

Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Effect

Mel Y. Chen

Duke University Press, 2012, 312 pp.

ISBN 978-0-8223-5272-3

Mel Y. Chen is Associate Professor of Gender & Women's Studies at U.C. Berkeley and Director of the Center for the Study of Sexual Culture. Chen's research areas include queer and gender theory, critical race theory and Asian American studies, disability studies, and critical linguistics. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (2012) articulates a vigorous new materialist study of the concept of "animacy," and offers a compelling look at the multifaceted ways how animacy is defined as "an acknowledgment of a quality of agency, awareness, mobility, and liveness". Chen's aim is to "reconsider the precise conditions of the application of life and death, and the working ontologies (2012, p.1). By focusing on contemporary biopolitics such as Achille Mbembe's necropolitics and Giorgio Agamben's bare life, the book traverses modern disciplinary categories and makes a great fit for Duke University Press's *Perverse Modernities* series edited by Judith Halberstam and Lisa Lowe.

The main argument in Chen's book revolves around recent debates on sexuality, race, environment, and affect to reimagine and reformulate the matter that is once perceived as insensate, immobile, deathly or otherwise wrong. The book makes a gripping read and opens up thought-provoking questions about the ways in which the matter animates cultural life and works linguistically in important and complex ways. Chen, by using animacy as a central construct, seeks to upset the binary of life and nonlife by offering a different way of relationality and intersubjectivity that are predicated on sex, race, and class.

The book is arranged into three parts, with two chapters each: “Words”, “Animals” and “Metals”. These individual parts investigate a feature of animacy with a particular focus. In “Words,” the focus is on language and figural dehumanization; in “Animals,” the reader tracks a feature of animacy based on queer animals and animality; in “Metals,” toxicity becomes the main area of inquiry. Each chapter seeks to construe a transdisciplinary method aligned with Chen’s background in cognitive linguistics that refers to queer of color, feminist, and disability scholarship. In the “Introduction,” Chen discusses the multifaceted construals of life and death, underscoring contemporary biopolitics. In doing so, Chen revisits the concept of animacy, uncovering implicit mediations of human and inhuman, particularly in the transnationally conceived United States. In Chen’s analysis, the idea of animacy appears as “racialized and sexualized means of conceptual and affective” mediation between human and inhuman, animate and inanimate through different registers in language, rhetoric, and imagery. This kind of animate crossings and changing disciplinary intimacies are aptly concerned with questions of race, sexuality, and disability in each part.

In the first chapter of “Words”, “Language and Mattering Humans,” Chen investigates what linguists call an “animacy hierarchy” by rethinking language as animated through embodied condensation of social, cultural, and political life. In this chapter, Chen examines an exceptional form of linguistic usage to urge us to comprehend different gradations of animacy and objectification. By utilizing the concept of linguistic insult and its iterative power as representational injury, the author turns to questions of objectification that have been long discussed in critical race, feminist, and disability theory. Chen gives the example of “macaca” that was used by the U.S. Senator George Allan, a Republican from Virginia, at a rally for his candidacy for reelection to the Senate in 2006. The word macaca, as Chen mentions, is hinged on the complex historicity of racialized animality, illuminating such dehumanizing insults that allude to the nonhuman animal. In the second chapter named “Queer Animation”, Chen asks as follows: “If language helps us to coerce certain figures into nonbeing, or to demote on animacy hierarchy, then

what are the modes of revival, return, or rejoinder?"(2012, p.58). Here, Chen investigates the ways in which humans reclaim distressed agencies as a move toward political agency. By analyzing queer's multiple references and senses, Chen articulates on the idea that there are two lexicalized forms: a "re-animated queer verb," and a "de-animated queer noun" that unleash their own reclaimed animations.

In the second part, *Animals*, Chen delves into the problematics of presumed superiority of humans and politics of exclusion by questioning liberal humanism's fictions such as "treated me like a dog". This chapter revolves around the ways in which animality creeps into textures of humanness. In the third chapter "Queer Animality," Chen addresses racialized animacy and points to vibrancies of the queer figure, albeit paradoxically. The author uses performativity to gesture towards a theoretical kinship between queerness and animality. In doing so, Chen revisits the English philosopher J.L. Austin and his work "a marriage with a monkey" asking whether this is a response to heteronormative and righteous marriage. Chen also mentions that Shoshana Felman marks the monkey example as a "monstrous marriage," and "evidence of the black humor" of Austin's text, underwriting the function of "triviality of the witty example". Chen, then, questions the stakes of this kind of humor that the marriage provokes for its readers. Concerning animality, Chen also focuses on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in terms of increased Asian immigration in the United States, illuminating how Chinese are promulgated as rats in visual media and advertisements. According to Chen, decentering the ontological cohesion of "the human" and blurring the hierarchy of human-animal-vegetable-mineral are some of the interventions that queer animacies offer. In chapter four "Animals, Sex, and Transsubstantiation," Chen begins with biopolitical questions of animal and human neutering and asks how gender and family are queered to address the challenges to the normativity of sex. Even though this chapter seems like a massive convoluted stretch, it invites an interesting queer analysis in animal neutering and castration, and hence rightly extends biopolitical thinking.

Animacy, for Chen, becomes a property of insensate particles and triggers anxiety about permeable borders, whether of skin or country. Thus, the final part “Metals,” revolves around the Chinese lead toys panic in the United States in 2007 and its representation in mainstream media. This part traces physical travel of lead as an industrial by-product, while referring to its representation of national security concerns and interests. In the fifth chapter “Lead’s Racial Matters,” Chen aptly traces lead’s *mythic origins*, and *mythic targets*, illuminating the fact that black children’s exposure to lead are ignored. In the sixth chapter “Following Mercurial Affect”, Chen shifts the book’s main perspective from a theoretical investigation of animacy to the biopolitical impact of environmental toxins on human bodies in terms of present-day emergent illnesses. According to Chen, the body’s fragility is constantly threatened by animacy that takes mobile and molecular form of mercury. In this chapter, Chen traces Roberto Esposito’s paradigm of community, immunity, and biopolitics. By tracing mercurial affect through immunity and biopolitics, Chen examines emergent illnesses in the context of environmental illnesses that reshape intimacies and forms of sociality as queer and disordered proximities. The last part, “Afterword: The Spill and the Sea”, deftly summarizes the affective politics surrounding both animate and inanimate things. Chen brings together the Oil Spill in the Gulf of Mexico (April 2010) and “the human-wanna-be fish,” protagonist of the animated Hayao Miyazaki film *Ponyo* (2008) in order to discuss unexpected affectivity and unruly agencies that surround and poison us.

Chen convincingly illuminates how scholars and activists might respond to hierarchies, racialized animacies, and environmental risks by recognizing the material agency of our own bodies entangled in the world. While *Animacies* invites readers to rethink their own corporeal permeability, the ways we consume and of course are consumed by others, it makes an intersectional mode of reading to trouble the human exceptionalism. *Animacies* urges us to understand our “vexed and often painful complicity” in the order of things and underlines “deconstructive consequences of contemporary biopolitics” in terms of an “ethics of care and sensitivity accompanied by political revision” (2012, p. 237). This

understanding renders an admirable hope and compelling analytical lens to bring to the fore possible queer intimacies that shake the humanist hierarchical ladder. However, the book's dispersion in terms of its analytical focus, at times, leaves some critical areas under-elaborated, and thus confuses the reader. Particularly, biopolitical theory Chen draws upon suffers from vague theoretical abstractedness. Even though Chen includes Mbembe's necropolitics and Agamben's bare life in terms of deconstruction of life and death, and mentions Esposito's immunity, the discussion on biopolitics needs substantive elaboration to escape heavy rhetorical moves throughout the book. The words such as animacy, animality, queer, and toxic are discussed compellingly, yet, at times, lack clarity and precision. That said, *Animacies* is an ambitious intellectual work that offers brilliant moments of slippage in terms of queering human subjects, objects, and affect.

Deniz Gündoğan-İbrişim
Washington University in St. Louis