

TOXIC ANIMACIES, INANIMATE AFFECTIONS

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Toxic Allure

A toxin threatens, but it also beckons. It is not necessarily alive, yet it enlivens morbidity and fear of death. A toxin requires an object against which its threat operates; this threatened object is an animate object—hence potentially also a kind of subject—whose “natural defenses” will be put to the test, in detection, in “fighting off,” and finally in submission and absorption.

This essay suggests that thinking, and feeling, with toxicity invites a recounting of the affectivity and relationality—indeed the bonds—of queerness as it is presently theorized. Approaching toxicity in three different modes, I first consider how vulnerability, safety, immunity, threat, and toxicity itself are sexually and racially instantiated in the recent panic about lead content in Chinese-manufactured toys exported to the United States. While the essay seems at first to float somewhat outside queerness, a queer analysis is completed in the next section, where I interweave biopolitical considerations of immunity into an account of the peculiar intimacies and alienations of heavy metal poisoning, rendered in the first person. The essay ends by suggesting that the queering and racializing of material other than human amounts to a kind of *animacy*. Animacy is built on the recognition that abstract concepts, inanimate objects, and things in between can be queered and racialized without human bodies present, quite beyond questions of personification. Theorizing this animacy offers an alternative, or a complement, to existing biopolitical and recent queer-theoretical debates about life and death, while the idea of toxicity proposes an extant queer bond, one more prevalent today than is perhaps given credit. Such a toxic queer bond might complicate utopian imagining, as well as address how and where subject-object dispositions might be attributed to the relational queer figure.

Toxins — toxic figures — populate increasing ranges of environmental, social, and political discourses. Indeed, figures of toxicity have moved well beyond their specific range of biological attribution, leaking out of nominal and literal bounds while retaining their affective ties to vulnerability and repulsion: so an advice columnist might write *Keep a healthy distance from toxic acquaintances*, while a senator up for reelection decries the “toxic” political atmosphere. Even literally toxic events make affective reference to other instances outside their temporal bounds. The looming environmental devastation of the Gulf of Mexico, while pointing to the toxicity of the leaked crude oil to the aquatic ecologies that it now approaches, merely follows a series of spectacular toxic catastrophes with single-name recognition: Bhopal, Minamata, Love Canal, Chernobyl. More recently, stories about the toxic load that people in various (largely Global North) geographies at various life stages carry, including newborns, both naturalize “our” own toxicity, “our” internal corruption, while alerting “us” to a new kind of purity we can now hopefully configure.¹

One recently crystallized metaphor points to a central culprit of the current global recession, and speaks precisely to this notional expansion of toxicity and its likely foray into its former history as a concept directly tied to immunity: “toxic assets.” In this notion, asset is a good precisely because it entails capital value, but one which 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” (i.e., rendering the corporations that buy up those assets invalid themselves). The toxic assets of significance in the U.S. context, which are held responsible for global economic fallout, are the financial products composed of grouped mortgages tied to a hypervalued and/or unstable residential real estate market. Yet looking beyond financial products to other cultural sites, objects, or identities under capitalism, I suggest there are more toxic assets with which one might think economically, rhetorically, and in terms of critical domesticities. Given its rapidly multiplying meanings, toxicity clearly has a persistent allure.² In what follows, I investigate the potential to resignify toxicity as a theoretical figure, in the interest of inviting contradictory play and crediting queer bonds already here: the living dead, the dead living, antisocial love, and inanimate affection.

Lead as Toxic Asset

Wrapped up in industrial manufacture and threatening “healthy development” with disability, the chemical element of lead has arguably become a “toxic asset.” In the summer of 2007, lead became a primary concern precisely as a toxin in the U.S. media landscape. In this geopolitical and cultural moment, the critical scene was one of toys: lead’s identity as a neurotoxic “heavy metal” was attributed to toys identified as made in China, toys whose decomposable surfaces when touched yielded up lead for transit into the bloodstreams of young children, giving it a means for its circulatory march toward the vulnerable, developing brain. Media outlets paraded images of plastic and painted children’s toys as possibly lead-tainted and hence possible hosts of invisible threat. Medical professionals repeated, almost ritualistically, caveats about “brain damage,” “lowered IQ’s” and “developmental delay,” directing their comments to concerned parents of vulnerable children. Toy testing centers were set up across the country.³

Journalists, government offices, and parents began to draw tighter connections between Chinese-made products and environmental toxins at large, and 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. A generalized narrative about the inherent health risk of Chinese products (to U.S. denizens) began to crystallize.⁴ Mass media pitched these environmental threats neither as “acts of God” nor as products of a global industrialization, but as invasive dangers into the U.S. territory from other national territories. These environmental toxins were supposed to be “there,” but were found “here.”

As a toxin, lead deterritorializes. Recall toxic assets: if toxins both literal and metaphorical threaten an interiority, then various domesticities become threatened realms. Such domesticities’ economic ties have become more clear: there is trouble at home, not only in national security, toxic drywall, and toys, but also at the level of residence itself, as toxic assets are linked to the fact that one’s very house, rented or owned, may now be lost. House and nation are also connected: consider the U.S. government’s preferring to allow homes to founder in favor of investments in national economic and military security.

The last few decades, particularly after 9/11, have seen a strengthened union of affects around terrorism that associate it with transnational provenance and hence invasive threat.⁵ Under these conditions, the invisible threat of cognitive and social degradation in the case of lead meant that the abiding, relatively much more methodical, and diversified work of environmental justice activists on

lead toxicity was here transmogrified into something that looked less “environmental” and more 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.⁶ This “war on terror” was doubly pitched as a neomissionary insistence on disseminating 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 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”) and/or as a symptomatic signifier of a war of capital flows.⁷ Lead, then, simultaneously became an instrument of heightened domestic panic, drawing from and recycling languages of “terror,” and a rhetorical weapon in the rehearsal of U.S. economic sovereignty.

Tracking Lead

The florid palette of toy-panic media representations yielded two prominent and repeated icons: the vulnerable child, more frequently a young, white, middle-class boy, and a dangerous painted toy, Thomas the Tank Engine. While difficult to trace or identify on the toys, the lead toxin itself was made doubly invisible: there were few, if any, direct media representations of lead itself (its naturally occurring colors, its molecular form, its appearance in industrial bulk). Consultants and safety advocates deemed red and yellow colors to have particularly dangerous levels of lead and suggested colors as effective criteria by which toys should be identified and returned. Thus lead was an invisible threat whose material loci and physical provenance, much like the sleeper cell, needed to be presumed in advance and mapped—not only geographically but sensorily, sometimes through visual coding schemes like color itself.

Thomas the Tank Engine is a fetishized object, but not only of and for children: the series is marketed to middle-class parents who insist on high-status “quality” products, which in this case are aimed at boys and quite explicitly direct their proper masculine development. An article from the *New York Times*, which caters to a politically liberal, economically privileged readership, associates pricey quality with safety. In line with the coincidence of the two signal images described above, the article bears one visual image, a photograph of the red James Engine, one of Thomas’s “friends,” and a description of one member of the vulnerable population (identified as children), a white four-year-old boy, whose family appears to be middle to upper-middle class. His mother testifies to the “high” expecta-

tions she had for these toys: “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.’”⁸

Presumably then, the “cheap,” working class–coded McDonald’s toys are the toxic ground on which the “quality” toys are to be established as nontoxic. Now consider the iconic place of trains 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 depended heavily on imported Chinese labor that was rendered invisible in certain interested histories of labor.⁹

Current news accounts about Chinese manufacture occasionally reveal the manual labor behind this relentless industry, in the form of textile sweatshops, device assemblers, and toy painters, who are largely young female migrants to the city from rural satellites. How to explain this *incipient* visibility? It is perhaps useful to surmise that 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 white ownership not only of land and property but also of the West’s history, for the toy painters, the conditions of labor needed to be made just visible enough to facilitate the territorial/state/racial assignation of blame, but not enough to generally extend the ring of sympathetic concern around the workers themselves.¹⁰

Displaced Racializations

Just as the presumed agents of “terror” have become racialized as Arab and/or Muslim after 9/11, so too has lead itself become recently racialized as Chinese. This particular racialization is a contemporary one. Before this transnationalizing of environmental threats, lead was, for example, a domestic concern in the United States, framed in terms of the public-health injunction to reduce the amount of leaded paint existing in older homes. In the late twentieth century, cultural media outlets like National Public Radio informed the liberal public that rates of lead poisoning among black children had much to do epidemiologically with the pollution of neighborhoods populated largely by people of color, given the existence

of older buildings whose lead paint had not been remediated and the proximity of lead-polluting industrial centers.

Lately, however, the media identification of black children's vulnerability to the dangers of domestic lead has shifted dramatically in favor of identifying white children's vulnerability to the dangers of Chinese lead. In this potent narrative, black children have largely been superseded. I suggest 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 battle of sovereignty among 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, new ground to the newest figure. A racial construction of blacks as already unruly, violent, contaminated, and mentally deficient lies inherent in the current neoliberal economy, itself an economic mode conditioned and supported by a growing and incredibly powerful prison-industrial complex with its own structuration of race, class, and gender.¹¹ Lead exposure itself is associated with cognitive delay, enhanced aggression, impulsivity, convulsions, and mental lethargy. One wonders to what degree any new-found alarmism about the vulnerability of black children to environmental lead can succeed, given the abiding construction of the mentally deficient, impulsive, and spastic black body. That is to say, which assets have gone toxic (lead), which assets are considered toxic (bodies of color), which assets must be prevented from becoming toxic?

In the present case of the Thomas trains, then, 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, the great fear of lead toxicity's neurological effect, borne out by toxicological evidence, is that lead makes a dull and/or violent child—it increases aggression and arrests some cognitive development. Some years ago, as I indicated above, before this domestic narrative largely disappeared in favor of the Chinese one, the greater public had been invited to simply extend a naturalized myth of decrepitude in urban blackness and hence imagine black children licking the peeling walls of their unmaintained dwellings as a decisive factor in black children's greater lead toxicity. This version of liberal environmentalism supports the progressive extension of "environmental rights" to previously unrecognized populations, yet does not critique environmental racism's structural makeup.¹² That is, black children are assumed to be toxic, and lead's threat to white children is not only that they risk becoming dull, or cognitively defective,

but also that they lose their class-elaborated white racial cerebrality and become suited to living in the ghettos.¹³

Lead Licking

The iconic white boy is an asset that must not be allowed to become toxic: he must not be mentally deficient, delayed, or lethargic. His intellectual capabilities must be assured to consolidate a futurity of heteronormative (white) masculinity, which is also to say that he must not be queer. 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 iconic example of the white boy, who in the threatening or frightening scene is licking the painted train, a train whose name is Thomas, the train that is also one of the West's pre-eminent Freudian phallic icons.¹⁴ This image never appears literally, or at least I have not seen it. 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).



Precisely what is wrong with the boy licking the train? Many 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 in his mouth. Such late-exhibited orality bears the sheen of that “retarded” stage of development known as homosexuality.¹⁵ Thus “retarded,” the scene 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 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.”¹⁶ Exhibiting telltale signs of homosexuality and lead toxicity alike is simultaneously to alert a protected, domestic sphere to the threat of disability. Finally, the queerest bioterrorist is one who is remote, racialized “otherwise,” and hybrid: both human painting agents and microcosmic pollutants that, almost of their own accord, invade the body through plenitudes of microcosmic sites (a child's skin), sites the state cannot afford to acknowledge, for the queer vulnerabilities they portend.

The mediation of lead toxins in and around categories of life in turn

undoes lead's deadness by reanimating it. In other words, like any toxin, lead has the capacity to poison definitively animate beings, and as such achieves its own animacy as the agent who can do us harm. To call it "personified" would be too simple. Toxins sometimes bear the threat of death to a protected life, but whether or not they "are" alive is not the issue. What is felt along with toxicity; what are its coextant biopolitical figures? As suggested in this essay's opening, common notions of toxicity invoke threatened immunity as their requisite condition. Immunity bears its own complex political histories; Donna Haraway writes that immune systems are tightly intertwined with the biopolitical brokerages between "us" and "them."¹⁷ An immune system is never innocent, never "merely" biological, because what is biological is itself never innocent of complex "intertextuality": scientific, public, and political cultures together inform understandings of the immune system. Haraway's politicization of the immune system is not surprising, because the medicalized notion of immunity was derived from political brokerages.¹⁸ Such knowledges comprising the "immune system" would seem, therefore, to serve as discourses that implicitly inform what is understood of the participants and as means of a perceived attack.¹⁹

What becomes of life when human bodies, those preeminent containers of life, are themselves pervaded by xenobiotic substances—that is, substances not intrinsic to, not generated by, unadulterated bodies (pollutants, synthetic pharmaceuticals, toxic heavy metals)—and nanotechnology? I suggest toxicity becomes significant now for reasons beyond the pressing environmental hazards that encroach on zones of privilege, beyond late-transnational capitalism doing violence to national integrities: debates about abortion and the lifeliness or deathliness of Terri Schiavo suggest not only that we cannot tell what is alive or dead, but perhaps that the diagnostic promise of the categories of life and death is itself in crisis.²⁰

Toxic Sensorium

I now discuss toxicity as a condition, one too complex to imagine as a property of one or another individual or group. I would also like to de-emphasize 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.²¹ Thus I wish here to think more broadly about synthesis and symbiosis: toxic vapors, interspersals, intrinsic mixings, alterations, favoring interabsorption over corporeal exceptionalism.²²

But I will not do it from a point of view of mythic health. The above narration of the animation of lead and its new racializations in projects of national sovereignty has required a particular mode of exteriorization and exceptionalism together. In the above reading one might not have been wrong to presume that what was under discussion were formerly healthy, individuated bodies, heretofore unadulterated by toxins, and cognitively clear, middle-classed young white lives, presumably floating in suspended ether above the hidden masses, classes, colors, toxins, of all the rest of those living within the bounds of the United States. To move away from these presumptions invites a different mode of discourse.

In other words, I am moving now from a theoretical discussion about metaphors about threat and risk into what feels, for me personally, like genuinely risky and threatening terrain, the terrain of the biographical. (As academics are often trained to avoid writing in anything resembling a confessional mode, such a turn is fraught with ambivalence.) This section considers toxicity as it has profoundly affected my own health, my own queerness, and my own ability to forge bonds, and offers a way to resolve the points of the essay still open. It is not intended as a perfect subjectivity that opposes an idealized objectivity; rather, it is meant as a complementary kind of knowledge production, a sensorium, one that in this context invites both the sympathetic ingestion (or intoxication) of what remains a marked experience, as well as potentially invites 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. Queers are in many ways treated as toxic assets, but what happens when queers become intoxicated?

Today I am having a day of relative well-being and am eager to explore “my new” neighborhood on foot; I have forgotten for the moment that I just do not go places “on foot,” because the results can be catastrophic. 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 come near, I quickly assess whether they are likely (might be the “kind of people”) to wear perfumes or colognes, or sunscreen. I scan their heads for smoke puffs or pursed lips prere-

lease; I scan their hands for a long white object, even a stub. In an instant, quicker than I thought anything could reach my liver and have it refuse, the liver screams hate, 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, and 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 certainly have taken my mask 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"; my jig was up. 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-assignment of "I am highly sensitive" furthers the fiction of my dependence to others' independence. The question then becomes which bodies can bear the fiction of independence and of uninterruptedness.

The insinuation or revelation of disability dovetails complexly with issues of coming out: discourses of sexuality and passing. Living with my illness, not wearing a mask counts as a guise of passing, of nondisability: 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 consideration of "masquerade" as an exaggeration of disability symbols to manage or intervene in social schemas about ability and disability.²³ Siebers

does not seem to imagine the possibility of a literal mask when he theorizes the “masquerade” (a word expressly derived from the dance or ball at which masks are worn) as expressive exaggeration. I wonder if Siebers assumes a mask could only already be masquerade for its apparent radical departure from the facial presentations of normative public embodiments.

Queer Ingestion

There is a potency and intensity to two animate or inanimate bodies passing one another, bodies that have an exchange—a potentially queer exchange, I suggest—that effectively risks the implantation of injury. The quality of the exchange may be at the molecular level, where airborne molecules enter the breathing apparatus, molecules that may or may not have violent bodily effects, or the exchange may be visual, where the meeting of eyes unleashes a series of pleasurable or unpleasurable bodily reactions such as chill, pulse rush, adrenaline, heat, fear, tingling skin.

Let us revisit the child licking his lead train, the scene that must be avoided at all costs. Both the mobility of ingestible air and its nonemptiness demonstrate to us 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 social grammar of such encounters, for the grammar itself—one of effacement, avoidance, infectious threat, and fear—predicts only negative toxicity.

I am, in fact, still seeking ways to effect a smile behind my mask. This can mean 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 a Michael's crafts shop, full as it is of scents and glues and fiberboard. The register clerk was very sweet and 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 repulsive affect; indeed “SARS!” is what has been used to interpellate me in the streets.

So how is it that so much of this toxic world, in the form of perfumes, cleaning products, body products, plastics, all laden with injurious chemicals that damage us, is encountered by so many of us as benign or pleasurable? And how is it that we are doing this, doing all this, to ourselves? Yet even as the toxins themselves spread far and wide, such a “we” is a false unity. There are those who find themselves on the underside of industrial “development”—women hand-painting vaporous toys by the hundreds daily without protection; agricultural workers with little access to health care picking fruit in a cloud of pesticides, methane, and fertilizer that is breathable only in a strictly mechanical sense; people living adjacent to pollution-spewing factories or downwind of a refinery installed by a distant neocolonial metropolis, or in the abjected periphery of a gentrified urban “center”; those living in walls fortified with lead that peel inward in a false embrace; domestic workers laboring in toxic conditions, taking into their bodies what their better-vested employers can then avoid.

Intoxicated Subjects

Who, then, are these laboring or literally intoxicated subjects described above? Can they demand revisions of our queer accountings when they stand in for productivity’s queers, rather than reproductivity’s queers? I gesture here to the inherent connectivities, the bonds in fact, between all the subjects “here” that I just described, living and working in U.S. poverty, and the toy-assembly workers in China, Southeast Asia, India, Mexico, and so on. Both groups are exposed literally, economically, and rhetorically to toxic by-products of transnational capital flows, receiving their share of poisoned assets. The kinds of bonds that link these groups, bonds that are recognized in the potent affinities of transnational labor and immigrant activism, have been laid there from without, to suture and reinforce multiple transnational systems of racialization, labor hierarchy, and capital—and ultimately of affection or nonaffection. These groups are industrialization’s canaries.

The nature of my metal poisoning, accumulated over decades, is that any and every organ, including my brain, can bear damage. Symptoms can reflect the toxicity of any organ and are a laundry list of cognition, proprioception, emotion, agitation, muscle strength, tunnel perception, joint pain, nocturnality. Metal-borne

damage to the liver's detoxification pathways means that I cannot sustain many everyday toxins, so that, once they enter, they recirculate rather than leave. I can sometimes become "autism-spectrum" in the sense that I cannot take too much stimulation, such as touch, sound, or direct human engagement, including even 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 because the toxin has altered a self, has directly transformed an affective matrix: affect goes faster, affect goes hostile, goes toxic. Traditional psychology, I suspect, can be only an overlay here, a reading of what has already transformed the body; it cannot fully rely on canonical 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 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 so as to inhale something that won't hurt me, turning toward a thing or correspondingly away from it means that to a radical degree humans are 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; reminders of immunity's fictivity, attachment's impermanence. Life sustains even—especially?—in this kind of silence, this kind of pause, this disability. 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, unable 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; I can't look at her and can 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 is my cat or a chair or a friend or a plant or a stranger or my partner, I think they are, and remember them as, the same ontological thing. 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—once again bringing 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? 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 intimacy, 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; I wonder whether or how much they are really made of habit.

Toxic Theory

Matters of life and death have arguably underlain queer theory from at least the time of its nomination in the early nineties, when ACT UP and radical queer AIDS activism blended saliently with the academic theorizing of politics of gender and sexuality. Signal to queer theory's interest in queer relationality, Lee Edelman takes up a psychoanalytic analysis of queerness's figural deathly assignment in relation to a relentless reproductive futurity.²⁴ Jasbir Puar points to life-death economies that simultaneously segregate some queer subjects to the privileged realms of 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."²⁵ Similar affective pulses of surging liveness or morbid resignation might reflect the legacy of the deathly impact of AIDS in queer scholarship and might as well have reflexes in utopian or anti-utopian thinking in queer theory. 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 utopia whose major

concerns are limited to gay marriage and gay service in the military: lifely for a few, deathly for others.²⁶

Toxicity straddles boundaries of “life” and “nonlife,” as well as the literal bounds of bodies, in ways that introduce a certain complexity to the presumption of integrity of either lifely or deathly subjects. While never undergoing sustained theorization in queer theory, toxicity has nevertheless retained a certain resonance there and a certain citational pull.²⁷

Roberto Esposito’s *Bios* develops the idea of the “immunizing paradigm,” which in his view is implicitly interwoven with community. Immunity is thus contracted on a “poisoned” affect of gratitude (on the basis of membership in a community) that undercuts the final possibility of individual immunity. Imbalances are inherent to the model; an “interdependent social ecology of bodies” could easily yield desires for greater protection, and some bodies might legally build greater immunity against others.²⁸ Esposito identifies the shaky prescription of the introjection of the negative agent as a way to defend against its exterior identity. I wonder, however, whether toxicity meddles with the subject-object relations required for even this immunitary ordering that Esposito suggests. 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? At the same time, toxicity releases “life” from any absolute need to contain or protect it. Toxicity is simultaneously released from the realm of the dead, even as immunity remains premised on the generativity of life.²⁹

I find myself dancing in this essay between advocating the notional release of the metaphor of toxicity and marking its biopolitical entrainment as an instrument of difference. While the first seems theoretically important to allow a kind of associative theorizing, it is important to retain simultaneously a fine sensitivity to the vastly different intersectional sites in which toxicity involves itself in very different lived experiences (or deaths)—for instance, a broker’s relation to “toxic bonds” versus a farmworker’s relation to pesticides. One toxin is metaphorical; the other literal. Yet metaphorical luxuries can have deadly consequences. Michael Davidson reminds us that while literary analogical treatments of disability render disabled characters as functional prostheses who are merely there to help entrench a nondisabled subject position, “there are cases in which a prosthesis is *still* a prosthesis.”³⁰ Sometimes a mask is still a mask, even if it is simultaneously a masquerade.

Animacy, Interobjectivity

A discussion of toxicity and affect calls for a concomitant discussion of the idea of *animacy*. Sianne Ngai demonstrates how one of animacy's correlates, animatedness, can become a quality of racialized affect.³¹ Yet the word *animacy* has no single definition. It is described alternately as a quality of agency, sentience, or liveness; it is also a term of linguistic semantics that registers the grammatical ramifications of the sentience of a noun. It can also be considered a philosophical concept that addresses questions of life and death. These many meanings must be sustained together, for they all circulate biopolitically, running through conditionally sentient and nonsentient, live and dead, agentive and passive bodies. We can then ask not "who is alive, or dead," but "what is animate, or inanimate, or less animate"; relationally, we can ask about the possibilities of the interobjective, above and beyond the intersubjective.³² For instance, Jennifer Terry's recent work on the love of objects, as well as the tradition of fetish scholarship, speaks to an intensified investment in objects; it is useful to build on this work, then, to ask questions of the subject facing that object, precisely how or why to mark its subjectivity as such, and when instead to consider its objectivity.³³ This interobjective tack is suggested, for instance, by the above example of the couch, with which my relationality is made possible only to the degree that I am not in possession of human sociality.

Sara Ahmed writes extensively about her orientation toward a table of hers and that table's orientation toward her. "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."³⁴ I first must agree, but then find that what she nevertheless still presumes in this work is the proper integrity of her body and of the table, an exclusion of molecular travel that permits her to position one thing against another. Yes, she is talking mainly about the perception of integrity, but my contention here is that percepts are to some degree bypassed, for instance, by the air itself. Standing before you, I ingest you. There is nothing fanciful about this. I am ingesting your exhaled air, your sloughed skin, and the skin of the tables, chairs, and carpet in this room.

Ahmed's reading takes for granted the deadness and/or inanimacy of that table, as a reference point for the orientation of a life, one in which the table is moved according to its owner's purposes and conveniences. And while it would be

unfair to ask of her analysis something not proper to its devices, I do wonder how this analysis must change once the animate/inanimate object distinctions collapse, when we move beyond the exclusionary zone made up of the perceptual operands of phenomenology. The affective relations I have with this couch are not made out of a predicted script and are received as no different from those with animate beings, which, depending on perspective, is both their failing and their merit. My question here is, what is lost when we hold tightly to that exceptionalism that says that couches are dead and we are alive? 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? Or must couches be cathected differently from humans? Or do only certain couches 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 reasonable.

For animacy is a category mediated not by whether you are a couch, a piece of lead, a human child, or an animal but by how you interpret the thing of concern and how dynamic you wish it to be. Above and beyond the philosophical intersubjectivity we might analytically afford ourselves, there is the strict physicality of the elements that travel in, on, and through us, and sometimes stay. If we ingest each other's genetic code-driven replication of skin cells, as well as each other's personal care-driven application of synthetic skin creams, then animacy comes to appear as a category itself held in false containment. Also, the toxicity of the queer to the heterosexual collective or individual body; the toxicity of the dirty subjects to the white empire; 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 propels, not repels, queer loves, especially once we release it from exclusively human hosts, disproportionately inviting disability, industrial labor, biological targets—inviting loss and its "losers," and trespassing containers of animacy. We need not assign the train-licking boy so *surely* to the nihilistic underside of futurity or to his own termination, figurative or otherwise. I would of course be naive to imagine that toxicity stands in for utopia, given the explosion of resentful, despairing, painful, screamingly negative affects that surround toxicity. Nevertheless, I do not want to deny the queer productivity of toxins and toxicity, quite beyond the given enumerable set of addictive or pleasure-inducing substances, or to neglect indeed to ask after the desires, 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.

Notes

Special thanks go to Rebekah Edwards for important thinking-with during formative stages of this project; thanks also to Julian Carter, Don Romesburg, Rita Alfonso, Dana Luciano, and the guest editors of this issue. I am grateful to the Species Spectacles: Transnational Coordinations of Animality, Race, and Sexuality group at the University of California Humanities Research Institute from September to December 2009. Carla Freccero, Judith Halberstam, Tamara Ho, Claire Jean Kim, Tonglin Lu, Kyla Schuller, and David Theo Goldberg provided me with a compelling intellectual context for developing these lines of thought. Huge thanks to Julia Bryan-Wilson for asking the right questions when I thought the article was done.

1. For one such account and analysis, see Sandra Steingraber, *Living Downstream: An Ecologist Looks at Cancer and the Environment* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997). Recent years have also witnessed a growth of toxin-testing private and non-profit agencies.
2. These metaphors span a range of popular discourse, including Britney Spears’s Grammy-winning hit song, “Toxic” (*In the Zone*, 2003), in which she sings, “Don’t you know that you’re toxic/And I love what you do.”
3. For a more detailed account of the lead panic and its shared resonances with the peculiar toxicity of a much earlier Fu Manchu fantasy about Asian threat materialized in the form of an interspecies/inanimate “serum,” see Mel Y. Chen, “Racialized Toxins and Sovereign Fantasies,” *Discourse* 29, nos. 2–3 (2007): 367–83.
4. The actual picture is dramatically more complex. Chinese residents are being poisoned by their “own” industries, through pollution of water, air, food, and soil, and the regular failure of government protections from industrial toxins has led to a dramatic rise in community protests, lawsuits, and organized activist movements.
5. Nonstatehood has come into mature relationship with the possibility of terrorism, evidenced most recently by the fact that U.S. Senator Joe Lieberman has, with some support, proposed revoking the citizenship of those who demonstrate financial support or other forms of allegiance to U.S.-deemed “terrorist” organizations.
6. For more accounts of the rhetorical strategies of environmental justice activism, see, for example, Julie Sze, *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Francis Calpotura and

- Rinku Sen, "PUEBLO Fights Lead Poisoning," in *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*, ed. Robert Bullard (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994), 234–55. For general approaches to environmental justice, see Robert Bullard, ed., *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2005).
7. Leslie Wayne, "The Enemy at Home," *New York Times*, October 8, 2009. This was the print title; the online version is titled "Thousands of Homeowners Cite Drywall for Ills," www.nytimes.com/2009/10/08/business/08drywall.html.
 8. Angel Jennings, "Thomas the Tank Engine Toys Recalled Because of Lead Hazard," *New York Times*, June 15, 2007. In an incisive response to my talk at UC Irvine, Gabriele Schwab referred to the "here, not there"-ness of lead toxicity, its surprising emergence in privileged bodies, as "involuntary environmental justice."
 9. David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001). Eng, working off a photograph that through omission performs the erasure of Chinese labor in the building of the railroads, performs a literary analysis of the rhetorical suppression of Asian American presence in relation to "racial melancholia" in the United States.
 10. There are some exceptions. Among individual public responses to either professional journalism or blogged expressions of the toxicity of lead toys and/or the toxicity of Chinese products, one can find alerts to the more complex, sometimes imperial, relationships among U.S.-borne and transnational corporate interests, U.S. consumer interests, Chinese government, and Chinese transnationalized labor. For all the complexity it might have included in its coverage, mainstream publications have symptomatically resorted to either occasional gestures of alarmism or confluences of biosecurity threats with the catchall nomination of "China." For an excellent study of representations of Chinese biosecurity threats and U.S. empire and the recent SARS global event, see Gwen D'Arcangelis, "Chinese Chickens, Ducks, Pigs and Humans, and the Technoscientific Discourses of Global U.S. Empire," in *Tactical Biopolitics: Art, Activism, and Technoscience*, edited by Beatriz da Costa and Kavita Philip (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 429–42.
 11. See, for instance, Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003) and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
 12. For the class and race qualifications of the sick building syndrome movements and forms of activism, see Michelle Murphy, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty: Environmental Politics, Technoscience, and Women Workers* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
 13. "A mind is a terrible thing to waste," reads the United Negro College Fund's campaign to further blacks' access to education. Dan Quayle's perversion of this slogan,

- “What a terrible thing it is to lose one’s mind,” suggests what fantasies about blackness might underlie benevolent white representations.
14. I thank Don Romesburg for first getting me to indulge in this sensory fantasy.
 15. I am invoking the impossible juncture between the queernesses “naturally” afforded to children and the fear of a truly queer child. For more, see Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). Also see Steven Bruhm and Natsha Hurley, eds., *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
 16. Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 88–89.
 17. For biopolitical approaches to medicine, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) and *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1970). See also Donna Haraway, “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse,” *differences* 1, no. 1 (1989): 3–43; and Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate(d) Others,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 295–337.
 18. Ed Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). Cohen’s book discusses the history and ramifications of the adoption of an originally legal and political (not biological) concept of immunity into medicine.
 19. For more extensive studies of immunity (which toxicity implicates), see these respectively philosophical, discursive, and anthropological treatments: Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Cohen, *Body Worth Defending*; Emily Martin, *Flexible Bodies: The Role of Immunity in American Culture from the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS* (Boston: Beacon, 1994).
 20. Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) has had a tremendous impact on the thinking of the politicized line and relationship between life and death. Achille Mbembe extends this theorizing into postcolonial modes of analysis in “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40; and Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
 21. Both Cohen and Esposito write of the immune system’s contradictory injunction to introject the toxic elements precisely in order to protect life.
 22. This argument bears some resemblance to Deleuzian interspersal and symbiosis. For example, Gilles Deleuze and Félix 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. 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 can be useful here in the sense that this article attempts not only to accentuate proximal relations among categorically differentiated entities (in this article’s case, 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, Chinese toys function as a kind of “assemblage” of biology, affect, nationality, race, and chemistry. I have found it of use to hold to materiality here, insofar as it offers a potentially useful purchase in thinking through queer relating and racialized transnational feeling. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal . . .,” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 272–73.
23. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2008), 101–8. For complexities of passing and disclosure, see also Ellen Samuels, “My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming-Out Discourse,” *GLQ* 9 (2003): 233–55; and Robert McRuer, “Coming Out Crip,” in *Crip Theory*, 33–76. On compulsory able-bodiedness in relation to queer-crip perspectives, see Alison Kafer, “Compulsory Bodies: Reflections on Heterosexuality and Able-Bodiedness,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 77–89; Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Queerness, Disability, and Liberation* (Boston: South End, 1999).
 24. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
 25. Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), xii.
 26. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
 27. Eve Sedgwick’s implicit logic of the toxic as an excisable element of a self and her concomitant rejection of toxicity as a model for shame was in some ways redeployed with a difference by Muñoz, who used the notion of disidentification to represent the willing uptake of toxic elements in order to pose new figurations of identity and minoritarian/majoritarian politics. Christine Bacareza Balance juxtaposes public health’s indictment of queer Filipino bodies with disproportionately high HIV rates as “toxic subjects” with the possibility of shared queer Filipino American drug trips as pleasurable and intimate counterpublics. See Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Christine Bacareza Balance, “On Drugs: The Production of Queer Filipino America through Intimate Acts of Belonging,” *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 16, no. 2 (2006): 269–82.

28. Esposito, *Bios*, xiii.
29. Thinking more specifically about the ethical/affective politics of geopolitical strife, particularly war, Judith Butler writes of vulnerability as a given condition, a condition that might inform a radically changed ethics were it to be acknowledged. See, e.g., *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).
30. Michael Davidson, "Universal Design: The Work of Disability in an Age of Globalization," in *Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard Davis (Routledge, 1996), 117–130.
31. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
32. Thanks to Michael Israel for naming this investment.
33. Jennifer Terry, "Objectum-Sexuality" (paper presented at "Rethinking Sex: A State of the Field Conference in Gender and Sexuality Studies," University of Pennsylvania, March 4–6, 2009).
34. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).