



**MEL Y. CHEN**

# **Animacies**

**Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect**

# Animacies

**PERVERSE MODERNITIES**

*A series edited by Judith Halberstam  
and Lisa Lowe*

# **Animacies**

Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect

**MEL Y. CHEN**

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Yet toads and frogs may not be long for this world. The latest theory involves a destructive fungus, apparently created within particularly benevolent lab conditions where *Xenopus* frogs were being studied; the fungus was distributed globally by the popular trade in *Xenopus* frogs and spread back into various ecosystems by released *Xenopus* and herpetologists themselves in search of undocumented species. I must admit to the possibility of writing into a world in which toads may no longer be near. The style of their disappearance reminds me of the complexities of identity, environment, and transaction, and even of the retroactive "discovery" between a historical trace of material conveyance and a diagnosis of present-day loss. Toads, too, teach me again that toxicities have retrospective temporalities and affects, as do my acknowledgments.

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## Introduction

### Animating Animacy

Recently, after reaching a threshold of “recovery” from a chronic illness—an illness that has affected me not only physically, but spatially, familiarly, economically, and socially, and set me on a long road of thinking about the marriage of bodies and chemicals—I found myself deeply suspicious of my own reassuring statements to my anxious friends that I was feeling more alive again. Surely I had been no *less* alive when I was *more* sick, except under the accountings of an intuitive and immediately problematic notion of “liveliness” and other kinds of “freedom” and “agency.” I felt unsettled not only for reasons of disability politics—for “lively wellness” colludes with a logic that troublingly naturalizes illness’s morbidity—but also because I realized that in the most containing and altered moments of illness, as often occurs with those who are severely ill, I came to know an incredible wakefulness, one that I was now paradoxically losing and could only try to commit to memory.<sup>1</sup>

In light of this observation, I began to reconsider the precise conditions of the application of “life” and “death,” the working ontologies and hierarchicalized bodies of interest. If the continued rethinking of life and death’s proper boundaries yields surprising redefinitions, then there are consequences for the “stuff,” the “matter,” of contemporary biopolitics—including important and influential concepts such as Achille Mbembe’s necropolitics, the “living dead,” and Giorgio Agamben’s “bare life.”<sup>2</sup> This book puts pressure on such biopolitical factors,

*Agamben*

## Introduction

organized around a multipoint engagement with a concept called *animacy*.

*Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* draws upon recent debates about sexuality, race, environment, and affect to consider how *matter* that is considered insensate, immobile, deathly, or otherwise “wrong” animates cultural life in important ways. *Animacies* interrogates how the fragile division between animate and inanimate—that is, beyond human and animal—is relentlessly produced and policed and maps important political consequences of that distinction. The concept of animacy undergirds much that is pressing and indeed volatile in contemporary culture, from animal rights debates to biosecurity concerns, yet it has gone undertheorized. This book is the first to bring the concept of *animacy* together with *queer of color* scholarship, critical animal studies, and *disability theory*.

It is a generative asset that the word *animacy*, much like other critical terms, bears no single standard definition. Animacy—or we might rather say, the set of notions characterized by family resemblances—has been described variously as a quality of agency, awareness, mobility, and liveness.<sup>3</sup> In the last few decades, *animacy* has become a widely debated term within linguistics, and it is in fact within linguistics that animacy has been most extensively developed and applied. A pathbreaking work written in 1976 by the linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein suggested that “animacy hierarchies” were an important area of intersection between meaning and grammar, on the basis of evidence that spanned many languages.<sup>4</sup> Within linguistics today, animacy most generally refers to the grammatical effects of the sentience or liveness of nouns, but this ostensibly simple meaning opens into much wider conversations.

How does animacy work linguistically? To take one popular example involving relative clauses, consider the phrase “the hikers that rocks crush”: what does this mean?<sup>5</sup> The difficulty frequently experienced by English speakers in processing this phrase has much to do with the *inanimacy of the rock (which plays an agent role in relation to the verb crush)* as compared to the animacy of the hikers, who in this scenario play an object role. “The hikers that rocks crush” thus violates a cross-linguistic preference among speakers. They tend to prefer animate head nouns to go with subject-extracted relative clauses (the hikers *who* \_\_ crushed the rock), or inanimate head nouns to go with object-extracted relative clauses (the rock *that the hiker crushed* \_\_). Add

matter  
is  
policed

to this that there is a smaller plausibility that rocks will agentively crush hikers than that hikers will agentively crush rocks: a conceptual order of things, an animate hierarchy of possible acts, begins to take shape. Yet more contentious examples belie the apparent obviousness of this hierarchy, and even in this case, it is within a specific cosmology that stones so obviously lack agency or could be the source of causality. What if nonhuman animals, or humans stereotyped as passive, such as people with cognitive or physical disabilities, enter the calculus of animacy: what happens then?

Using animacy as a central construct, rather than, say, “life” or “liveliness”—though these remain a critical part of the conversation in this book—helps us theorize current anxieties around the production of humanness in contemporary times, particularly with regard to humanity’s partners in definitional crime: animality (as its analogue or limit), nationality, race, security, environment, and sexuality. Animacy activates new theoretical formations that trouble and undo stubborn binary systems of difference, including dynamism/stasis, life/death, subject/object, speech/nonspeech, human/animal, natural body/cyborg. In its more sensitive figurations, animacy has the capacity to rewrite conditions of intimacy, engendering different communalisms and revising biopolitical spheres, or, at least, how we might theorize them.

Interestingly, in most English language dictionaries, including *Merriam-Webster’s* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), the word *animacy* does not appear, though the related adjective *animate* does. The related senses of *animate* (ppl., adj., n.) found in the *OED*—of which only the adjective remains contemporary—are denoted as having the following Latin etymology: “ad. L. *animātus* filled with life, also, disposed, inclined, f. *animāre* to breathe, to quicken; f. *anima* air, breath, life, soul, mind.” As an adjective, *animate* means “endowed with life, living, alive”; “lively, having the full activity of life”; “pertaining to what is endowed with life; connected to animals”; and “denoting living beings.” *Animus*, on the other hand, derives from the Latin, meaning “(1) soul, (2) mind, (3) mental impulse, disposition, passion,” and is defined as “actuating feeling, disposition in a particular direction, animating spirit or temper, usually of a hostile character; hence, animosity.” We might find in this lexical soup some tentative significations pertaining to materialization, negativity, passion, liveness, and a possible trace of quickened breath. Between these two, ani-

mate and *animus*, is a richly affective territory of mediation between life and death, positivity and negativity, impulse and substance; it might be where we could imagine the territory of animacy to reside. As I argue, animacy is much more than the state of being animate, and it is precisely the absence of a consensus around its meaning that leaves it open to both inquiry and resignification.

## Construals of Life and Death

Concepts related to animacy have long shadowed Western philosophical discussions: Aristotle's *De Anima*, subtly presaging the present-day debates about the precise status of animals and things, proposed that "soul" could be an animating principle for humans, animals, and vegetables, but not "dead" matter such as stones (or hypothetical rocks that crush hikers).<sup>6</sup> There are many implications in this work; not only did Aristotle provocatively include "animal" as a possessor of soul, he proposed the blending of two disciplines of thought, psychology and biology (to the extent they were then segregated). Though it is beyond the intent of this book to wholly revive Aristotle, it is compelling nonetheless to recall the outlines of his image of the "soul" as a suggestive invitation to think contemporarily of "soul" as an "animating principle" rather than the proverbial "spark of life" ignited by a set of strictly biological processes, such as DNA.

It is further compelling to understand that such an animating principle avowedly refused a priori divisions between mind and body, the philosophical legacy of Descartes which today remains cumbersome to scholars of material agency. Michael Frede has explained that "the notion of the soul attacked by Aristotle is the historical ancestor of Descartes's notion of the mind: a Platonist notion of the soul freed of the role to have to animate a body."<sup>7</sup> We might therefore say, if we took Aristotle to one end point, that it is possible to conceive of something like the "affect" of a vegetable, wherein both the vegetable's receptivity to other affects and its ability to affect outside of itself, as well as its own animating principle, its capacity to animate itself, become viable considerations.

I note, too, that Aristotle's exclusion of stones itself rubs up against other long-standing beliefs according to which stones are animate or potentially animate; his ontological dismissal anticipates the affective economies of current Western ontologies that are dominant, in which

stones might as well be nothing. Carolyn Dean usefully observes that “Western tradition does not generally recognize a ‘continuum of animacy.’ . . . Denying the constant (though imperceptible) changeability of rocks, Western thought has most often identified stone as the binary opposite of, rather than a complement to, things recognized as animate.”<sup>8</sup> While in my own perusing of linguistic theory and philosophy of language I have certainly seen prolific examples of stones as “bad” verbal subjects, I will insist in this book that stones and other inanimates definitively occupy a scalar position (near zero) on the animacy hierarchy and that they are not excluded from it altogether and are not only treated as animacy’s binary opposite.

not  
binary  
but w/v

New materialisms are bringing back the inanimate into the fold of Aristotle’s animating principle, insisting that things generate multiplicities of meanings while they retain their “gritty materiality,” to use Lorraine Daston’s phrase.<sup>9</sup> The history of objects is a combination of intuitive phenomenologically acquired abstractions and socially acquired histories of knowledge about what constitutes proper “thingness.”<sup>10</sup> Throughout the humanities and social sciences, scholars are working through posthumanist understandings of the significance of stuff, objects, commodities, and things, creating a fertile terrain of thought about object life; this work asserts that “foregrounding material factors and reconfiguring our very understanding of matter are prerequisites for any plausible account of coexistence and its conditions in the twenty-first century.”<sup>11</sup> At the forefront of this field, Jane Bennett, in her book *Vibrant Matter*, extends affect to nonhuman bodies, organic or inorganic, averring that affect is part and parcel, not an additive component, of bodies’ materiality.<sup>12</sup> This book builds on these insights by digging into animacy as a specific kind of affective and material construct that is not only nonneutral in relation to animals, humans, and living and dead things, but is shaped by race and sexuality, mapping various biopolitical realizations of animacy in the contemporary culture of the United States.

Dehnot  
animacy  
not here but  
re &  
sexuality

Recent critical theory has considered the believed-to-be-given material world as ~~more than provisionally constituted~~, illusorily bounded, and falsely segregated to the realm of the subjective. Such work includes, for instance, Donna Haraway’s feminist dismantling of the binary of nature and culture in terms of “naturecultures,” Bruno Latour’s “hybrids,” Karen Barad’s agential realism, and Deleuze and Guattari’s “assemblages” of objects and affects.<sup>13</sup> Thinking twice about

other  
things

## Introduction

such givens means that we might further reconceive how matter might contribute to the ongoing discussions about the conceptual, cultural, and political economies of life and death. That is, what are the creditable bodies of import, those bodies whose lives or deaths are even in the field of discussion? If we should rethink such bodies—and I argue that we should—then how might we think differently if nonhuman animals (whom both Haraway and Latour point out have been ostensibly, but in fact not neatly, bracketed into “nature,” despite already being hybrids) and even inanimate objects were to inch into the biopolitical fold? Nicole Shukin’s *Animal Capital*, for instance, reads biopolitics as having been theorized only in relation to *human* life, arguing that, in fact, “discourses and technologies of biopower hinge on the species divide.”<sup>14</sup>

If contemporary biopolitics is already troubling the living with the dead, this book, in a way, continues to crash the party with protagonists which hail from animal studies (monkeys) and science studies (pollutant molecules), bringing humanism’s dirt back into today’s already messy biopolitical imbroglio. Nevertheless, there are important consequences within concepts of life and death for race and sexuality politics. Recently, Jasbir Puar has revisited questions of life and death while working along the lines of what she calls a “bio-necro” political analysis which “conceptually acknowledges [Foucauldian] biopower’s direct activity in death, while remaining bound to the optimization of life, and [Mbembe’s] necropolitics’ nonchalance toward death even as it seeks out killing as a primary aim.”<sup>15</sup> In this, she provides potent revising of the place of new homonormativities in geopolitical negotiations of biopolitics. Indeed, the givens of death are already racialized, sexualized, and, as I will argue, animated in specific biopolitical formations.

Since biopower as described by Michel Foucault is thought in two ways—at the level of government, and at the level of individual (human) subjects—how inanimate objects and nonhuman animals participate in the regimes of life (making live) and coerced death (killing) are integral to the effort to understand how biopower works and what its materials are.<sup>16</sup> I am drawn to the potent claims and articulations of

biopolitics, given their extraordinary relevance to concerns with sexuality, illness, and racial “matters.” Because of a lingering Eurocentrism within what is thought of as biopolitics—its implicit restriction to national bodies, for instance, as well as its species-



## Animating Animacy

centric bias that privileges discussions about human citizens—there are productive openings for transnational race, animal, and sexuality scholarship. This contested terrain also opens up new ways of thinking racially and sexually about biopolitics, particularly around governmentality, definitions of population, health regimes, and deathly life. What biopolitical story, for instance, could a discussion of enlivened toxins like transnational lead, their effectivity and affectivity in young white bodies, and their displacement of deathly black and contagious Asian bodies tell? At the least, a consideration of the animation of otherwise “dead” lead and its downstream effects and affects challenges and extends given notions of governmentality, health, and race beyond a national framework.

animacy  
humanized

The anima, animus, animal, and animate are, I argue, not vagaries or templatic zones of undifferentiated matter, but in fact work as complexly racialized and indeed humanized notions. I also highlight what linguistic semantics has done with this concept and bring some of its productive peculiarities (such as the seemingly circular relation between life and death) into conversation with animacy’s contemporary theoretical questions. If language normally and habitually distinguishes human and inhuman, live and dead, but then in certain circumstances wholly fails to do so, what might this tell us about the porosity of biopolitical logics themselves?

## Animate Currents

The stakes of revisiting animacy are real and immediate, particularly as the coherence of “the body” is continually contested. What, for instance, is the line between the fetus (often categorized as “not yet living”) and a rights-bearing infant-subject? How are those in persistent vegetative states deemed to be at, near, or beyond the threshold of death? Environmental toxicity and environmental degradation are figured as slow and dreadful threats to flesh, mind, home, and state. Myths of immunity are challenged, and sometimes dismantled, by transnationally figured communicable diseases, some of them apparently borne by nonhuman animals. Healthful or bodily recuperation looks to sophisticated prosthetic instruments, synthetic drugs, and nanotechnologies, yet such potent modifications potentially come with a mourning of the loss of purity and a concomitant expulsion of bodies marked as unworthy of such “repair.”

environmental  
toxicity

Theoretically, too, the body's former fictions of integrity, autonomy, heterosexual alignment and containment, and wellness give way to critiques from discourse studies, performance studies, affect theory, medical anthropology, and disability theory. In view of such relevant breadth of disciplinary engagement, this book is indebted to, and thinks variously in terms of, philosophical considerations of life, care, and molecularity; linguistics considerations of the sociocritical pulses that radiate out from specific kinds of speech; ~~security studies~~ questions about how threats are articulated and ontologized; and animal studies questions about the links between animals or animalized humans and the human questions they are summoned to figuratively answer.

Among linguists, animacy's definition is unfixed (and, in standard dictionaries, absent). The cognitive linguist Mutsumi Yamamoto describes it as follows:

The concept of "animacy" can be regarded as some kind of assumed cognitive scale extending from human through animal to inanimate. In addition to the life concept itself, concepts related to the life concept—such as locomotion, sentiency, etc.—can also be incorporated into the cognitive domain of "animacy." . . . A common reflection of "animacy" in a language is a distinction between animate and inanimate, and analogically between human and non-human in some measure. However, animacy is not simply a matter of the semantic feature [+alive], and its linguistic manifestation is somewhat complicated. Our cognition of animacy and the extent to which we invest a certain body (or body of entities) with humanness or animateness influence various levels of human language a great deal.<sup>17</sup>

By writing that animacy "invest[s] a certain body . . . with humanness or animateness," she implicitly rejects the idea that there is a fixed assignment of animate values to things-in-the-world that is consistently reflected in our language, taking instead the cognitivist approach that the world around us animates according to what we humans make of it.

But Yamamoto also remarks on the complicity of some linguists with the apparent anthropocentricity of a hierarchical ordering of types of entities that positions humans at the top. She makes an observation regarding John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, written in 1694: "Locke argued that the identity of one animal or plant

(‘vegetable’ in his word) lies in maintaining one and the same life, whilst the identity of one person is maintained through one and the same (continuous) consciousness. . . . [H]owever, how can it be proved that [one animal or plant] does not possess one continuous consciousness throughout its life, as a human being does?”<sup>18</sup> Here, Yamamoto clearly supports a broad definition of consciousness that seems quite in keeping with Aristotle’s notion of animating principle, or “soul.” In this book, I further the productive skepticism inherent in Yamamoto’s more radical take on animacy, and move beyond the realm of linguistics to consider how animacy is implicated in political questions of power and the recognition of different subjects, as well as ostensible objects.

Animacy is conceptually slippery, even to its experts. In 2005, Radboud University in the Netherlands held an international linguistics workshop on animacy, noting that it both “surfaces in the grammar” and “plays a role in the background” and proposing that participants finally “pin down the importance of animacy in languages and grammar.”<sup>19</sup> In the concluding words to her book, Yamamoto shifts away from analyzing data to appeal to the language of mysticism: “it is of significant interest to linguists to capture the extra-linguistic framework of the animacy concept, because, as it were, this concept *is a spell which strongly influences our mind* in the process of language use and a keystone which draws together miscellaneous structural and pragmatic factors across a wide range of languages in the world.”<sup>20</sup> Animacy seems almost to flutter away from the proper grasp of linguistics, refusing to be “pinned down.”

Thus, the very animate quality of the term itself is useful, not least because it has the potential to move among disciplines. Taking the flux of these animacies into account as I theorize various connectivities (for instance, subjects and their environments, queers and their kin, couches and their occupants, lives and their biopolitical formations), *Animacies* uncovers implicit mediations of human and inhuman in the transnationally conceived United States, not least through cultural, environmental, and political exchanges within and between the United States and Asia. I pace animacy through several different domains, including language and subjectivity; selected twentieth- and twenty-first-century film, popular culture, and visual media regarding racialized and queer animality; and contemporary environmental illness. Through these case studies, the book develops the idea of ani-

A liney  
ending  
writing

macy as an often racialized and sexualized means of conceptual and affective mediation between human and inhuman, animate and inanimate, whether in language, rhetoric, or imagery.

I argue that animacy is especially current—and carries with it a kind of charge—given that environmental threats (even those that are apparently invisible) such as polluted air, poisoned food, and harmful materials are constantly being figured within contemporary culture in the United States. These purportedly unseen threats demand such figuration, yet also escape direct depiction and are usually represented associatively, in terms of animation, personification, nationalization, integrity, and immunity, as well as in relation to other threats. *Animacies* makes critical links between popular knowledges of environmental entities (which often gather around a few select objects of heightened concern) and the larger sociopolitical environments in which they are seated. This book builds on environmental justice work that tracks the subjects and objects of industrial capital and environmentalist movements that examine the implicit or explicit raced and classed components of toxic threats.<sup>21</sup> Yet I also inquire into the imputations of toxicity as an animated, active, and peculiarly queer agent.

Furthermore, political interest stokes public alarm toward “toxins.” We must therefore understand the ways in which toxicity has been so enthusiastically taken up during times of economic instability and panic about transnational flow. *Animacies* demonstrates that interests in toxicity are particularly (if sometimes stealthily) raced and queered. Indeed, toxins participate vividly in the racial mattering of locations, human and nonhuman bodies, living and inert entities, and events such as disease threats. This book aims to offer ways of mapping and diagnosing the mutual imbrications of race, sexuality, ability, environment, and sovereign concern.

In addition, animal and science studies have offered tools through which we can rethink the significance of molecular, cellular, animal, vegetable, or nonhuman life.<sup>22</sup> *Animacies* not only takes into account the broadening field of nonhuman life as a proper object, but even more sensitively, the animateness or inanimateness of entities that are considered either “live” or “dead.” Considering differential animacies becomes a particularly critical matter when “life” versus “death” binary oppositions fail to capture the affectively embodied ways that racializations of specific groups are differentially rendered. Siianne Ngai explores the affective meanings of the term *animatedness*, focus-

ing on its manifestation as a property of Asianness and of blackness: “the affective state of being ‘animated’ seems to imply the most basic or minimal of all affective conditions: that of being, in one way or another, ‘moved.’ But, as we press harder on the affective meanings of animatedness, we shall see how the seemingly neutral state of ‘being moved’ becomes twisted into the image of the overemotional racialized subject.”<sup>23</sup> Animacy has consequences for both able-bodiedness and ability, especially since a consideration of “inanimate life” imbues the discourses around environmental illness and toxicity. For instance, the constant interabsorption of animate and inanimate bodies in the case of airborne pollution must account for the physical nonintegrity of individual bodies and the merging of forms of “life” and “nonlife.” This book seeks to trouble this binary of life and nonlife as it offers a different way to conceive of relationality and intersubjective exchange.

I detail an animacy that is in indirect conversation with historical vitalisms as well as Bennett’s “vital materiality.”<sup>24</sup> Yet this book focuses critically on an interest in the animal that hides in animacy, particularly in the interest of its attachment to things like sex, race, class, and dirt. That is, my purpose is not to reinvest certain materialities *with* life, but to remap live and dead zones away from those very terms, leveraging animacy toward a consideration of affect in its queered and raced formations. Throughout the book, my core sense of “queer” refers, as might be expected, to exceptions to the conventional ordering of sex, reproduction, and intimacy, though it at times also refers to animacy’s veering-away from dominant ontologies and the normativities they promulgate. That is, I suggest that queering is immanent to animate transgressions, violating proper intimacies (including between humans and nonhuman things).

For the purposes of this book, I define affect without necessary restriction, that is, I include the notion that affect is something not necessarily corporeal and that it potentially engages many bodies at once, rather than (only) being contained as an emotion within a single body. Affect inheres in the capacity to affect and be affected. Yet I am also interested in the relatively subjective, individually held “emotion” or “feeling.” While I prioritize the former, I also attend to the latter (with cautions about its true possessibility) precisely because, in the case of environmental illness or multiple chemical sensitivity, the entry of an exterior object not only influences the further affectivity

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of an intoxicated human body, but “emotions” that body: it lends it particular emotions or feelings as against others. I take my cue from Sara Ahmed’s notion of “affective economies,” in which specific emotions play roles in binding subjects and objects. She writes, “emotions involve subjects and objects, but without residing positively within them. Indeed, emotions may seem like a force of residence as an effect of a certain history, a history that may operate by concealing its own traces.”<sup>25</sup> The traces I examine in this book are those of animate hierarchies. If affect includes affectivity—how one body affects another—then affect, in this book, becomes a study of the governmentality of animate hierarchies, an examination of how acts seem to operate with, or against, the order of things (to appropriate Foucault’s phrasing for different purposes).<sup>26</sup>

Queer theory, building upon feminism’s critique of gender difference, has been at the forefront of recalibrating many categories of difference, and it has further rewritten how we understand affect, especially with regard to trauma, death, mourning, shame, loss, impossibility, and intimacy (not least because of the impact of the HIV/AIDS crisis); key thinkers here include Ann Cvetkovich, Lauren Berlant, Heather Love, and Lee Edelman, among others.<sup>27</sup> As will be demonstrated, these are all terms that intersect in productive ways with animacy. Thus, this book fixes particular attention on queer theoretical questions of intimacy, sexuality, and connectivity; critical race work on the flexible zones of extension of race, the ways that raciality circulates transnationally, and the intersections of race and environment; the staging of animals to displace racial and sexual questions; disability studies questions about toxicity and recuperation; environmental justice connections between environmentally condemned marginalized communities and the toxins conferred upon them; and queer of color mappings of race and sexuality in “unlikely” places.

## How the Chapters Move

The book is organized into three parts, with two chapters each: “Words,” “Animals,” and “Metals.” These three parts each examine and track a feature of animacy in detail, along the lines of a focus: in “Words,” language and figural dehumanization; in “Animals,” queer animals and animality; and in “Metals,” the toxic metal particles lead and mercury. Each pair attempts to investigate a question about kinds

## Animating Animacy

of animacy, and each exhibits, or performs, the result of letting its object *animate*, that is—considering that its etymological history still survives somewhere in its linguistic present—letting it breathe, gender itself, or enact “animus” in its negativity. For instance, in the “Words” part, the animacy of the word *queer* is unleashed to find new linguistic loci; later, in “Animals,” the animal transubstantiates beyond the borders of our insistent human ontologies; and finally, toxic metals are let loose in the bloodstream of the text to queer its own affective regard.

In this sense, each chapter, while an animation in itself, is simultaneously an attempt to seek a transdisciplinary method forged through my background in cognitive linguistics and inflected by my commitments to queer of color, feminist, and disability scholarship. Thus, animacy is still identifiable, even if it leaves behind its epistemological pinnings. If these methodological efforts may seem eccentric, my hope is that they might, in their animate crossings and changing disciplinary intimacies, be plumbed for a certain kind of utility, particularly to the extent that each is engaged in some way with questions of race, sexuality, and disability.

## Words

“Language and Mattering Humans,” the first chapter, is framed by a consideration of language as animated, as a means of embodied condensation of social, cultural, and political life. Here I consider in detail a particular political grammar, what linguists call an *animacy hierarchy*, which conceptually arranges human life, disabled life, animal life, plant life, and forms of nonliving material in orders of value and priority. Animacy hierarchies have broad ramifications for issues of ecology and environment, since objects, animals, substances, and spaces are assigned constrained zones of possibility and agency by extant grammars of animacy. The chapter examines a seemingly exceptional form of linguistic usage to think through gradations of animacy and objectification: the insult, a move of representational injury that implicates language as capable of incurring damage. Linguistic insults vividly demonstrate that language acts to contain and order many kinds of matter, including lifeless matter; they also show that language users are “animate theorists” insofar as they deploy and rework such orders of matter. Furthermore, insults that refer to humans as abjected matter or as less than human—for instance, Senator George Allen’s in-

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famous “macaca” utterance from 2006—cannily assert human status as a requisite condition for securing nonhuman comparators, thereby rendering the idea of “dehumanization” paradoxical.

Chapter 2, “Queer Animation,” then asks: if language helps to coerce certain figures into nonbeing, or to demote on an animacy hierarchy, then what are the modes of revival, return, or rejoinder? One popular social strategy has been to “reclaim” distressed objects as a move toward political agency, sometimes literalized in a discredited social label. Both subtle and explicit de-animations, therefore, may be responded to with plays at re-animation through linguistic reclaiming acts, not least with the act of speech itself, and I investigate this possibility by giving special consideration to the scholarly and political uptake of an identity reference and theoretical entity called *queer*, a term that seems semantically predestined to launch its own animations. Analyzing *queer*’s multiple senses with cognitive linguistics, I show how two conceptual forms emerged with two lexicalized forms, verb and noun: a re-animated queer verb and a de-animated queer noun, which open it to some critiques that queer politics have made the “wrong” turn to essentialization and identity politics. I suggest that Foucault’s governmentality might be revisited in the linguistic notion of governance, especially concerning its sensitivity to the animacy hierarchy.

## Animals

In chapter 3, “Queer Animality,” I consider animality as a condensation of racialized animacy, taking up inquiries relating to the paradoxical morbidities and vibrancies of the queer figure and its potentiality for nonnormative subject formations. I locate queerness, in this chapter, in both wrong marriage and improper intimacy. Using performativity as a point of departure for a theoretical kinship frequently found between queerness and animality, I examine a signal argument in the work of the language philosopher J. L. Austin. Austin set up the example of a failed pronouncement of marriage: in this case, nonauthorized official speech by evoking “a marriage with a monkey.” Here I read the “exemplary ridiculousness” of Austin’s example as indicating a wider anxiety about the legitimacy of exchange between properly animated figures, teasing apart the combined intimations of sexual oddity with racial nonwhiteness and figural blackness. Moving then



to a selection of visual media from the turn of the twentieth century, I assess the role that queerness, miscegenation, and comparative racisms play in rendering some bodies less animate, even when affective intensities surround them. Closely attending to this visual culture, I examine how controversies around citizenship in the United States at this time were displaced onto the figure of the “dumb” animal, which was both raced and sexed for rhetorical effect.

In chapter 4, “Animals, Sex, and Transsubstantiation,” I ask what happens when the matter of gender, race, and sexuality itself shifts, either in our diagnostic ontologies or in its own figural actuality. I begin with biopolitical questions of animal—and human—neutering, asking how gender and family are queered in both normative and exceptional ways; here, I use “queer” to indicate challenges to the normativity of sex (sexing) that are sometimes biopolitically authorized. I then turn to an odd yet pervasive omission in cultural animal representations—that of the missing morphology of the genitalia—suggesting that such a phenomenon could, instead of being seen as a trivial or expected circumstance, be thought in relation to the cultural production of animals. I ask what this missing morphology animates, whether due to notions of propriety; to the idea that skin and fur are treated as essentially sartorial, displacing but confirming an interior human; or to an attempt at symbolic neutering (since animals often serve as stand-ins for rampant sexuality) or transing. Questions of transgendering are put into conversation with this omission to ask after the valence of this kind of queer affectivity.

## Metals

Turning to allegedly insensate—but nevertheless potent—particles, chapter 5, “Lead’s Racial Matters,” considers the Chinese lead toys panic in the United States in 2007 and its representation in mainstream media. Here, animacy becomes a property of lead, a highly mobile and poisonous substance that feeds anxieties about transgressors of permeable borders, whether of skin or country. The chapter traces the physical travels (animations) of lead as an industrial by-product, while simultaneously observing lead’s critical role in the representation of national security concerns, interests in sovereignty, and racial and bodily integrity in the United States. I argue that the lead painted onto children’s toys was animated and racialized as Chinese, whereas

its potential victims were depicted as largely white. In the context of the interests of the United States, the phrase *Chinese lead* is consistently rendered not as a banal industrial product, but as an exogenous toxin painted onto the toys of innocent American children, and as the backhanded threat of a previously innocent boon of transnational labor whose exploitive realities are beginning to dawn on the popular subconscious of the United States. This lead scare shifted both its mythic origins and its mythic targets, effectively replacing domestic concerns about black and impoverished children and their exposures to environmental lead.

Finally, chapter 6, “Following Mercurial Affect,” shifts the book’s perspective from a theoretical examination of animacy to the biopolitical impact of environmental toxins on human bodies in the context of present-day emergent illnesses. Here the term *animacy* takes mobile, molecular form, as particles that both intoxicate a body into environmental illness and as particles that constantly threaten that body’s fragile state. The chapter considers the ways in which environmental illness restages expected forms of sociality, rendering them as queer, disordered proximities in the case of molecular intimacies and orientations. Such altered sociality also evinces in the case of the often-different geographies of affective ties to animate and inanimate objects exhibited in autism (which in some views symptomatically overlap with environmental factors, rather than being determined by them). Such forms of sociality have the potential to trouble the alternative socialities offered by queer theory, as well as the thematics of negativity that recent queer theory takes up as a political question.

I conclude with an afterword, “The Spill and the Sea.” It opens by pairing the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010 and the “killing” language summoned to commemorate its technological resolution with an unlikely partner: the human-wannabe-fish protagonist of the animated Hayao Miyazaki film *Ponyo*, released in 2008. These two different phenomena come together as an indication of the questions that continue to be raised by the affective politics surrounding both animate and inanimate things. Miyazaki’s cosmology is imbued, I argue, with unexpected affectivity, which is part of his animation’s magic. I end with a plea to revisit the possibility of “care” across the realm of animacy, considering it as a means of unlikely cross-affiliation, a politics that wanders in and out of mainstreams.

## Disciplinary Animation, Shifting Archive

Fundamentally interdisciplinary in nature, *Animacies* traverses a number of intersecting fields. First, it comes out of, but is by no means limited to, my training as a queer feminist linguist with a heightened sensitivity to the political and disciplinary mobility of terms. My argument tracks how the notion of animacy implicitly figures within and reorients a range of theoretical constructions, from disability studies with its focus on redefining given conditions of bodily and mental life; to queer theory's considerations of feeling, sex, and death; to biosecurity studies with its mapping of the character of national obsessions about terrorism, ingestion, transmission, and infection. I build on the feminist insight that "nature" is a feminized counterpoint to masculinized "culture," but also approach "nature" as a complexly differentiated site, gendered, racialized, and sexualized in ways that are not consistent or predictable.<sup>28</sup> And in view of the place that a heteronormatively textured sovereignty takes in the national anxieties of the United States about disability and illness, such as the lead toy panic, it is instructive to turn to both disability theory and queer theory in the consideration of environmental illness. Here I am indebted to queer-disability theorists such as Eli Clare and Robert McRuer.<sup>29</sup>

I want to affirm, study, and reflect upon the monkey whose marriage to a human Austin dismissively refers to as a mockery in chapter 3, for this queer, potentially racialized, invalid marriage has much to say. That is, nonlife as life, and monkey as legitimate marrying subject, materialize, replenish, and trouble ideologies, sentiments, and ontologies of race, humanness, and security. I reside in this so-called negative zone, one of abjection, racial marking, toxic queerness, and illness, to think about the epistemic riches of possibility within. If this is not a recuperative project, it is nevertheless an affirmative one.

Thinking through the fluidities of either "life" or "death" that seem to run across borders of animate and inanimate, and through orders of state preference that (in large part due to the commodifying and virtualizing and abstracting processes of capitalism) disregard common understandings of "life" or "liveliness," I follow connectivities that animate before me, without a fore-given attachment to a "proper" or "consistent" object. The chapters of this book therefore interanimate, rather than organizing fully and completely with regard to one another.

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Furthermore, *Animacies* steps out of and around disciplinary closure, particularly since my objects of concern seem to call for movement. Thus, I shift weight between interdisciplinary stresses of analysis, from linguistic to literary to phenomenological, alternately focusing on close readings of films, illustration, archival research, linguistic evidence, newspaper accounts, and popular media coverage. The concluding chapter, framed by personal narrative, performs a provocative and pointedly intimate invocation to rethink animacy in the reader's own terms.

Finally, a word about my shifting archive. This book uses several lenses to explore the rangy, somewhat unruly construct called animacy. In my view, a somewhat “feral” approach to disciplinarity naturally changes the identity of what might be the proper archives for one's scholarship. Nonetheless, my research is grounded in twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural productions, ones that are often framed within transnational encounters between the United States and Asia, from Fu Manchu to the contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing. As I shift from discussions of dehumanizing language (linguistics?) to animal genitality (cultural studies?) to health discourse (science studies?) to (in)human and queer sociality (queer theory?), it is my intention and design that the archives themselves feralize, giving up any idealization about their domestication, refusing to answer whether they constitute proper or complete coverage. At the same time, I take care to contextualize (whether temporally or geopolitically) the “thing” under discussion, since I have no interest in running roughshod over historical particularity.

Thinking and moving ferally constitutes a risk, both to the borders of disciplinarity and to the author who is metonymically feralized along with the text. Yet it is arguably also a necessary condition of examining animacy within disability, postcolonial, and queer studies. I venture, as well, that as surely as intersectionality “matters” lives and nonlives, animacy might ask of queer of color analysis, and other modes of analysis that rely upon intersectionality, that the seeming givens thought to centrally inform race, sexuality, and gender might bear further examination—that is, that animacy tugs the categories of race and sexuality out of their own homes. I refer to Roderick Ferguson's useful discussion of queer of color critique's potential to counter the obliquely intersecting racialization, gendering, sexualization, and classing that exist within national spaces. Notably, Ferguson describes

queer of color critique itself as “a heterogeneous enterprise made up of women of color feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory, and queer critique.”<sup>30</sup>

I use the word *feral* in direct conversation with the disability scholars Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, who ask about the location of disability theory within disciplinary formations: “Is it possible to keep the freshness—the insight-driven ‘wildness’—of the field in the midst of seeking a home base in the academy? Can disability studies sustain its productive ‘feral’ nature without being reduced to a lesser form of academic evolutionism or thoroughly domesticated as an academic endeavor?”<sup>31</sup>

The notion of feral also brings up ambivalent identifications with antihomes, since it both rejects the domicile and reinvigorates a notion of public shelter. As a moving target, the sign of the feral also invokes diaspora and its potential to naturalize nationalisms and capitalist geopolitics. Gayatri Gopinath’s work on queer South Asian public cultures is useful here; Gopinath, reflecting on diaspora’s simplest definition as “the dispersal and movement of populations from one particular national or geographic location to other disparate sites,” provokes us to closely examine valences of queer “home” that interrupt and trouble diaspora’s “dependence on a genealogical, implicitly heteronormative reproductive logic.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the ambivalently homed feral figure also appears in my text as the sign of a biopolitical (nationalized) demand for population control.

I choose instead, here, to allow for the impression of a certain surfeit, and simultaneously to refuse to categorize humans, animals, objects as so very cleanly distinct from one another. To do this is to hope for a certain “wiliness” of the sort performed by the writer and queer critic Silviano Santiago, who in his essay “The Wily Homosexual” answers the implicit request posed by Western white queer conference-goers to provide “native” Brazilian knowledge by responding both vertically (as expected) and horizontally. That horizontality, which Santiago describes as a “supplement” rather than a clumsy inversion of the hierarchy of values implicit in the question, can be described as “elusive” only from an insistently typological drive to closure and hence leaves a certain trace of mystery and escape in the path of his text.<sup>33</sup> My hope is for that opening, insofar as it can be found in this book, to be inviting and productive. Animacy, after all, is an unstable terrain; this means that (and it is my belief that) its archives are not

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“pinnable.” The various archives, which seem at first to be distinct, are surprisingly very much in conversation with each other and, beyond my attempts to “interarticulate” these connections, ring with one another’s strange vitality.

As many scholars of illness have remarked, “living through illness” seems, at least at first, to confound the narrativized, temporalized imaginary of “one’s human life,” for it can constitute an undesired stopping point that is sporadically animated by frenzied attempts (to the extent one’s energy permits) to resolve the abrupt transformations of illness that often feel in some way “against life.” Some transformations suggest a suspension of time (productivity time, social time), and some involve the wearing of a deathly pallor or other visible registers of morbidity.<sup>34</sup> But for those with the privileges of food, care, and physical support, this pause can also become a meditation (if forced) on the conditions that underlie both illness and wellness, that is, the biopoliticized animacies that foretell what may become of a changing body, human or not, living or nonliving. For this, I am grateful for the pause that, even if it took me “out of life,” gave me the matter that could animate this book.

# Notes

## Introduction

1. Anatole Broyard describes his engagement with illness as an intoxication; in opposition to his “sobered” friends, he felt “vivid, multicolored, sharply drawn.” Broyard, *Intoxicated by My Illness*, 6.

2. See, especially, Mbembe, “Necropolitics”; and Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

3. I refer here to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblances, in which a group is defined not by a core criterion or essential meaning, but by multiple similarities.

4. Silverstein, “Hierarchy of Features and Ergativity.”

5. Mak, Vonk, and Schriefers, “Animacy in Processing Relative Clauses.”

6. Aristotle, *De Anima*.

7. Frede, “On Aristotle’s Conception of the Soul,” 94.

8. Dean, *A Culture of Stone*, 8.

9. Daston, *Things That Talk*.

10. Within the United States, material culture is examined both within the social sciences (that is, anthropology) and the humanities (that is, art history); for an overview, see Kingery, *Learning from Things*; and Lock and Farquhar, *Beyond the Body Proper*. Arjun Appadurai has also edited a book that considers commodification and culture from a global perspective; Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*.

11. Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 2. See also Colebrook, “On Not Becoming Man,” for a reading of selected feminist approaches to matter.

12. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

13. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*; Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*; Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; and Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

14. Shukin, *Animal Capital*, 11.

## Notes to Chapter One

15. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 35.
16. Foucault, "The Birth of Biopolitics."
17. Yamamoto, *Animacy and Reference*, 1.
18. *Ibid.*, 15.
19. "Animacy" conference, Radboud University, 2005.
20. Yamamoto, *Animacy and Reference*, 180. Emphasis mine.
21. See, for example, Checker, *Polluted Promises*.
22. Haraway's oeuvre is central here, as are critically important texts such as Franklin, *Dolly Mixtures*; Thompson, *Making Parents*; and Hayden, *When Nature Goes Public*.
23. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 91.
24. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, vii.
25. Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 119.
26. Foucault, *The Order of Things*. The original French title was, perhaps more apt for this book, *Les mots et les choses* (words and things).
27. Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*; Love, *Feeling Backward*; Edelman, *No Future*; and Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*.
28. See Moore, Kosek, and Pandian, *Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference*.
29. Clare, *Exile and Pride*; McRuer, *Crip Theory*.
30. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 149.
31. Snyder and Mitchell, *Cultural Locations of Disability*, 195.
32. Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 6–10.
33. Santiago, "The Wily Homosexual."
34. See, for example, the feminist theorist and poet Susan Griffin's memoir *What Her Body Thought* and Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*.

### 1. Language and Mattering Humans

1. Comrie, *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology*, 185.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Yamamoto, *Animacy and Reference*, 1.
4. Comrie, *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology*, 186.
5. Silverstein, "Hierarchy of Features and Ergativity."
6. *Ibid.*, 168.
7. *Ibid.*, 164.
8. *Ibid.*, 211.
9. For a summary, see Yamamoto, *Animacy and Reference*, 24–35. Silverstein's animacy hierarchy depended on a number of contributing features, each of which could have a binary value, while Yamamoto's definition of animacy departs from this approach.
10. Cherry, *Animism in Thought and Language*.
11. *Ibid.*, 314.
12. Comrie reports that in early Slavonic, the emergence of a new gram-