

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.

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 lifeliness 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: lively 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 lively 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

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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 conflation 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).

Openings and Retrospectives



FIRES, FOGS, WINDS

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My desire is on fire. Its velocity is exhilarating. Its direction is the wind. I am simultaneously racing in front of and away from it. I am it chasing me with its inhuman legs. I want it to catch me. But I understand the consequences if it does. So I keep running just in front, but not too far away from its encroaching reach. My desire and I are asymptotic; if it becomes mine, then I am on fire. I don't know if this is a universal quality of desire, or if it is the specific condition of me.

SUBJECTIFICATION

When I was two and a half years old, we moved from Buffalo, New York to Shreveport, Louisiana, a trip less treacherous, perhaps, than the distance my paternal grandparents traveled from the vicious Austro-Hungarian and Italian Alps to the United States (see [Thompson 2009](#)). My parents burrowed our new home into the edge of an old pine forest around which slowly grew a suburb: clean, white, and affluent in the old, middle-class, white, affluent way. But dry pine

needles beckon fire to release their intense aroma. And my brother loved fire. The drama of fire: from the first sound of the rough scratch where redhead meets sandpaper to the glorious transition of stick into flame. Under the tingling of wind in pines you can hear the sound of heat eating air, consuming it. And everything is parchment-dry in the incinerating southern summers. It can happen very quickly. Woods burn. Houses burn. Old logging factories burn. Another brother and I raced behind with water buckets and piss. And that, too, that horrid sound when water kills fire. What onomatopoeia captures its sensory disappointment? To fizzle, to fizzle out, to sputter out, to end feebly: how much better to hit the ferocious walls of rain, cold and pelting, that also consumed the north Louisiana summers, the wild thunderstorms that drove walls of water toward you, burned your skin as they ripped across it, lit trees on fire. And sometimes, when you were very, very lucky, the rain and lightning kept time with vicious little ice balls that we heard could kill you dead. We ran with fire. We ran with the rain. We were desperate to get out of the way of the fires. We were jubilant ahead of the rain, less so if we got caught by it. We wanted to experience just barely escaping death.

We also ran with the fog trucks, sometimes ahead, but often behind them. It was a game we played—who could run the longest, the closest, to the nozzle spewing the pesticides in great clouds? The trick was not to breathe. To run at full speed without breathing, then to quickly veer away from the cloud when your lungs gave out and your heart began to explode. It was great fun. We loved the sign of an approaching truck, the smell it gave off far ahead of its appearance. The love had nothing to do with how effectively the pesticide DDT rid the neighborhood of mosquitoes and their parasites. And we weren't the only ones playing with the fog. Entire generations spontaneously invented the same game across countless neighborhoods in the United States. We can ask, what were we thinking? What was anyone thinking? We can try to calculate the effects of this widespread pastime. But I will tell you something true: when I think of our races, their wild, uncontaminated intoxication is not diminished by the knowledge that they were toxic—any less than our flying ahead of raging fire is diminished by the knowledge that we could well have died, that we might be imperceptibly burning inside out from the long-lasting effects of DDT. These fires, fogs, and winds were a part of us. They were elemental to what we were because they were the elements that composed us. Yes, true, we also were juvenile accelerationists. My brothers built ancient sailing ships out of manila filing folders, toothpicks, and thread, chalking the driveway with Herodotus's lands and seas, flicking

matches as if they were flying balls of Greek fire, but often devolving as we smeared gasoline on our sweat shirts and turned the matches on each other. This was elemental to our desire—smearing ourselves with gasoline and then racing away from the match.



Figure 1. A fogging machine spraying the streets of Darwin, Australia, with DDT in 1962.
Photo by Ken Hodge, licensed under CC BY.

The one very good thing my parents did, confronted by their wild children, was to refuse a new solution to all of this crazy shit with the neural pesticide Ritalin. Their solution to the effects of our running games was to keep us running. *Burn it out of your system*, they'd say. And lest we think this pure metaphor, they bought us chemistry kits and showed us how heat was expressed in chemical reactions and how heat could turn one kind of thing into another. *You see fire*, they said, but fire is just an expression of one form of oxidation. What's important is not what you can see, but what you can't. It's all a careful measure. It's all about knowing which chemicals are in which containers and how chemicals combine. It's probably important to wear protective clothing. Chemicals burn in ways you might not notice until it is too late.

TERRITORIALIZATION

In Rochester, New York, the great Kodak factory is undergoing a controlled demolition and a phased reorientation. Kodak Park is becoming the Eastman Business Park. It cannot happen soon enough for the city of Rochester. The collapse of the market for film sank the Eastman Kodak Company into debt and left it to hemorrhage vast numbers of its once tens of thousands of employees, who worked across 154 buildings on 1,300 acres. In 2012, the city's unemployment topped 11.7 percent. As company and personal debt rose, tales of toxic swamps and sinkholes leaked out. Those billions of stilled memories and moving fantasies suddenly had a toxic unconscious. The material afterimages of those Kodak moments emerged as fibromyalgia, neuropathy, and primary biliary cirrhosis. Lawsuit after lawsuit followed. Kodak admitted to violations of air- and water-pollution laws that created "an underground plume of chemicals" ([Hanley 1990](#)). Cancer clusters were tracked. Superfund sites were established and managed. New forms of employment emerged as the film was run backward and a secret toxic image seen. Cleanup can be lucrative. Servpro Industries makes between \$100 and \$500 million of revenue each year by providing residential and commercial restoration and cleaning services in the United States and Canada.

Its services include water damage repair and restoration, fire damage repair and restoration, and mold remediation and restoration. The company also provides storm damage cleanup and restoration services for various disasters, such as flooding caused by heavy rains, hurricanes and tidal surges, tornados and wind damage, ice and snowstorms, and wild fires. Its cleaning services include odor removal, and sewage and biohazard cleanup, as well as services for trauma and crime scenes, and vandalism and graffiti. ([S&P Global Market Intelligence 2017](#))

Just be sure to wear protective clothing.

But some don't wear hazmat suits. They don't suit up, clean up, and leave. My father's sister and her family moved to Rochester when we moved to Shreveport. Wild raspberries grew in the woods behind their yard. They live and remain among the smoldering remains, not by necessity. Others remain because they have nowhere to go or no means to get there. Besides, as one man said, having

remained on top of the toxic plume: “I don’t think being on top of them will be any worse than living anywhere else” (Hanley 1990). Which does not mean that living amid the toxic plumes provides a space of composure. The invisibility of the hazard sparks an affective fire we call *anxiety*, which sears the neural system according to its own logics and remedies, adding velocity to system. Where are the toxins? Quasi-events and quasi-substances need trained or enhanced perception. How does one probe and discover the world that one is in, but can experience only peripherally? Artworks and digital designs are commissioned (see Shapiro 2015). How can we seal them off, if they are increasingly everywhere? New disciplines of environmental architecture are spawned. But alongside these old toxins new ones seep in, some legal, some not. How clean are the cleaners? And how corrosive the opiates of every sort, or the amphetamines that fill up the space left empty by collapsed industries (Pine 2007)? Newly timely, William Burroughs’s *Junky* is pulled out of storage and placed in airport bookstores as the innards of shrinking cities are pulled out and sold to fuel survival economies of a growing number of impoverished families and expanding addictions. And I mean to write *impoverished*, not merely *poor* (cf. Nixon 2011). And this impoverishment has a racial form, usually African American. Detroit, Michigan; Flint, Michigan: these are the current poster children of a new American dream. Neighborhoods burn, whether from wild fires or demolition crews. And as they do, what Catherine Fennell (2015) calls “ambient envelopes” of potent neurotoxins waft across neighborhoods as houses are demolished or stripped for their copper wiring. And while Detroit might be the poster child of the toxic afterlife of collapsed industries, Syracuse, New York, less than 150 kilometers from Rochester, faces a similar problem. The city invested nearly \$50 million to build a connective corridor between Syracuse University and its boutique, deco-dotted, picturesque neighborhoods to disconnect these from the infrastructural and social rot that has settled into its interstitial spatial tissue.

Where would my parents have us run at this point? Far away is nowhere different. And the past has a specific smell. The anthropologist Ali Feser (2015) has found that in spite of the hard evidence of Kodak’s liability, many former employees and their children simply could not kick their habit of associating the astringent smell of photographic chemicals with better days, happier moments, more secure futures. The sensory history of chemicals sear into the affects, creating bonds of desire, nostalgia, and mourning for the very toxins now slowly overheating bodies and landscapes. The odor embodies nostalgic sensations of full and secure employment, of a working middle class, of an intimate kinship among

capital, production, and consumption, and of work as something other than precarious labor, underwater mortgages, and mountains of debt. Sure, it has become clear by now that profit always mattered more than the vitality of bodies; that Michel Foucault's understanding of biopolitics should have emphasized more the fact that *making live* was an ideological cover for *letting die*; that the experience of vitality and potency was more like what a meth addict feels; that the battery acid, drain cleaner, antifreeze, and Sudafed are more expertly mixed than anyone thought. Now we know that geontopower was hiding in the open, telling everyone not to worry about the great expanse of nonlife, the soils and subsoils, the aquifers and ozone, until suddenly their irradiated glow surrounded us as chemico-capital made its vicious deal with consumptive and informational capitalism (see [Povinelli 2016](#)).

Between the rising tides and chemical burns, our bodies are stew pots cooking up a new form of posthuman politics with new forms of posthuman corporealities.

In the French Antilles, [Vanessa Agard-Jones \(2014\)](#) tries to track sexuality, race, and gender expression only to find the “chemical embodiment” of coming corporealities. Transnational circuits of pesto-capital—hormone-altering pesticides like chlordecone—are simultaneously giving rise to new forms of human bodies and new forms of national political collectives. The Allied Signal Company began manufacturing chlordecone, also known as kepone, in the 1950s in Hopewell, Virginia. After an environmental spill and public scandal in the 1970s, chlordecone was banned in the United States. But powerful planter groups on Martinique and Guadeloupe (principally local whites or *békés*) imported stockpiles of the pesticide with the approval of France, despite the fact that France had banned its use within its continental borders. France did not outlaw its use in its overseas, racialized territories until the 1990s. The interval produced increased levels of bodily maladies (prostate cancer, for example) as well as so-called abnormalities (intersex births, for example). And these bodies—born outside the body-with-organs and confronting an anxious bionormativity—are in turn producing a politics at the material intersection of carnal vulnerability and its chemical legacy.

Likewise, in the far north of Australia, the Karrabing Film Collective tries to tell a story that starts out with a simple premise—a group of young Indigenous men hiding in a chemically contaminated swamp after being falsely accused of stealing two cases of beer, while all around them miners are wrecking and polluting their land—and winds up in the paradox of contemporary toxic sovereignty. The young men note that they are safe within the swamp because state officials will not enter without hazmat suits. In toxic territoriality, a robust form of Indigenous sovereignty emerges. Karrabing members laugh or nod when coming to this moment in the film, most of them agreeing that what the young men say is true even as this truth has no place in sense. Or put somewhat differently, their conversation is diagnostic if not prognostic of the current condition of toxic sovereignty—a prognosis of a form of survivance in which survival does not quite fit into the picture.¹ In the process, fictional representations become nonfictional analytics. In a crucial scene, three fictional police capture one of the fictional Karrabing Land Rangers at a barbed-wire fence in the middle of the bush. Karrabing have walked through, around, and over this fence collecting wild honey, shooting kangaroo and pig, or looking for various sweet fruits for their entire lives. But when the filmmakers emerged from the shooting of the scene onto a public road, two nonfictional police confronted them, asking if they had illegally entered “the contaminated region” or altered signage in the area. Suddenly Karrabing members were curious: *what contaminated region?* They searched the Internet and found a 2014 document submitted to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works by Australia’s Department of Finance. It notes that asbestos and other highly toxic substances have been on the Cox Peninsula for more than seventy years, but never cleaned up for (*because of*) the largely Indigenous population in the area. Suddenly a legal but fictional sign turned into a factual but illegal sign. What was intended to produce an aesthetic experience transformed an aesthetic activity into an analytic of existence. And when the branch burns in the next fire season, a small plume of toxicity will be released as the paint boils. And with the winds might come other forms of toxicity. Although the Karrabing Film Collective does not shoot on film stock, the digital platforms on which it relies are as crucial to the overheating of that swamp and its chemical composition as the Eastman Kodak Company (see [Carruth 2014](#)).

My heart is exploding, but you are saying, “Keep running.” How do I hold my breath against the toxic winds when they have become the air?

ARISE

Fire is the element that transforms substances. It brings about new forms with new memories, desires, and nostalgia. These forms do not abide by the logic of vitality, but manifest an affiliation with the errant harms of a grinning geon-topower. Now, we know that fire is just one effect of oxidation—the loss of one or more electrons when two substances interact, a chemical bonding. The natural sciences believe that oceanic cyanobacteria were the first forms of life to produce oxygen through photosynthesis ([Holland 2006](#)). This Great Oxygenation Event set the Earth's original atmosphere off kilter, making humans the afterlife of cyanobacteria breath. Fire is merely rapid oxidation. And while water might put out some fires, it can also cause others to spark. When water meets potassium, salt, and zinc powder a flamboyant green flame ignites. But oxidation is pressing on all things, as oxygen molecules seek free radicals, slowly eating through paint and looking for an uneven distribution of lemon juice on an open-faced avocado. The brown on a cut apple, the rust on a car bumper, and the green on the Florence Baptistery relief: all are the result of different rates of oxidation, leading some people to call rust a slow fire that produces iron as ash. The difference in rates depends, in part, on the ignition temperature of a substance. If you want a fire, you need to get the substance to that temperature. Some can get there on their own. Hay mounds, pistachio nuts, and manure piles all can spontaneously combust if not stored in ways that keep their temperatures under control. Coal seams can light on fire if exposed to certain levels of oxygen. Other substances need external ignition. And if you want it to run, add an accelerant. In terms of climate change, remove more ozone and spread volatile chemicals widely. As the world overheats, the accelerant will be the winds.

In here and out there, atoms and ions, winds and rivers, attracting and repulsing each other in ways that reveal desire to be a feeble concept. Bioterrorism connects DIY hormo-terrorists with religious apocalypto-terrorists (see [Preciado 2013](#)). Free radicals refer to new alliances between post-toxic humans and klepto-electrons. The chemistry sets have hopped out of their multicolored boxes, the chemicals remixing according to their own sense. Some bodies are running toward a new smell. Some are running away as fast as they can.

The bonds I seek are outside me in the smell of burning pine, the memory of the madness of DDT, the touch of my various smartphones as we shoot Kar-rabing films to unravel the toxicity that surrounds Indigenous worlds. But thinking the nature of desire through these bonds interrupts the staid intersection of climate-change policy and science. We think there is a choice between mitigation and adaptation. But a very different kind of adaptation is already well underway. The voracious nature of information capitalism exhales its toxic winds as it redistributes an older assemblage of viruses and their hosts. The Great Climate Acceleration is underway “with faster rates of change resulting in less time for human and natural systems to adapt” (Smith et al. 2015, 333). Everything is on fire. And we are already producing our afterlife as our enjoyments seed new digital clouds and chemicals seep into more aquifers, mixing and spreading new anxieties. These fires, fogs, and winds are surrounding the poor, the black and brown, the islands, and the verging-on-extinct first. But from the future, we will have been the cyanobacteria. Who will be us is not yet clear.

NOTE

1. According to Gerald Vizenor (1999, vii), “survance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry.”

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