clear here: the apologetic emphasis is always on I-statements because there is more shame and implicature (the implicit demand for my interlocutor to do something about it) in “the smoke makes me sick,” so I avoid it. Yet the individuated property-assignation of “I am highly sensitive” furthers the fiction of my dependence as against others’ independence. The question then becomes which bodies can bear the fiction of independence and of uninterruptability.

I am, in fact, still seeking ways to effect a smile behind my mask: lightening my tone, cracking jokes, making small talk about the

weather, or simply surging forward with whatever energy I have to connect with a person on loving terms. I did this recently when I had to go with a mask into Michael's crafts shop, full as it is of scents and glues and fiberboard. The register clerk was very sweet, very friendly, and to my relief did not consider the site of our intersubjectivity to be the two prominent chemical filter discs on either side of my mask. "Wearing the mask with love" is the same way I learned to deal with a rare racial appearance in my white-dominated hometown in the Midwest, or with what is read as a transnationally gendered ambiguity. It seems the result I receive in return is either love or hostility, and it is unpredictable. Suited up in both racial skin and chemical mask, I am perceived as a walking symbol of a contagious disease like SARS, and am often met with some form of repulsion; indeed, "SARS!" is what has been used to interpellate me in the streets.

As many thinkers have noted, the insinuation or revelation of a disability, particularly invisible disability, dovetails interestingly with issues of coming-out discourses of sexuality and passing. Both Ellen Samuels and Robert McRuer have discussed the ways in which "coming out" as disabled provocatively overlaps with, and also differs from, "coming out" as queer.²⁶ How does a mask help interrupt the notion of "passing"? How does it render as "damaged" (or, at least, vulnerable) a body that might otherwise seem healthy? Not wearing a chemical mask counts as a guise of passing, of the appearance of non-disability: I look "well" when I am maskless in public, at least until I crumple.

The use of the literal mask as an essential prosthesis for environmentally ill subjects is notable in light of Tobin Siebers's deployment of "masquerade" as an *exaggeration* of disability symbols to manage or intervene in social schemas about ability and disability.²⁷ This dialogic friction between *actual* mask as facial appurtenance—the mask's literal locus on the face—and mask or masquerade as a racial, non-disabled, or sexuality *metaphor* points to the central significance of face as intersubjective locus, and it exemplifies the expropriability of a facial notion of embattlement to the rest of the (human) body or to social spheres of interaction;²⁸ but it also points to the complexities that emerge when the actual facial signification of disability rubs up against the facial mask metaphor. Arguably, a chemical mask can serve as its own masquerade, but it also slips and slides into orthogonal significations. Its reading as *exaggeration*, in particular, competes

with its reading as racializing and masculinizing toxic *threat*, where the skin of the mask ambivalently locates the threat on either side of it. The same ambivalence may be attributed to the "skins" of some toxic bodies, whereas the syncdochal attribution of toxicity applies either to the (rest of the) toxic body itself (the mask standing for the human SARS vector) or to an exterior, vulnerable body that renders it so (Fanon's "skin," which the "mask" covers, standing in for the colonial racialized visualities that render his blackness toxic to a white collective).²⁹ Is, then, the toxic body the disabled body? Or is the toxic body that collective body that biopolitically inoculates itself against a stronger toxin by affording itself homeopathic amounts of a "negative" toxin (disabled bodies) while remaining in a terrible tension with these negated entities?

Given my condition, I must constantly renegotiate, and recalibrate, my embodied experiences of intimacy, altered affect, and the porosity of the body. The nature of metal poisoning, accumulated over decades, is that any and every organ, including my brain, can bear damage. Because symptoms can reflect the toxicity of any organ, they form a laundry list that includes cognition, proprioception, emotion, agitation, muscle strength, tunnel perception, joint pain, and nocturnality. Metal-borne damage to the liver's detoxification pathways means that I cannot sustain many everyday toxins: once they enter, they recirculate rather than leave. I can sometimes become "autism-spectrum" in the sense that I cannot take too much stimulation, including touch, sound, or direct human engagement, including being unable to meet someone's gaze, needing repetitive, spastic movements to feel that my body is just barely in a tolerable state; and I can radically lose compassionate intuition, saying things that I feel are innocuous but are incredibly hurtful. The word *mercurial* means what it means—unstable and wildly unpredictable—because the mercury toxin has altered a self, has directly transformed an affective matrix: affect goes faster, affect goes hostile, goes toxic. Traditional psychology here, I suspect, can only be an overlay, a reading of what has already transformed the body; it cannot fully rely on its narratives.

Largely two quarters of the animated agents of the metropolis—that is, motor vehicles and pedestrians, but not the nonhuman animals or the insects—can be toxic to me because they are proximate instigators. The smokestacks, though they set the ambient tone of the environment, are of less immediate concern when I am surviving moment

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to moment. Efficiency is far from my aim; that would mean traversing the main streets. Because I must follow the moment-to-moment changes in quality of air to inhale something that won't hurt me, turning toward a thing or away from it correspondingly, humans are to a radical degree no longer the primary cursors of my physical inhabitation of space. Inanimate things take on a greater, holistic importance. It also means that I am perpetually itinerant, even when I have a goal; it means I will never walk in a straight line. There are also lessons here, reminders of interdependency, of softness, of fluidity, of receptivity, of immunity's fictivity and attachment's impermanence; life sustains even—or especially—in this kind of silence, this kind of pause, this dis-ability. The heart pumps blood; the mind, even when it says, “I can't think,” has reflected where and how it is. Communion is possible in spite of, or even because of, this fact.

To conclude this narration of a day navigating my own particular hazards: I've made it back home and lie on the couch, and I won't be able to rise. My lover comes home and greets me; I grunt a facsimile of greeting in return, looking only in her general direction but not into her eyes. She comes near to offer comfort, putting her hand on my arm, and I flinch away; I can't look at her and hardly speak to her; I can't recall words when I do. She tolerates this because she understands very deeply how I am toxic. What is this relating? Distance in the home becomes the condition of these humans living together in this moment, humans who are geared not toward continuity or productivity or reproductivity but to stasis, to waiting, until it passes.

In such a toxic period, anyone or anything that I manage to feel any kind of connection with, whether it's my cat or a chair or a friend or a plant or a stranger or my partner, I think they are, and remember they are, all the same ontological thing. What happens to notions of animacy given this lack of distinction between “living” and “lifely” things? I am shocked when my lover doesn't remember what I told “her” about my phone earlier that day, when it was actually a customer service representative on a chat page, which once again brings an animating transitivity into play. And I am shocked when her body does not reflect that I have snuggled against it earlier, when the snuggling and comforting happened in the arms and back of my couch. What body am I now in the arms of? Have I performed the inexcusable: Have I treated my girlfriend like my couch? Or have I treated my couch like her, which fares only slightly better in the moral equations?

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Or have I done neither such thing? After I recover, the conflation seems unbelievable. But it is only in the recovering of my human-directed sociality that the couch really becomes an unacceptable partner. This episode, which occurs again and again, forces me to rethink animacy, since I have encountered an intimacy that does not differentiate, is not dependent on a heartbeat. The couch and I are interabsorbent, interporous, and not only because the couch is made of mammalian skin. These are intimacies that are often ephemeral, and they are lively; and I wonder whether or how much they are really made of habit.

Animate Objects, Inanimate Subjects

By its very definition, the toxin, as much as it may have been categorized as inanimate, is more than mere matter, for it has a potency that can directly implicate the vulnerability of a living body. Prototypically, a toxin requires an object against which its threat operates. This threatened object is an object whose defenses will be put to the test, in detection, in “fighting off,” and finally in submission and absorption. But some confusion occurs when we note that the object of toxicity, its target, is an animate one—and hence potentially also a kind of subject—and that the toxin, the subject of toxicity, is inanimate. Thinking back to the linguistics of animacy hierarchies detailed in chapter 1, we note that in this case, various categories of assessment, particularly of worthiness to serve as agents or patients of verbs, tell opposing stories. In a schema of toxicity, likely subjects are equally likely objects, despite their location in very different parts of the animacy hierarchy. In a scene of human intoxication, for toxins and their human hosts, the animacy criteria of lifeliness, subjectivity, and humanness (where the human wins) come up short against mobility and sentience (where the toxin wins). And this is before even considering what occurs in that moment and the ensuing “life” of intoxication; toxicity becomes us, we become the toxin. The mercurial, erethic, emotionally labile human moves toward quicksilver, becomes it. There is, indeed, something “unworlding” that might be said to take place in the cultural production of toxic notions. A “normal” world's order is lost when, for instance, things that can harm you permanently are not even visible to the naked eye. Temporal orders become Moebius strips of identity: How could it do this to me? And yet in that instant, the “me” that speaks is not the “me” before I was affected by it.

Recent attention to inanimate objects, from Jennifer Terry's work on the love of inanimate objects such as the Eiffel Tower and the Berlin Wall to news coverage of men having serious emotional relationships with their dakimakura pillows, represents certain kinds of reversals of expectation regarding a kind of vitality that objects are afforded within human worlds.³⁰ Thinking beyond the rubric of fetishism, it is useful to build upon this work to ask questions of the subjects *facing* these objects and to consider how to mark their subjectivity as such or *why* we do so. Consider, for instance, the example of my couch, with which my relationality is made possible only to the degree that I am *not* in possession of human sociality. We might indeed let go of an attachment to the idea that social states or capacities are possessed by one animate entity and think rather in terms of transobjectivity.³¹ Transobjectivity releases objectivity from at least some of its epistemological strictures and allows us to think in terms of multiple objects interspersed and in exchange. Stacy Alaimo's term *transcorporeality* suggests we think beyond the terms of the bodily unit and affirm the agencies of the matter that we live among.³² The sentience of the couch, in our meeting and communing, then becomes my own sentience as well.

Nikolas Rose, in *The Politics of Life Itself*, has observed the impact of recent dramatic changes in the field of biology, particularly in the life-making capacities of genetics and the role of pharmaceuticals in vital self-management.³³ To Rose, these shifts constitute an epistemological and technical event, and he pronounced that contemporary biopolitics must now be considered *molecular* in character. This focus on molecularity is important when thinking about neurotoxicities, which I consider less a part of the spread of pharmaceutical self-management than a sign of the mediations we must now make about toxins between environmental "givens" (that toxins surround us) and self (that toxins are us).

In particular, what are the "affectations" or socialities attributed to toxicity, and what is the "affect" attaining between a toxin and its host? I consider two different senses of molecularity, one of which takes the notion of a particle at face value, the other of which leaves behind a strict biological or physical schema and considers a particle's affective involvement on radically different scales. I also want to make more explicit a relationship between xenophobia and xenobiotics; xenobiotics are substances understood to be not proper to the human

body, that is, inherently alien to the body, whether or not they are recognized as such by it.

Both lead and mercury are chemically classified as metals. They are often further described as "heavy metals," a category whose chemical definition remains contested since "heavy" variously refers to atomic weight and molecular density. Heavy metal toxins have sites of entry, pathways of action, and multiple genres of biochemical-level and organ-specific reaction in the body. Lead and mercury are both classified as neurotoxic, which means that they can damage neurons in the brain. Sensory impairment correlated to mercury's neuronal damage, for instance, can include loss of proprioception, nystagmus (involuntary eye movement), and heightened sensitivity to touch or sounds. But their effectiveness is potentially comprehensive: "Like most other toxic metals, lead and mercury exist as cations, and as such, can react with most ligands present in living cells. These include such common ligands as SH, phosphate, amino, and carboxyl. Thus they have the potential to inhibit enzymes, disrupt cell membranes, damage structural proteins, and affect the genetic code in nucleic acids. The very ubiquity of potential targets presents a great challenge to investigations on mechanisms of action."³⁴

The ubiquity of potential targets further informs us that the transformation by a toxin and its companions can be so comprehensive that it renders their host somewhat unrecognizable. Furthermore, to state perhaps the obvious, research on contemporary toxicities—or indeed, to broaden our field of inquiry, on historical intoxication—confirms for us our experiences: that under certain conditions, some of them enduring or seemingly permanent, social beings can also become radically altered in their sociality, whether due to brain-specific damage or not. They are overcome, overwhelmed, overtaken by other substances. Although the body's interior could be described as becoming "damaged" by toxins, if we were willing to perform the radical act of releasing the definition of "organism" from its biological pinnings, we might from a more holistic perspective approach toxicity with a lens of mutualism.

The biologist Anton de Bary, who developed a theory of symbiosis in 1879, defined three types: commensalism, mutualism, and parasitism. Thinking of toxins as symbiotes—rather than, for instance, as parasites which seem only to feed off a generally integral being without fundamentally altering it (which would perhaps be our first

guess)—not only captures some toxic affectivity but enables me to shift modes of approach. Ultimately, amounts—that is, scales—are inconsequential here; it is affectivity that matters, and the distinction between parasite and symbiosis is irrelevant. It is worth noting here that my thinking bears some resemblance to Deleuzian interspersal and symbiosis. Deleuze and Guattari write substantively about “molecularity” in relation to becoming-animal, referring to “particles” as belonging or not belonging to a molecule in relation to their proximity to one another; but such molecules are defined not by material qualities but rather more so as entities whose materiality is purposefully suspended.³⁵ Thus, they compare “verbal particles” to “food alimentary” particles that in a schizophrenic’s actions enter into proximity with one another.

Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking is useful in the sense that I attempt not only to accentuate proximal relations among categorically differentiated entities (across lines of animacy), but equally to emphasize the insistent segregations of “material” into intensified condensations (affective intensities) of race, geography, and capital. In this light, the toxicities tied to heavy metals function as a kind of “assemblage” of biology, affect, nationality, race, and chemistry. And yet, their analysis leaves little room for distinctions between “actual” and “abstract,” particularly in their creative distinction between molecularity and molarity. Thus, I find it useful to hold on to a certain concrete materiality here, insofar as it offers a potentially critical purchase for thinking through queer relating and racialized transnational feeling, and further because mere metaphors, as we have seen, can sometimes overlook their own effectivity in literal fields.³⁶

Queering Intimacy

There is a potency and intensity to two animate or inanimate bodies passing one another, bodies that have an exchange—a potentially queer exchange—that effectively risks the implantation of injury. The quality of the exchange may be at the molecular level, airborne molecules entering the breathing apparatus, molecules that may or may not have violent bodily effects; or the exchange may be visual, the meeting of eyes unleashing a series of pleasurable or unpleasurable bodily reactions, chill, pulse rush, adrenaline, heat, fear, tingling skin. The necessary condition for toxicity to be enlivened—proximity, or

intimacy—means that queer theories are especially rich for thinking about the affects of toxicity. At the same time, queer theories can further benefit from the lessons of disability theory, particularly by re-thinking its own others.

Thinking and feeling with toxicity invites us to revise, once again, the sociality that queer theory has in many ways made possible. As a relational notion, toxicity speaks productively to queer-utopian imagining and helps us revisit the question of how and where subject-object dispositions should be attributed to the relational queer figure. But even further, queer theory is an apt home for the consideration of toxicity, for I believe the two—queerness and toxicity—have an affinity. They truck with negativity, marginality, and subject-object confusions; they have, arguably, an affective intensity; they challenge heteronormative understandings of intimacy. Both have gotten under the skin. Yet queer theory’s attachment to certain human bodies and other human objects elides from its view the queer socialities that certain other, nonhuman intimacies portend. What are the exceptionalisms that can haunt such theorizing?

Let us revisit the scene from the previous chapter of the child who inappropriately licks his lead-toxic painted train, the scene that is constantly conjured as one that must be avoided at all costs. The mobility of ingestible air and the nonemptiness of that air demonstrate that the act of lead licking is a fantasy of exception. It is not only a fantasy that not-licking is a viable way to contain heterosexuality in its bounds, but it is also a fantasy that not-licking is a viable way to contain the interconstitution of people and other people, or people and other objects. Look closely at your child’s beloved, bright-red train: you may choose to expel it from your house, for the toxins that the sight of it only hints at; but you will pay the cost of his proper entrainment. What fingers have touched it to make it so? How will you choose to recover your formerly benign feelings about this train? Love has somehow to rise above the predetermined grammar of such encounters, for the grammar itself predicts only negative toxicity.

So how is it that so much of this toxic world, in the form of perfumes, cleaning products, body products, plastics, all laden with chemicals that damage us so sincerely, is encountered by so many of us as benign or only pleasurable? How is it, even more, that we are doing this, doing all this, to ourselves? And yet, even as the toxins themselves spread far and wide, such a “we” is a false unity. There is a relation-

ship between productivity's queers (not reproductivity's queers, that is) and hidden, normative intoxications.

Those who find themselves on the underside of industrial "development" bear a disproportionate risk, as environmentalists and political economy scholars alike have shown.³⁷ In her article "Akwesasne: Mohawk Mother's Milk and PCBs," environmental justice activist Winona LaDuke describes a multipronged activist project led by the Mohawk midwife and environmentalist Katsi Cook.³⁸ Cook developed the "Mother's Milk" PCB-monitoring breast milk project, begun in 1984 and ongoing today, in response to the demonstrated toxic levels of PCBs on the Akwesasne reservation, which straddles the border between the United States and Canada and is located very close to a primary emitter of PCBs, a General Motors site established in 1957 which is now a Superfund site. This proximity—and GM's improper disposal practices—meant that both the St. Lawrence River and the Akwesasne wells, the sources of water on which the Mohawks relied, had toxic concentrations of PCBs. Indeed, Akwesasne is one of the most highly polluted Native American reservations.

Cook emphasizes strengthening women's health so that their critical role as the "first environment" of babies be taken seriously for existing and future bodily toxicity. These molecular intimacies—particles passed on via breast milk to babies—are implicated in regimes of gendered labor and care. Cook's activism connects the poisoning of the turtles to the fate of the Mohawks in a cosmology that reiterates the shared potency of live turtles and earthly support. Turtles are critically important in the Mohawk cosmology, which connects them to the earth itself; LaDuke mentions that North America is called "Turtle Island," which comes from a common Native American origin story. Such a cosmology does not depend, for instance, on the narrow ecology of edibles that informs mainstream U.S. food safety advocacy (wherein bigger animals eat smaller animals, a logic that articulates the threat of ocean fish to humans). It serves as a reminder that to the degree that mainstream animacy frameworks have become dominant law, such law could potentially be recodified if the animate orders on which it depends were interrupted. The interruptions demand recognizing the contradictions within matter itself—whether through accepting that worldviews (and their cosmologies) are legitimately contestable, especially in a time of problematization and retrenchment diagnosed as "posthuman," or through revitalized understandings of

matter's own complexity that can cross the discursive boundaries of science.

Cosmologies, of course, are as much written into Western philosophies as they are in Akwesasne cultures, and the life and death hidden within their objects has a binding effect on their theoretical impulse. In her important book *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed gives extensive, unabashed attention to tables, at one point writing extensively about her "orientation" (in a larger discussion of sexuality and orientations) toward a table of hers and that table's orientation toward her. She writes, "we perceive the object as an object, as something that 'has' integrity, and is 'in' space, only by haunting that very space; that is, by co-inhabiting space such that the boundary between the co-inhabitants of space does not hold. The skin connects as well as contains. . . . Orientations are tactile and they involve more than one skin surface: we, in approaching this or that table, are also approached by the table, which touches us when we touch it."³⁹ Ahmed works here with an important and profound assertion by Maurice Merleau-Ponty that sensory engagement binds sensing and sensed objects to one another; in this way, my skin is simultaneously the skin of the world. Yet, if we were to stretch this intercorporeality further, it appears that Ahmed still presumes the proper integrity of her body and of the table, an exclusion of molecular travel that permits her to position one thing against another. Ahmed is talking mainly about the perception of integrity; but I wonder what happens when percepts are to some degree bypassed, for instance, by the air itself. When physically copresent with others, I ingest them. There is nothing fanciful about this. I am ingesting their exhaled air, their sloughed skin, and the skin of the tables, chairs, and carpet of our shared room.

Ahmed's reading thus takes the deadness and inanimacy of that table as a reference point for the orientation of a life, one in which the table is moved according to the purposes and conveniences of its owner. And while it would be unfair to ask of her analysis something not proper to its devices, I do wonder how this analysis might change once the object distinctions between animate and inanimate collapse, when we move beyond the exclusionary zone made up of the perceptual operands of phenomenology. The affective relations I have with a couch are not made out of a predicted script and are received as no different from those with animate beings, which, depending on the perspective, is both their failing and their merit.

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My question then becomes: What is lost when we hold tightly to that exceptionalism which says that couches are dead and we are live? For would not my nonproductivity, my nonhuman sociality, render me some *other* human's "dead," as certainly it has, in case after case of the denial of disabled existence, emotional life, sexuality, or subjectivity? And what is lost when we say that couches must be cathected differently from humans? Or when we say that only *certain* couches as they are used would deserve the attribution of a sexual fetish? These are only questions to which I have no ready answers, except to declare that those forms of exceptionalism no longer seem very reasonable. Indeed, the literary scholar John Plotz's careful review essay on new trends in materiality theories, "Can the Sofa Speak? A Look at Thing Theory," itself never arrives at confronting the possibility of the sofa's speech, seeming to presume that the question of sofas remains at the level of humorous titular play, no explanation needed.⁴⁰

It seems that animacy and its affects are mediated not by whether you *are* a couch, a piece of metal, a human child, or an animal, but by how holistically you are interpreted and how dynamic you are perceived to be. Stones themselves move, change, degrade over time, but in ways that exceed human scales. Human "patients" get defined, via their companion technologies, as inanimate, even as they zip right by you in a manual wheelchair. And above and beyond these factors related to the power of interpretation and stereotype, there is the strict physicality of the elements that travel in, on, and through us, and sometimes stay. If we ingest each other's skin cells, as well as each other's skin creams, then animacy comes to appear as a category itself held in false containment, insofar as it portends exteriorized control relationships rather than mutual imbrications, even at the most material levels. Nancy Tuana, reading New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in terms of interactionist ontology, writes, "There is a viscous porosity of flesh—my flesh and the flesh of the world. This porosity is a hinge through which we are of and in the world. I refer to it as viscous, for there are membranes that affect the interactions."⁴¹ Furthermore, the toxicity of the queer to the heterosexual collective or individual body, the toxicity of the dirty subjects to the hygienic State, the toxicity of heavy metals to an individual body: none of these segregations perfectly succeeds even while it is believed with all effort and investment to be effective.

In perhaps its best versions, toxicity does not repel but propels queer

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loves, especially once we release it from exclusively human hosts, disproportionately inviting dis/ability, industrial labor, biological targets, and military vaccine recipients—inviting loss and its "losers" and trespassing containers of animacy. We need not assign the train-licking boy of the previous chapter so *surely* to the nihilistic underside of futurity or to his own termination, figurative or otherwise. I would be foolish to imagine that toxicity stands in for "utopia" given the explosion of resentful, despairing, painful, screamingly negative affects that surround toxicity. Nevertheless, I am reluctant to deny the queer productivity of toxins and ~~toxicity~~, a productivity that extends beyond an enumerable set of addictive or pleasure-inducing substances, or to neglect (or, indeed, ask after) the pleasures, the loves, the rehabilitations, the affections, the assets that toxic conditions induce. Unlike viruses, toxins are not so very containable or quarantinable; they are better thought of as conditions with effects, bringing their own *affects* and animacies to bear on lives *and* nonlives. If we move beyond the painful "antisocial" effects to consider the sociality that is present there, we find in that sociality a reflection on extant socialities among us, the queer-inanimate social lives that exist beyond the fetish, beyond the animate, beyond the pure clash of human body sex.

Affective Futures

A chapter on mercurial affect would not be complete without some accounting for autism. While autism's etiology remains controversial, a significant number of accounts tie childhood autism to the neurotoxicity of environmental mercury, with much attention to vaccines.⁴² (This is surely not true of all accounts. Some people, including Amanda M. Baggs, who appears later, explicitly disavow it.) Environmental mercury occurs in two forms, inorganic and organic (methyl) mercury. Much of the debate has occurred over whether the inorganic form of mercury is toxic to human bodies. Much of the noncontroversial, undebated alarm about mercury toxicity has focused on fish, which are not damaged by methyl mercury, even as they accumulate it; once ingested, methyl mercury is toxic to human beings. However, many have claimed that the inorganic form of mercury can be converted partially by the human body into the organic form. The classic developmental understanding of autism does not conform to the popular understanding of "mercuriality," most com-

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monly associated with Minamata or “mad hatter’s syndrome.” Mercuriality focuses on adult responses to mercury intoxication, which by definition are not about child development. My invocation of autism in relation to “mercurial affect” here is not a closed one and is most certainly not a theory. It is a purposeful inclusion in a history that has yet to be told, and is hence, as I write today, to a certain degree experimental. The inclusion is part of my attempt to plumb the connections between toxic elements and toxic bodies; that is, bodies which are deemed “sick” are either seen as affected by toxic elements to the point of entering disability categories or are themselves considered a polluting scourge upon human normative securities.

To begin, I revisit a question I posed at the end of chapter 2: what are the possibilities of rejoinder, of response, for those considered nonsubjects or errant subjects? For it has not escaped me that there is an ironic, yet all too true, possibility of reading medicalization into the descriptive linguistics terminology for the components of actions. Verbal actions are described as being executed by *agents* and performed on *patients*. As a linguist, I can use this jargon with pleasure and the excitement of precision. Yet its use also sometimes hurts, because in conventional use, the noun *patient* refers to an object of Western medical treatment. The linguist Suzanne Fleischman writes that Western biomedical discourse on disease “tends to cast the sufferer in the role of a passive substrate, or medium, on which the more interesting player in the game, the disease, operates.”⁴³ Hence, disabled and ill people, particularly given their medicalized locations in U.S. society, occupy a rather strict container and a subhuman locus on animacy hierarchies; that is, *other* humans “operate on” these ones. Here I examine not only the possibilities for simple rejoinder—being a subject of one’s own expression—but for a challenge to the very animacy hierarchy, which is simultaneously an ontology of affect.

I turn first to perhaps the best-known spokesperson for autism, Temple Grandin, whose self-representation speaks to the animacy hierarchy in a very interesting way, for it is both rendered in first-person experience and explained using discourses of science. Grandin gained fame precisely through her accomplishments in animal welfare, including descriptions of how nonhuman animals think and feel, and her autobiographical accounts of living with autism. In an extraordinarily communicative book, and in interviews and other writings, Grandin expresses precisely the ambivalence reported by many

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people with autism and Asperger’s regarding their “human” expressibility: that while she may communicate very well, this is a skill she has had to learn through unusual means, and that the most natural and consonant communication for her occurs with nonhuman animals (which, perhaps contrary to expectation, she calls simply *animals*).⁴⁴ Though she does not herself claim this, Grandin’s work makes possible the insight that a turn toward nonhuman animals need not be considered itself an antisocial turn, and that people with autism need not be thought of as antisocial. Rather, Grandin traces a set of positive relations among autistic people and nonhuman animals.

Nor are all autistic people’s claims merely about communalisms, kinship, or affection with nonhuman animals. A plethora of scholarship, expressive arts, and reported experience speak to a greater significance of inanimate objects than is normatively expected. The activist and writer Amanda M. Baggs has, as part of her work articulating a neurodiversity framework, made and circulated several videos in which she “translates” her experience of the world for a nonautistic viewership. In 2007, Baggs created a video titled “In My Language.” The YouTube video is accompanied with an explanation that the video’s purpose is not to do a “look-at-the-autie peep gawking freakshow”—a constant risk for disabled people’s self-expression—but a “statement about what gets considered thought, intelligence, personhood, language, and communication, and what does not.”⁴⁵ The first part, Baggs annotates, is “in my language” and consists only of her vocal, touch, and hearing sense interactions with objects in the context of her apartment: metal chains, staplers, plastic Slinkies, door handles, dresser knobs, paper, books. The second part is a “translation, or at least an explanation,” for English readers: overlaid on Baggs’s interactions with more objects, lines of text appear on the screen that are simultaneously automated as computerized text-to-speech. (A dog often appears in the background.) Significantly for this chapter, the video represents to me an important juncture between expressibility commensurable with normative human language and expressed distance from that normativity. Baggs points out two critical ironies within mainstream beliefs that hinge attributions of personhood and proper sociality on material practices, specifically interactions with things:

Far from being purposeless / the way that I move / is an ongoing response to what is around me. / Ironically, the way that I move /

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when responding to everything around me / is described as “being in a world of my own” / whereas if I interact with a much more limited set of responses / and only react to a much more limited part of my surroundings / people claim that I am / “opening up to true interaction with the world.” . . . However the thinking of people like me / is only taken seriously / if we learn your language, / no matter how we previously thought or interacted. . . . It is not enough to look and listen / and taste and smell and feel, / I have to do those to the right things / such as look at books / and fail to do them to the wrong things / or else people doubt I am a thinking being / and since their definition of thought / defines their definition of personhood / so ridiculously much / they doubt that I am a real person as well.

Baggs thus very effectively reverses the given economies of language and affect. The transobjective tack is subtly suggested by the notion that her relationality with objects could be interrupted by an exclusive focus on human sociality, indeed that such relations might be somehow *enabled* by the absence of attention to human sociality. The lesson I take from this passage is that we would be well advised not simply to denounce Baggs’s transobjectivity as problematic from some normative perspective, but rather to ask what it might mean of objects, what it might say of humanness and the ways it must push on the carefully guarded subjectivities proper to the human. Furthermore, to pathologize such object relationships out of hand would also be to pathologize a great many kinds of long-standing, but politically suppressed, cosmologies. These include the Potawatomi world-relating mentioned in chapter 1 and other cosmologies dubbed *indigenous* that are less characterized by a categorical, stringent attachment to human exclusivity.

Examining relationships between people with illness, or autism, and inanimate objects is not without its risks, for it can easily resemble—or be taken up as—a repathologization or a validation of pathologization. That is to say, while these relationships are important to recognize, they should not be unreflectively used to naturalize such people and objects to lower positions on hierachalized animacy scales, while normative positions themselves are renaturalized to the top. For example, Licia Carlson observes that human intellectual disability is commonly brought up in arguments about speciesism and in general populates philosophical arguments about animals; thus, the

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intellectually disabled are unthinkingly used to populate “the face of the beast” in more than glancing terms.⁴⁶ My own belonging in this human-object field of recognition (as someone, for instance, whose illness brought me into renewed and vitalized intimacies with inanimate objects) does not shed me of responsibility for asking what it is I am doing, what is the status of my example, and how to move toward, not away from, justice in my use of an archive.

But I also draw—perhaps surprisingly—from the affective politics of Ann Cvetkovich’s important work on lesbian cultures of trauma. Writing about therapeutic work on incest and its tendency to carefully disavow any possible relationship between incest and lesbianism, she asks, “But why can’t saying that ‘sexual abuse causes homosexuality’ just as easily be based on the assumption that there’s something right, rather than something wrong, with being lesbian or gay?”⁴⁷ I do not mean to conflate incest, queerness, or disability so much as to use this moment to think about the affective politics—with and without scholarship—of desiring the canonically undesired: desiring disability, desiring queerness, desiring objects. As Robert McRuer and Abby Wilkerson write, there is a special resistant sense of “desiring disability,” unlike fetishizations of disability, that embraces “practices that would work to realize a world of multiple (desiring and desirable) corporealities interacting in nonexploitative ways.”⁴⁸ Ultimately, Baggs makes desiring disability possible not only by articulating such relatedness through a visual modality that disidentifies with the gestural tropes of “severe disability,” but by simultaneously releasing the hold of an ableist language fully dependent on strict animacy hierarchies that are assimilated and are reasonably legitimate only for a very specific set of people.⁴⁹ It is a crip-theoretical text.⁵⁰

Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay, a South Indian immigrant to the United States who has published poetry and narrative articulations of his autism experience from an early age, participates in this debate in a direct way. Among the objects taking importance in his learning world is a long mirror, with which he remains in dialogue. Later, he writes, “The curtains that moved in the wind, the big and small leaves that moved a little more with the air because of their suspended positions, the little bits of paper, or the pages of an open book under a fan were classified as autistic. They were affected with autism because they flapped, because they would not respond to any blocks, because they did not talk, and I was sure that they would not be able to imitate the clinical psychologist.”⁵¹

Mukhopadhyay applies a status mobility to objects that might not otherwise be their province for a neurotypical thinker. It is not, Mukhopadhyay asserts, irrelevant to think that a curtain might be autistic too. The normative “violation” Mukhopadhyay commits is to refuse the animate locatability of autism toward those objects and to remember that it is only a *possibility*, not a given. Mukhopadhyay’s writing simply disregards the sure pathologization of the transobjective worlds that some autisms engage. To loosen the pathologizing ties that bind normalcy to normalcy, or nonnormalcy to nonnormalcy, in human object worlds is to reassert the status mobilities of “humans,” “animals,” and “objects” in the many worlds they populate.

Let me say more about a particular object—a stone—as it has been encoded and applied to human sexualities. Within butch or femme lesbian culture, being “stone” or “stone butch” is a particular erotic and sexual formation. It does not suggest an outright lack of agency or power—as an animate hierarchy might predict—but a particular sexual economy of affect in which the butch’s sexual pleasure can emerge from the touch instigated by her, whereas she prefers not to be touched by her lover. The stoneness of butch can also refer to the masculinities of expressive life for butches: feelings held in, the appearance of unfeeling. “Being stone” is thus not merely a queer affect; it also tugs at and traverses the animacy hierarchy’s affective economy with regard to both feeling and touch.⁵² “Stones in My Pockets, Stones in My Heart,” Eli Clare’s early discussion of trans and butch locations, sexual abuse, and the importance of telling troubled histories for movement politics, can be read as shadowed by the affective print of stone butch, offering us a relation between the feeling and being of butch into the material forms of stones: stones in the pocket warmed by Clare’s hands, stones in the heart, stones lying together in an array.⁵³

Clare wrote in this essay as a female-bodied person searching for places between butch and trans: “I turn my pockets and heart inside out, set the stones—quartz, obsidian, shale, agate, scoria, granite—along the scoured top of the wall I once lived behind, the wall I still use for refuge. They shine in the sun, some translucent to the light, others dense, solid, opaque. I lean my body into the big unbreakable expanse, tracing which stones need to melt, which will crack wide, geode to crystal, and which are content just as they are.”⁵⁴ The stones are of Clare’s heart (integral) and in Clare’s pocket (exterior); Clare is

and is not stone; Clare is and is of stone. Rather than considering the stones as simple structuring metaphor, we can read this piece as one about an intimate co-relation, one defined by both integrality and proximity, in which the stones—their multiple and variant, diversely opaque or translucent—also feel, need, shift, transform. Their draw to Clare, and Clare’s engagement with them, complete a kind of environmental assemblage, of names, expression, subcultures, affects, prosthesis, material existence, and being.

It is simply wrong to say that, for instance, people with autism and stone butches—both of whom are popularly depicted as lacking emotion—are “affectless.” Neither the untouchability that some people with autism possess (for instance, many people with autism describe it as an overwhelming surfeit of sensory information), nor the sexual untouchability of certain butch-identified women need be thought of as a construction of self in response to a historical trauma. Yet touching by others in spite of an orientation of not being touched can be experienced as traumatic. J. Jack Halberstam aptly points out that stone butchness is often wrongly popularly portrayed as a pathological state of femaleness, while men, for instance, who do not wish to be penetrated are simply viewed as normal.⁵⁵ Extending this point further, we might imagine that to the extent that sexual or abled identities rely on particular histories, those histories should not be so stably sutured to definitions of physical or sexual harm’s own historicity. A definition of harm that is reliant on the possibility of present or imminent injury, rather than reliant on a vision of reiterations of past trauma that defines a person’s pathology or disability, locates hurt, like Clare’s stones, ambivalently: both inside and outside of the body, both inside and outside of the self, both in sociopolitical structure and in the individual instance.

But what is a toxic body, after all? How can we reconceptualize a harmful body when our bodies are themselves deemed harmful to others? It is useful here to turn to queer theory’s uptake of the toxic, where it retained a certain resonance and a certain citational pull. Eve Sedgwick’s use of *toxic* to describe an *expellable* interiority (one that shameful elements are not, since they are proper terms of one’s identity) is taken up in Muñoz’s *Disidentifications* to refer to discursively toxic elements, the “toxic force” of illicit desire, and images and stereotypes toxic to identity, all uses that seem to repeat Sedgwick’s ultimately exterior, or alienated, quality of toxicity.⁵⁶ For Muñoz, dis-

identification represents the willing uptake of toxic elements to pose new figurations of identity and minoritarian-majoritarian politics.

Taking Muñoz's suggestions further, and taking toxicity's ontological shape-shifting from mercury to traumatic sociality seriously, I believe that we can, in a sense, claim toxicity as already "here," already a truth of nearly every body, and also as a biopolitically interested distribution (the deferral of toxic work to deprivileged or already "toxic subjects"). Such a distribution, in its failure to effectively segregate, leaks outside of its bounds to "return," and it might allow a queer theoretical move that readily embraces, rather than refuses in advance, heretofore unknown reflexes of raciality, gender, sexuality, (dis-)ability.⁵⁷ In assuming both individual and collective vulnerability, it suggests an ulterior ethical stance.⁵⁸ If we were to release toxicity from its own stalwart anti-ness, its ready definition as an unwelcome guest, it has the possibility to intervene into the binary between the segregated fields of "life" and "death," vitality and morbidity. Toxicity straddles boundaries of "life" and "nonlife," as well as the literal bounds of bodies (quite independently of toxicity's immunitary representation), in ways that introduce a certain complexity to the presumption of integrity of either lifely or deathly subjects.

Using the worldly ontologies described earlier, we might consider reframing the terms of intimacy itself, so that it might not be restricted to operating between only human or animate entities. *Intimacy* is, furthermore, temporalized, in the sense that it is cognate with *intimation*. Intimacy might be thought of as a temporalized notion insofar as it might provide a hint or prediction of the future. In these final paragraphs, I connect the "aberrant" socialities implicated within discourses of toxicity to those suggested in queer (political) futures. What futurity might such a present suggest, particularly if we read these futures back into politically sexualized and racialized maps of desirability and repulsion? Here I draw inspiration from the feminist disability theorist Alison Kafer, whose book theorizes a queer-crip approach to disability, one that, in its disentangling of the discourses of morbidity and sexual exile that contain and fix dis/abled bodies, refuses the "grim imagined futures" associated with them and moves toward a resolutely optimistic futurity.⁵⁹

According to J. Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place*, above and beyond the temporal closures and fissures wrought by (the U.S. advent of) AIDS, the queer life narrative necessarily has a trajectory very

different from heterosexual, heteronormative, reproductive time.⁶⁰ Such a notion of queer time can be worked to emphasize its racial and gendered dimensions. On the "racial" dimension of time, or racialized temporality, David Eng has argued that it was Freud's attempt to negate the primitive that fundamentally motivated and underlaid his developmental narrative of sexuality, as well as his rendering of homosexuality.⁶¹ The idea that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny replicates itself teleologically in science and in public life alike, for instance, in the notion that child is to adult as primitive is to modern. Thus, the animalization of (queer) children cannot be divorced from the vote-bearing African American figure in the nineteenth-century *Harper's Weekly* cartoon considered in chapter 3. Interracial frameworks—whether human or animal or stone (which bears the mark of "nature")—are constantly haunted by the possibility of anachronism. Within global capitalism's racialized arrangements of labor, the racially marked body in the contemporary or modernist moment is a "freaky" subject of unacceptable temporal transit. It is not coincidental that in the United States the animality of childhood, in which a child represents an animalizable early evolutionary stage, is the only (marginally) acceptably queer one.

Thus, both queer and racial temporalities are a kind of shimmering presence. They are less easily bound to capital or to any other regimented time; or perhaps we could say that the time of capital is also no longer in the form it might have once been. And so queer and racially marked bodies are present (that is, in the present time) but *strangely* so, embracing anachronism and "touching the past" (to evoke the historian Carolyn Dinshaw).⁶²

Heather Love suggests in her introduction to *Feeling Backward*, an exploration of literary texts that circle around queer suffering, that the contemporary juncture of affect studies and queer studies is attentive to the possibility that it is presently at a turning point, asking how to articulate or assume a queer political vision (within and beyond scholarship) that must do something with its history of shame, stigma, embarrassment, and pain. She describes this as "the emphasis on damage in queer studies."⁶³ Recent work has engaged a turn toward the embrace of acknowledgment of abjection as a site of work and healing in domains such as literature, the creative arts, and sexual practices, particularly in relation to queer of color proximities to racial abjection. Juana María Rodríguez theorizes the importance of politi-

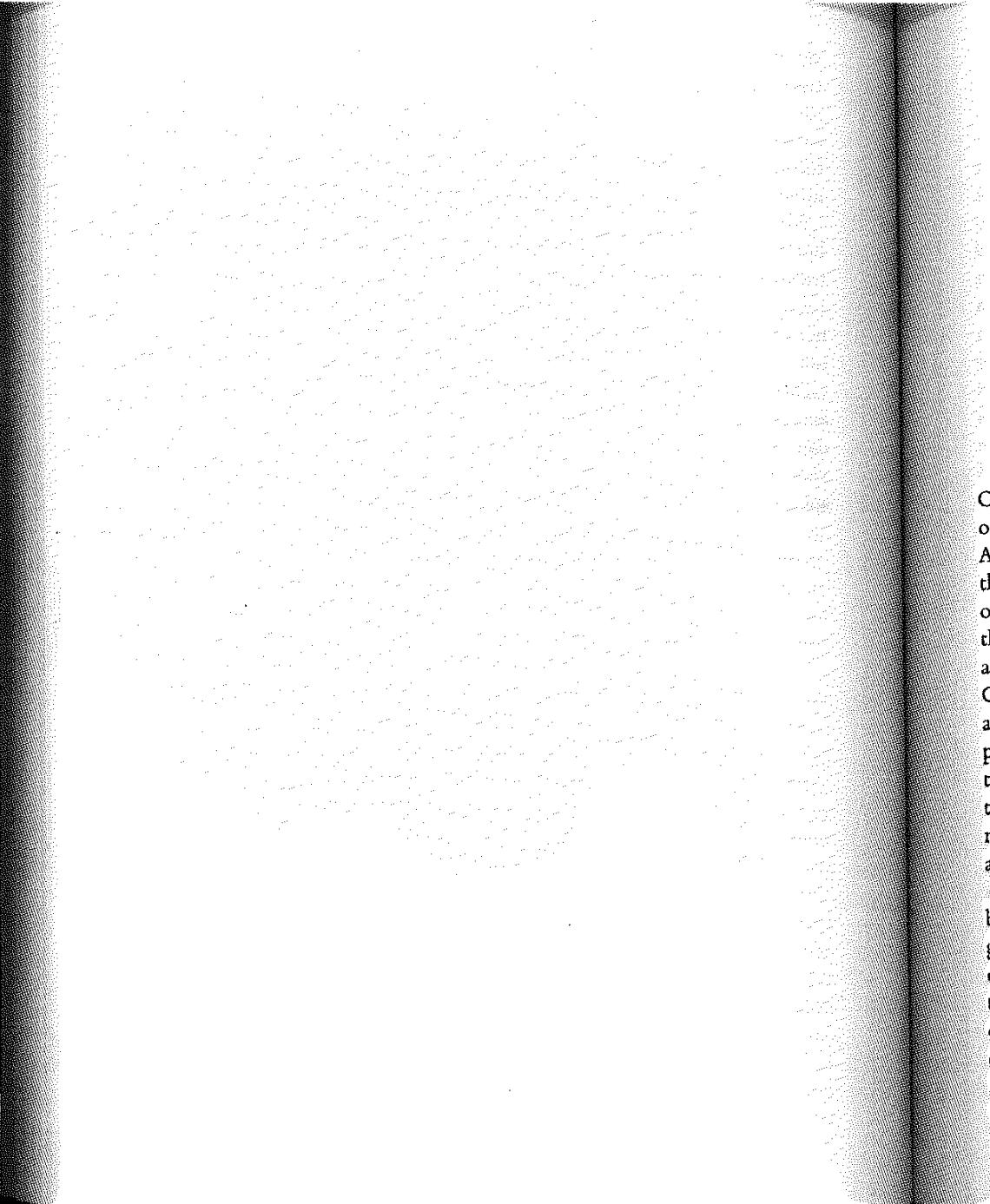
cally incorrect desire, exercised in sexual fantasy, as one kind of utopic practice: she advises that “we must learn to read submission and service differently,” even if—or as—we find ourselves occupying sexual positions written through with painful histories.⁶⁴ Indeed, the antipathy toward submission or service in and of itself does seem to collude too neatly with the autonomous urges of neoliberal culture, and would do well to think through the arguments for interdependence articulated within disability theory and activism.

Toxicity, at least in its mode of “intoxication,” embraces the ambivalent, in Love’s words, “abject/exalted” combination proper to queerness itself. (She even uses the words *damage* and *toxicity* to refer, as Muñoz and Sedgwick do, to the stigmatization of queerness and the painful affects associated with the recuperation of historical texts that represent “tear-soaked accounts of same-sex desire.”)⁶⁵ Negativity and death, of course, also attach to disabled bodies with terrible regularity, and they appear in different valences. But affective nuances are informative. Ato Quayson’s literary study *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* focuses on doubt: he traces a notion of “skeptical interlocution” through a number of literary works, suggesting that “there is always an anticipation of doubt within the perceptual and imagined horizon of the disabled character in literature, and that this doubt is incorporated into their representation.”⁶⁶ Quayson’s study suggests a complication of sociality by a negating affect.

In view of the attempts of these works to suggest a future politics, or the recommendations for politics that might be extracted from them, toxic affect is certainly not suggested as a panacea. It is a (re-)solution to the question of what to do with the ambivalence of queerness only to the extent that it does not represent a choice: it is *already here*, it is not a matter of queer political agency so much as a queered political state of the present. If toxicity is ambivalently constructed by a barely tenable political community, that fragility is not acknowledged. Nevertheless, an uptake, rather than a denial of, toxicity seems to have the power to turn a lens on the anxieties that produce it and allow for a queer knowledge production that gives some means for structural remedy while not abandoning a claim to being just a little bit “off.” The growing acknowledgment of a shared condition of toxicity within the United States—not only in terms of citing numbers of toxins present in people’s bodies, toxins whose hospitality toward the body is uncertain (or toward whom the body doesn’t know whether it

should be hospitable), but also in terms of the resigned acknowledgement that toxic assets were part of the fabric of U.S. capitalism—is not just evidence of a fall, or a radical shifting of political and economic fortunes. It is also evidence that the interstices of the otherwise suffocating cultures of neoliberalism may be engaged, productive, and immensely meaningful.

Thus, toxicity, as a queer thing or affect, both is and is more than horizon, which is unpredictable and, furthermore, synchronically traceable only to the extent that we not remain ontologically faithful. Toxicity fails over and again to privilege rationality’s favorite partner, the *human* subject, rather defaulting to chairs, couches, and other sexual orientations, but we might be wrong to disavow its claim to rationality altogether. If we let affect fall to object life, or to the inter-animation that surrounds us, one example of which toxicity illuminates very precisely, then perhaps there is a chance to take up (not revive, as it is far from “old and tired”) *queer* as something both like itself and yet also entirely different.



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The Spill and the Sea

On September 19, 2010, the oil well in the Macondo Prospect region of the Gulf of Mexico—which had ruptured five months earlier, on April 20, spilling an estimated two hundred million barrels of oil into the Gulf—was finally declared to be sealed. This closure led to a wave of relief that the threat had somehow been contained, and that further pollution of the Gulf would no longer occur (at least not at such an uncontrollable pace). The next day, the spill’s National Incident Commander, Thad Allen, acknowledged in an interview that “we’re actually negotiating how clean is clean,” going on to explain that this phrase was “a euphemism we use at the end of an oil spill to say, is there anything else we can do? And, sometimes, there will still be oil there, but then the agreement is that there can be no more technical means applied to it, and we’re all going to agree that this one is done as far as what we can do.”¹

Allen concluded the interview with a lively mixture of metaphors: both immediate “cleanup” and long-term “recovery” should be the goal; the residents of the coast have had “a lot of stuff laid at their door” and they “have a way of life that has been threatened down there.” It was unclear whether “recovery” meant the health of the Gulf or the economic well-being of the human residents of the Gulf, but clearly some kind of affliction was implied. Of course, metaphors of health and treatment have a peculiar history in national economic discourses; consider the phrase *shock therapy* (commonly associated with

the economist Jeffrey Sachs) used to describe a radical economic reform in the direction of free markets, deregulation, and public disinvestment.²

More often than not, articulations of the oil's danger, or the oil dispersant's toxicity (untested at such quantities), to sea creatures were made not for their sake but for the purpose of identifying a risk to an economic source of "livelihood" for the human professional residents of the U.S. Gulf shores, the fishermen and fisherwomen and the economy built around them. Many of the fishermen and -women (though it is unclear how many, and it is hard to disentangle such language from locally controlled BP media interests) were content to rely on their symbiotic relationship to their local environment, using cash payments and barter systems, and did not see fit to record and report income to the IRS tax system, habits of nonengagement which imperiled their future compensation by BP. In interviews with those workers, however, the distinction between "sources of revenue" and "living beings" was often blurred; their expressed pain did not appear to distinguish between the lost generations of shrimp and their own generativity of income.

The well was one of a newer generation of offshore deep-ocean wells, part of an adventurous effort by state governments and corporations to control heretofore inaccessible domestic resources by supporting deep-sea oil drilling offshore at ever-greater depths. When the well "blew," Allen acknowledged that containment efforts at such depths were "unprecedented," raising questions about what kinds of design principles and fail-safe procedures had been pursued in the case of the newer deep-well ventures. The politics of ownership of the well and its products and the responsibility for the spill's casualties are extremely complex, as with virtually any transnational projects involving property. While the Macondo well itself is owned by BP, the Exclusive Economic Zone where the Macondo Prospect was located is a geocapital entity that extends spatially into waters defined as "international" while retaining U.S. control over marine resources.³ Additionally, BP was working with a leased drilling rig, the Deepwater Horizon, as well as subcontracting with Halliburton Energy Services, which was responsible for establishing the seal over the well. Under BP's directive, the seal process was hastened and security measures were reduced (some against Halliburton's recommendations). Due to an inappropriate seal, methane gas escaped and flew up the drill col-

umn, exploding upon its rapid expansion into the ship. A faulty blowout preventer failed to cut off the gushing oil that ensued, at the level of an estimated tens of thousands of barrels a day.

Leading up to and following the sealing of the well on September 19, 2010, the news media stuck with extreme regularity to a number of phrases referring to the state of the well: "killed," "killed for good," "dead," "effectively dead," and even "permanently dead." Such deathly—and lively—language was summoned to refer to a situation that was much more complicated and only raised further questions. To what degree was such language strategically used to motivate a wave of transformed affect of relief or newfound security across the United States and beyond, a wave of assurance that the monster had been vanquished?⁴ How and in what sense was the well ever *alive*? Was the well conceivable, in strictly biological terms, as a single living unit? As the well is a general vessel for pools of oil, the burden of living proof then falls on the oil; hydrocarbons, oil's primary constituent, thus continue to comprise the matter of contemporary industrialized energy.

The well's excessive porosity, mainly in the form of a single leaching point, was used to deem its sudden *liveliness*; indeed, the very fact that it was not generally containable rendered it alive, when common conceptions of the living body are that it is generally a contained unit. But if we accept this definition of "alive," then how "dead" was the well upon being sealed? In human cases, physicians declare death under certain precise neural conditions (generally the irreversible ceasing of all brain function), often while certain tissues and organs are still biologically valid. The preoccupation among media and among government and BP representatives with declaring the well "dead" is remarkable. Slippages occur, however, in the category of "dead": even though "effectively dead," the well had not yet been subjected to "plugging and abandonment," in the words of Allen, suggesting that irreversible containment needed to be complemented with a withdrawal of vital engagement.

Working with Allen's articulations of the closing process, we could say that the conceptions animated in the closure of this human-led natural disaster were, on the one hand, life and death and, on the other hand, dirtiness and cleanliness, where "dirtiness" was paired with "death" and "cleanliness" with "life." The pure animation of the oil—until some of it evaporated, and some of it settled, and some of it got consumed by the "naturally occurring" bacteria in the Gulf—

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was dramatized and literalized by video coverage of the spewing drill pipe in the water. Its animacy, spectacular to the degree that it dramatized the uncontrollable shifting or transformation of matter at scales that dwarf and overwhelm human bodies, resembled other “natural disasters” like tornadoes, whose rapid shifting of matter occurs in the air rather than in the water, and even monster and horror movies such as *Godzilla* or *Twister*, whose horrific elements operate similarly as a threat of uncontrollable scale.

Visual and affective politics, and decisions thereof, surrounded the spill and its aftereffects at multiple levels. The people hired to clean up the surface oil included local fishermen in need of replacement income and so-called disaster migrants, largely made up of Latinos who relocate to work at changing disaster sites. We learned, in a few quietly released news stories, that initially the cleanup workers were not only not provided protective respirators but actively forbidden from wearing protective equipment, as reported in at least a few cases. While BP restricted news reporters from being anywhere in the area and should therefore theoretically have been safe from image-based indictment, it still desired any images of the cleanup to show humans free of apparent threat. (For reasons unknown, I was unsuccessful in obtaining permission from BP’s Video Department for the publication of before and after—“alive” and “dead”—images of the Macondo well.) For BP, whatever threat existed seemed to be divided into two irreconcilable domains: any threat to the “environment” was to the aesthetic preservation of the shore, and any threat to “humans” was only economic (that is, the reproductive cycles of some Gulf seafood, the fishing that they depended on for income, might possibly be interrupted). The notion of toxicity, which would have connected these stories, was largely bypassed in favor of the cleavage of these narratives.

Still, clashing layers of disease discourse piled up on one another: the oil that “contaminated” the landscape had to be cleaned up by human workers, and a further contaminant was represented by the dispersants themselves. Human cleanup workers on the surface were being subjected to toxic exposures while “protecting” the contaminated environment. BP’s attitude was that the mere viewing of safety equipment, presumably across the nation, could lead to mass “hysteria,” an unacceptable gendering of a nation already on the (bio-) defense. It is no surprise, somehow, that “dead” and “killed” were recruited to perform a kind of cognitive blanket to augment BP’s ap-

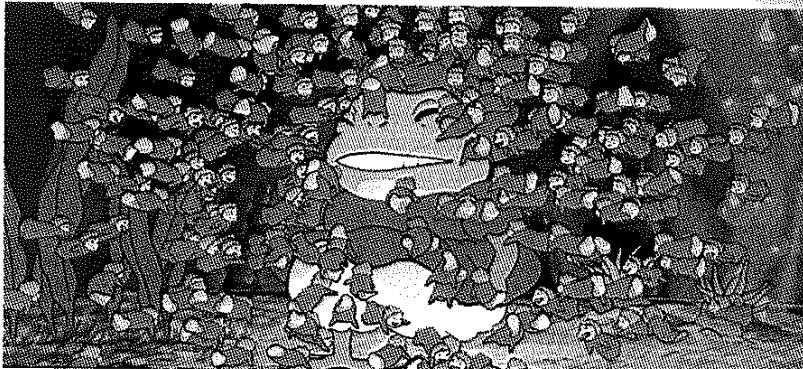
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parent power, control, and masculine righteousness over all forms of matter.

At bottom, the overbearing use of *dead* and *killed* functioned as an admission that a toxic spill was a *lively* thing: lively, perhaps, beyond its proper bounds. The well itself was alive, and not only because something had flowed out of it with such vivid animation. It was a threat to life in the Gulf, as well as to a *way* of life. This occlusion of life over marginal life speaks, as I see it, to the inadequacy of lively notions as a framework for governance, medicine, and vernacular affect and makes room for a concept like animacy, which encodes forces without being beholden to the failing categories of life and nonlife. As I have argued in this book, animacy permits an even more thorough registration of the role of racial, geopolitical, affective, and sexualized politics therein.

This is one vision of a contemporary biopolitical “ending”: the plugged Gulf well, good and dead, no longer a threat to a vulnerable sea. But I do not wish to end here, for the lessons of the Gulf spill feel disingenuous, particularly in a book that has been very much about places and sources of unexpected life. So let us also consider the inhabitants of Hayao Miyazaki’s animated film *Ponyo*, released in 2008, which is, like the BP oil spill catastrophe, a land-water drama, though one revealingly designed as a dreamscape in which “the ocean is a living presence.”⁵ The titular character, Ponyo, is a little fish (ambiguously raced) who desires to become a human and has strong affective ties to a little boy, Setsuke. She is not alone: she has a father, a kind of magician of the ocean who tends to its health by summoning potions which move and transform ocean matter, living or dead; a mother-goddess who seems almost metaphysical in form, but who makes occasional human-size departures; and a whole lot of little sisters who resemble her fish form, but are smaller in size, literally her “little sisters” (figure 19). They are her comfort and support when she is in the ocean. And this sea, as Miyazaki comments, “is animated not as a backdrop to the story, but as one of its principal characters.”⁶ Animation here works in multiple ways: both conjuring animacy and referring to the illustrated style and fantastical figuration of the film itself.

In Miyazaki’s visual narrative, however, the distinction between land and sea is blurred: indeed, it is hardly a hostile relationship or, as in the case of the BP spill, an economic one primarily. The border between land and sea simply shifts upward in the wake of a tsunami—



19. Ponyo's little sisters. *Ponyo* (dir. Hayao Miyazaki, 2008).

induced flood. Miraculously, despite the flood, death seems not what is at stake ("terror" and "contagion" is displaced by "magic," perhaps?), and the anxieties that exist are based on a disparate bunch of concerns, including electricity, protection for the elderly residents of the retirement home, and Setsuke's father being lost at sea. Ultimately, no one is killed; the big fish simply swim along what were formerly roads for automobiles; Setsuke's house remains above water; and the humans have simply remained buoyant, in boats, on the surface. Ponyo's little sisters are the ulterior oil plumes, animated little particles that have shared feelings. Collectively, they are affective matter.

I am reminded here of J. Jack Halberstam's work on animated movies featuring bees. Halberstam observes that animation films which center on bees display alternative political organizations despite not going so far as to observe, for instance, the matriarchal aspect of bee societies. That is, there are moments when more exact investigation of lived animal formations is generative. Halberstam nicely assumes this appropriability of reference not as a means of restoring final honesty to a signifier, but as a means toward political ends, suggesting that if mainstream animation filmmakers did study the lives of actual bees, bee fiction might do better than its currently middling job at representing a kind of feminist or otherwise progressive politics.⁷ The case of Ponyo's little sisters presents an alternative political organization of a hybrid posthuman-goddess-fish family which, in Miyazaki's configuration, is matriarchally structured and, unlike what human pro-

creation predicts, involves a set of hundreds and hundreds of siblings, siblings that are not necessarily the less-autonomous "little sister" deserving of protection.

Miyazaki's Studio Ghibli is known for being judicious about when it takes advantage of the convenience of computer-generated imagery (CGI) technologies, which Halberstam has observed is technology's latest imaginative feat in the representability of enormous collectivities ("hordes") and their accompanying political formations within animation. Ponyo's many little sisters, even if they were so numerous as to make up a "horde," were thus not multiply generated copies of a replicated single sister, launched at different points in her repeating dynamic smiling, speaking, and fluttering actions to induce the perception of difference and individuation. Rather, the supervising animator of the film, Katsuya Kondo, explained:

It wasn't enough just to have a lot of sisters onscreen. Each sister needed to move as an individual character. The scene in which the sisters rescue the half-fish, half-human Ponyo was divided into three stages—beginning, middle, and end—and the assistant animators drew each sister carefully. We didn't use any copies or CG, of course, because everything was drawn by hand this time. While the work was painstaking, it was easier to create the movements of an ensemble by hand than by CG, and we took on this task because we wanted to render those movements to our hearts' content.⁸

The technicality of Kondo's focus on mobility did not mitigate its sweetness to me, for the sisters were "painstakingly" given life one by one to the animators' "hearts' content." The "animation" of Ponyo was enriched by the multiple factors of animacy: sentience, movement, facticity, speech, and action upon something else—as well as the many imaginative animations dreamed up by each creator for which the final embodiment of a single sister was the culmination. Animation is thus the end point of the setting-off of many different animacies; its careful consolidation of these animacies, particularly in the case of Ponyo, is what sets it apart.

In her attempt to transmogrify into a human, Ponyo enters intermediary stages where she sprouts chicken legs (figure 20). She experiences her greatest exhilaration and exuberance at that in-between juncture: that chickenlike embodied site of interstitial land-water and fish-human, rather than a site of confusing or distressing liminality,

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20. Ponyo sprouts chicken legs. *Ponyo* (dir. Hayao Miyazaki, 2008).

yields an intensity easily read to viewers as pleasure. For Ponyo, the promise of humanness exists in spite of all that humans have done.

The fish/chicken/little girl is far from a binary logic; she is a blending that is partial and contingent and enacted across time, yet the blending is simultaneously robust and profound, effective and affective. Both air and seawater are the stuff of blends, the stuff of human, animal, and godly mattering. If lungs no longer critically matter for breathing, then the material difference between air and water also dissolves. The air-seawater is also the stuff of sex, of the sensuous, sensible exchange of breath, fluids, and parts; of meetings and interpenetrations which may be “actual” or “virtual,” within which we need feel no particular responsibility to any exceptional organs; of reproduction, of penetration, of reception, of animacy itself.

Still, “the real world in which matter matters most” inevitably haunts even this promise of gratifying transmogrification. For all its fictive identity as the ostensible setting of an animation film, the “Japan” that quietly informs the villages, personalities, languages, and socialities of Ponyo, as I write in spring 2011, too easily comes up against the Japan that was devastated—in an overwhelming way in Fukushima, Miyagi, and Iwate prefectures, as well as economically and affectively in its national ensemble—by an earthquake-instigated tsunami ranging from eight to twenty meters high on March 11, 2011. The tsunami, engulfing smaller towns in the north of Japan that largely engaged in farming and fishing, disproportionately killed and displaced the elderly,

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putting into aching relief Miyazaki’s rehabilitative image of elderly Japanese who have been submerged by a tsunami cavorting at the bottom of the ocean (to their surprise).

Yet to construe this contemporary and actual tsunami-radiation compound event exclusively in ready terms of failure, loss, and death risks a certain narrowing of imagination (surely justified for many closest to these events) that relies on the dubious construct of “natural disaster” and necessarily prioritizes economy, humans, locality, and national security. Once this kind of narrative is launched, it has only a narrow path that leads to blaming either “the Japanese,” or the bad disaster preparation, or the nuclear industry, or energy dependence, or something else; perhaps there is even a quieter rejoicing at the apparent failure of Japanese industrialism’s grasp on modernity, for all its recent decades of challenge to the United States’s tale of economic dominance. In the opening song to *Ponyo*, “Umi no Okasan” (Mother sea), the lyrics sing of lost unity and beckon a return to the family of countless siblings:

The sea lilies sway
In a world of blue
To brothers and sisters uncountable
We spoke in the bubbly, watery language of the sea
Do you remember when
So very, very long ago
We dwelt there together
Deep in the blue, blue sea?
The jellyfish, the sea urchins, the fish and the crabs
Were our family.⁹

The ending scenes of the film execute this new possible kinship between land and sea with the long-desired transmogrification of *Ponyo* into a human (albeit one who has a memory of being a fish) and the compacting of this transition by an agreement between a human (Sosuke), who agrees to care for her, and *Ponyo*’s mother who commands the sea and makes the transition so. The antinomic controlling magic of *Ponyo*’s waterborne father Fujimoto (an “exhuman”), which allows him to transform and animate (and imprison) all kinds of matter, has been attenuated; in its place, we viewers have been transformed into such magicians of imaginary and imaginative possibility by our very witnessing of the transmogrifications that populate this

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animation film and the gratitude and affection that attends the new unities.

Memory here seems to be both the foundation of togetherness and the target of extinction: Fujimoto's "exhumanness" shifts from its substantive status as a toxic trace in his management of his world to a feckless trace barred from boundary-enforcing potency. At the same time, the memory that constitutes the longing opening song permeates the film: a longing for remembered togetherness can bring about that worldly interanimation which yields the possibility of new relations as well as beloved possibilities. Such contradictory tropes of time provide us with anachronisms not constrained by progressivist "healing," appropriative or recuperative phylogenetic racial longing, but rather by a queer "temporal drag," or the "pull of the past upon the present" (to use Elizabeth Freeman's words), that retains a critical ambivalence about where, what, and who we are.¹⁰

Following the ocean has its lessons, too, and does not necessitate a well-articulated cosmology like Miyazaki's. Nor is it necessary to simply *reverse* the affective response to either delight or numbness, only to attempt to keep labile the affective economies that necessarily subtend modern life, especially in late capitalism when one is considering something like a "natural disaster." "Following the ocean," beyond the histories that oceans keep and the transterritorial human epistemologies they provoke, helps us scramble and interrupt the animacies that are both known and felt at the linguistic level, akin but not limited to the paradigmatic plays of Derrida and the associative games of Gertrude Stein, moving beyond streams of consciousness to the affectively orthogonal disregard for the deeply vested intricacies of "standardness" characteristic of English as a second language.¹¹ And beyond language, it helps us consider the minor, subtle, boundary-leaping memory traces that intoxications leave with us.

Though I began with language in this book, nowhere did I depend upon a dry vision of resignification; rather, I remained attached to a feeling for affect that subtends, exceeds, richly accompanies such otherwise mechanistic understandings of words, animals, and metals. It was against my own expectation for this book that I went back to my roots in linguistics. My explicit return began when I became quite attached to thinking about mobility (for instance, asking to what degree cosmopolitanism played in the uptake of queer theory's transnational objects, or asking after mobility's connection to abled embodi-

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ment). I came to the understanding that different mobilities meant very different things, and that the differences often had something to do with the animacy of the mobile or immobile object. I realized that what might seem a stale debate about *queer*'s seemingly mobile meaning and effectivity could still be richly informed from the perspective of cognitive semantics. If any word's meaning could shift and flex according to its users, what was so special about the senses of *queer*?

While I could not, from this limited perspective, settle the debate of whether *queer* was finally and universally special, I did attempt to explain the reasons why it might be considered special by some. It came down to *queer*'s status as either matterlike (a noun) or something that affected, modified, the meaning, the very materiality, of other things (an adjective, verb, adverb). I began to realize that queerness had everything to do with animacy: it was an operator that shiftily navigated gradations of matter, including things, actions, and sensibilities. At the same moment, I took seriously the lessons of feminist, antiracist, and political-economic assertions that privilege had become solidified into a lexeme that otherwise got a lot of credit for being unfixable.

Privilege has ultimately played multiple roles in this book. For I attended, in some ways disproportionately, to the crafting of worldly matter by privileged beings. Animate hierarchies have settled into their current life as a palimpsest of a long journey through Aristotelian categorizations, Christian great chains of being, Linnaean typologies, biopolitical governances, capitalisms, and historical imperialisms; these are the traces and marks of privileged views upon the world. To the extent these hierarchies have been used to enact zones of deferral, they have produced extraordinary fungibilities of entities in the realms that lie below the white male at the top, the kinds of exchange of matter that allow humans to "be" animals to "be" inanimate objects, while that equally fungible zone of highest privilege has remained largely backgrounded. This is not to say, however, that only the privileged take up these perspectives on the matter around us. For their logics are written into the textures of this world, and our enmeshment within it bespeaks our vexed and often painful complicity. Those of us who can suitably duck them could be said perhaps to access the counterprivileges of biopolitical irrelevance.

Furthermore, my own location with regard to privilege is not lost on me. As much as I track the empire's traces, indelible marks, re-

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gurgitations, phobias, and abandonments—as much as I occupied a place of social toxicity by the genderings and transgenderings, disablments, and racializations that have befallen and become me—I, too, write from the seat and time of empire. I have not forgotten Jacqui Alexander’s prompt ever since I heard it: what can we do as intellectuals within and without academies from the seat of empire, particularly to encounter the problem of the “here and now” versus the “then and there” that colonial and imperial time naturalize?¹² The concept of animacy has functioned for me in this book as one of many diverse and multimodal attempts to reach across this compacted condensation of time-space, always with the awareness that there is so much more to do and to imagine. With an eclectic traversal of objects and affects, this book tracked both the paradoxical naturalizations of animacy hierarchies (for instance, in the form of racialized animal anachronisms) and the rejoinders launched by contemporary animacies (unintended reimaginings of kinship and intense intimacies), only some of which remain in a human domain of disidentification. Some animacies remained quite corrupt; others seemed particularly enlivened by a capacity to romp through, under, and over such hierarchical knowledges. Finally, I claim the “eclectic,” perhaps reflexively, while remaining keenly aware of its role as a disclaimer for exceedingly, rudely feral transdisciplinarity. My archive of apes, theories, turtles, sensoria, cartoons, mercury particles, airborne skin, signifying lexemes, and racialized humans has seemed entirely logical, that is, to *me*; yet the label of “eclecticism” rings true, in my view, from a perspective that is wedded to institutional typologies of intellectual reference and styles of thinking. At the same time, animate affinities *do* bring these bodies together, and that, whether delivered under the protective bandage of “eclectic,” has ultimately been my point.

Animacy hierarchies slip and give, but they do not do so willy-nilly: I have suggested that they slip in particular privileged terms of sexuality, race, and ability, perhaps in part because these are the fragile grounds upon which they have been built in popular ontologies and political cultures in the United States: race because the formation of animal and animality has been enriched by colonial histories; sexuality because the discussions of kind, genre, production, and reproduction with regard to such an ontology inevitably call forth concerns of sexuality broadly conceived; ability because the human body and subject have resolutely been imagined as able-bodied, in a god’s image. My

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conviction that hierarchies are contingent and mobile lies in my sense that their rigidity must be promulgated and not simply rest in truth. Not only, for instance, might stones be multivalent, as both building materials and divine representants in some aspects of Inkan or Japanese cultures,¹³ but they are, despite their mainstream representation as dead and inanimate, dynamic and even moving, changing and shifting at a time scale that seems to outrun human life spans (if we ignore that human bodies themselves are capable of making calcium deposits that are, for all practical purposes, stones) and that lies beyond the narrower time cycles of capitalism. What might it be to take stones as “more than a thing to ignore”?¹⁴

I take inspiration here from the artist, disability rights activist, and animal rights advocate Sunaura Taylor, who writes: “In my life I have been compared to many animals. I have been told I walk like a monkey, eat like a dog, have hands like a lobster, and generally resemble a chicken or penguin. . . . The thing is, they were right. I do resemble a monkey when I walk—or rather I resemble an ape, specifically a chimpanzee. . . . This resemblance is simply true, as is the statement I eat ‘like a dog’ when I don’t use my hands and utensils to eat. These comparisons have an element of truth that isn’t negative—or, I should say that doesn’t have to be negative.”¹⁵ Taylor uses the recognition of this likeness—we might say a being-like—as a basis for a revised ethics. Such radical thingness as stoneness, I insist, can be visited, can be felt, and can have been; if that still seems more plausible than humanness being visited and felt *by* stones (with thanks, say, to humans’ being rendered so pervasively as commodity), I have at least attempted to plumb the boundaries and animate conditions of such orders of plausibility and suggested ways we might divest from such unthought conditions.

In her text “Animation, Apostrophe, and Abortion,” Barbara Johnson writes of the peculiar “animation”—the strange personification—realized in the specific poetic apostrophe form in which the addressee “you” refers to an aborted fetus. She asks: “For if apostrophe is said to involve language’s capacity to give life and human form to something dead or inanimate, what happens when those questions are literalized? What happens when the lyric speaker assumes responsibility for producing the death in the first place, but without being sure of the precise degree of human animation that existed in the entity killed? What is the debate over abortion about, indeed, if not the question of

when, precisely, a being assumes a human form?"¹⁶ I think this question is uncannily reproduced, albeit without a direct lyric addressee, in the animation of things unknown in their proximity to humanness, by their uneven agency, by their uncertain capacity to affect, by their unlikelihood of being "the effector of," by their uncertain possession of (human) life. For all its verbal coherence, with the exception of the interruption of a few pronouns, this book has also been a project of address, not so easily a diagnosable scene in which a living lyric speaker addresses a dead being whose animacy was uncertain, but a scene of engagement in which the "lives" on both sides are beholden to terms unknown. However you—my reader—have read this, I hope we have been engaged, you and I, in rediscovering existing forms of death, or deadness, as much as we have been engaged in the lively absence of life and lively inanimation.

In deploying animacy and its forbidding hierarchies as a central figure in this book, I aimed to move beyond reifying its apparent hierarchical closures. I endeavored to show how animacy tends to hide its own contradictions, the transsubstantiations, the transmutterings that go on underneath, through, and across it: hence, my title *Animacies* is importantly plural. One could go so far as to argue that they are what keep it vital, they are that upon which it depends. However, that being said, I was interested in animacy in a very significant way for its assertion of hierarchical validity, an assertion that is found peppered across discourses of not only mainstream thinking but also science itself. The categorical humanism characteristic of such ontologies is one reason why the call for "new materialisms" has become so urgent. The new materialisms we can pursue are those that not only diagnose the "facts" by which humans are not animals are not things (or by which humans cannot be animals cannot be things), but simultaneously reveal such "facts" to be the real uncanny permeating the world we know. This is the beauty of *Ponyo*: it forgoes tensions borne of uncanniness, promising instead an airy and watery cosmology that animacy hierarchies only begrudgingly admit, one in which communing and transmogrification among unlikely kinds is not exceptional, but normal and unsurprising. Taking in animacy in this way also suggests an alternative means, outside of the strictly political or strictly emotional, to identify cross-affiliations—affinities—among groups as diverse as environmentalists, people with autism, social justice activists, feminists, religious believers in nature's stewardship, and antiracists, to

mention just a few. It is also to refuse prescriptive closures around the possibility of metamorphosis, imaginative or otherwise. Not mimesis or partial-morphosis, but the stuff of transformative commitment. I take to heart the words of the political scientists Noenoe K. Silva and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller when they say that the politics of indigenous sovereignty in Hawaii, given the critical relevance of competing ontologies including animals and landscape objects in which powerful spirits reside, comes down to questions of metamorphosis.¹⁷

These affinities, however, demand fierce sensitivity to their differences. In my own thinking I return often to Trinh T. Minh-ha's ethnographic ethics "not to speak about / Just speak nearby."¹⁸ Well beyond rejecting either secularism or spirituality, I wish for an ethics of care and sensitivity that extends far from humans' (or the Human's) own borders. It is in queer of color and disability/crip circles, neither of which has enjoyed much immunity from the destructive consequences of contemporary biopolitics, that I have often found blossomings of this ethics of care and sensitivity, queerings of objects and affects accompanied by political revision, rewordings that challenge the order of things.

Thinking and feeling critically about animacy encourages opening to the senses of the world, receptivity, vulnerability. My care for a couch may well have stemmed from what some deem pathology, but that does not invalidate it as a peculiar kind of care that may at least truck with the more intensive valence that a couch acquires for one who cannot afford to replace it, and who cleans it; a dog who likes the taste of it and licks it; a relatively wealthy person who, due to some vague charting of proper liberal conduct, tries to give things away before sending them to the landfill; or a person of whatever neurological categorization who runs her finger along a slip of fabric ever so gently. Radical affection does not require intentional politics; and subjectivity itself, with its attendant danger zones of nationalism, individualism, whiteness, and rather anti-animate preference for typology and judgment, need not be core to this account. I seek not to end here with concluding words about animacy's ultimate failure or success, only that it is here and that it has its own regulatory forces which must be accounted for and met. If we must keep company with such ontological closure, it nevertheless remains eminently possible for us to seek out and affirm the wiliness within.