



PROJECT MUSE®

Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect by Mel Y. Chen (review)

Neel Ahuja

Journal of Asian American Studies, Volume 17, Number 2, June 2014,
pp. 229-231 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/jaas.2014.0019](https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2014.0019)



➔ For additional information about this article
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jaas/summary/v017/17.2.ahuja.html>



REVIEW

***Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, by Mel Y. Chen. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012. Xi + 297 pp. \$23.95 paper. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5272-3.**

To read Mel Chen's book *Animacies* is both a challenge and a pleasure, as Chen's playful text invites readers into a surprising range of themes, methods, and ethical commitments. This breadth is apparent in Chen's expansive notion of "animacy," which refers to the field of relationships in which bodies (ranging from humans to monkeys, couches, metal particles, and words) encounter power structures that mediate between life and death. While the book documents commonplace associations of privileged bodies with movement, language, sentience, and other capabilities signifying liveliness, Chen argues that dominant "animacy hierarchies" are always in flux and subject to rescripting. This allows Chen to recuperate the "affect" or relational potential of maligned bodies viewed as inanimate, subhuman, or somehow disabled. By documenting the political effects of this zone of bodily entanglements forged through discourses of race, species, disability, and sexuality, Chen offers an opening for "posthumanist" critical projects (affect theory, object-oriented ontology, animal studies, etc.) to articulate a critique of life and matter without suspending attention to social difference. Put simply, Chen proposes that the sorting of bodies as more or less "alive" forms the basic "stuff" or matter of politics.

Animacies offers a dizzying array of field engagements and approaches to writing. If early in the introduction Chen describes the book's novel contribution as bringing the concept of animacy in relation to "queer of color scholarship, critical animal studies, and disability theory," the text also reveals the author's engagement with performance studies, psychoanalysis, affect theory, medical anthropology, security studies, science studies, and linguistics. Although Chen assembles analytic objects improvisationally as the text jumps from words to bodies

to transnational media, the readings in the book consistently explore rhetorics of animalization, neutering, and contagion in racial formations centering on Asian American bodies. In the process, Chen blends a variety of approaches to writing, modeling an experimental and antidisciplinary queer method.

Beginning in part 1, “Words,” with an explication of animacy distinctions in the structure of language broadly and in the specific contexts of hate speech and the “reclamation” of defamatory appellations like “queer,” Chen moves in part 2, “Animals,” to the transnational circulations of bodies, images, commodities, and concepts. Chen explores the visual rhetorics of animalization in late nineteenth-century illustrations of “the yellow peril,” cinematic depictions of Fu Manchu, and the viral video of George Allen’s “macaca” slur aimed at Indian American campaign aide S. R. Sidarth. This analytic track repeatedly veers toward understanding how queer and disabled embodiments provide affective scaffolding for racial formation, for example in analyses of human marriages to nonhuman primates in the works of linguist J. L. Austin and filmmaker Nagisa Oshima; species transformation in Michael Jackson’s “Black or White” video; and media accounts of the facial injuries of Carla Nash after she was mauled by a friend’s companion chimpanzee. Part 3, “Metals,” expands on these accounts of interspecies touching and transmutation to examine the queer intimacies of apparently “dead” toxic metals. After analyzing the racial fears of lead poisoning in the “Chinese lead toy scare” of 2007, Chen moves at the end of the book to an autoethnography of the author’s experience of neurotoxicity attributed to mercury poisoning. These analyses are insightful accounts of the ways in which invisible metal particulates animate bodies, geographies of surveillance and racialization, and political cultures despite their categorization as inanimate matter.

If the breadth of Chen’s engagements seems intimidating, the author’s regular clarifications of critical debates open the book to unfamiliar readers. That said, to meander in Chen’s heady mix of fields, methods, and objects demands of readers an openness consistent with the author’s generosity to bodies demeaned as “insensate, immobile, deathly, or otherwise ‘wrong’” according to dominant animacy hierarchies (2). Readers who expect lengthy definitional debates, or who desire a generic model for how intersectionality across race, species, disability, and sexuality can be “applied” to other contexts, will have to confront Chen’s insistence on recuperating “the alchemical magic” of words and of critique itself—an insistence that refuses static ontologies (23). The book is intentionally more open, an assemblage of readings and digressions that could be endlessly disassembled and remixed.

Nonetheless, *Animacies* offers critical positions that will be of interest to Asian Americanists, especially as Chen links many abjected figures of Asian American

transnationalism (from the mercantile figure of yellow peril to the masked Asian body associated with SARS) to an account of biopower that centers racial embodiments. Whereas Michel Foucault classically defined a biopower that produces the human as species by letting live rather than making die, Chen attempts to recover “how inanimate objects and nonhuman animals participate in the regimes of life (making live) and coerced death (killing)”;

this involves a turn to Foucault’s early emphasis in *The Order of Things* on hierarchies of being (6). Chen’s move allows a political approach to affect that tracks its uptake in discourses of race, sexuality, species, and ability: “If affect includes affectivity—how one body affects another—then affect, in this book, becomes a study of the governmentality of animate hierarchies, an exploration of how acts seem to operate with, or against, the order of things” (12). Such a move contrasts with some contemporary critical projects—for example, necropolitical critique and queer antirelationality—that emphasize the productive power of death. Even if these emerging critical discourses scramble life/death coordinates, for Chen they do not ultimately undermine the binary between the two that underwrites animacy hierarchies. *Animacies* shifts the scale of relation to find curious, even minor vitalities and submerged affect in life disposed as “bare”; it is here that for Chen queer of color critique recuperates an expansive, ecological vision of sociality.

This is an ingenious move that expands on disability studies’ ethical refusal of the association of impairment with death and crosses with animal studies’ attempt to extend recognition of the liveliness shared across species. There are risks in establishing such an expansive vision of relationality. Further work will have to unpack Chen’s Deleuzian model of affect as relational potential given that it may place greater emphasis on vitalization rather than affective contexts of boredom, singularity, or immobilization—conditions that are important for disability critics who might take issue with associations of affect with mobility and capacity. Chen takes note of this problematic in a description of time spent on a leather couch during a bout of mercury sickness, noting the unusual intimacies of “stasis” and “waiting” even as such moments suggest other potentials, an “incredible wakefulness” (202, 1). In this recognition of the limits and uncertainties of relation, Chen exemplifies a queer critical method that takes difference seriously, down to the most basic forms of matter out of which political futures are constantly emerging.

Neel Ahuja

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL
