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animacies: biopolitics, racial mattering, and queer affect

Mel Y. Chen, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2012, 312pp.,
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seizing the means of reproduction: entanglements of feminism, health, and technoscience

Michelle Murphy, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2012, 272pp.,
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The books under review attend to the analysis of racialisation in the study of health, technoscience, activism and, in the case of *Animacies*, non-human animals and materialities. They do, however, differ significantly in approach, and may for that reason attract different kinds of readers.

Michelle Murphy focuses on the case of the white radical feminist health movement in Los Angeles, CA, from the 1970s onwards, which she uses as a lens to view late twentieth-century biopolitics in the United States and beyond. Murphy relates the notion of biopolitics to technologies such as hormonal birth control and immortal tissue cultures, which made 'life' in the second half of the twentieth century in various ways more alterable than before. This alterability included the potential to control reproduction, on which this book focuses. Murphy's study is an important contribution to gender history as well as science studies, a rethinking of 1970s feminisms not as ideologies but as forms of *technoscience and biopolitics in practice*. This provides a fresh and thought-provoking reading of the history of feminist activism: inspired by new materialist, critical geography and feminist technoscience scholars such as Donna Haraway, she reformulates the Foucauldian notion of genealogy into *biopolitical topology*.

The notion of topology captures feminist politics and practices as *assemblages*, the analysis of which accounts for both layered movements in relation to the past (genealogies) and the multiplicity of feminisms' connections in spatial terms, nationally and internationally. I find stimulating what I read as the author's rethinking of historical methodology through new materialism, in which she empirically approaches the studied technologies as mobile. Here, mobility means both the ways in which the technologies crossed national boundaries and political contexts and the ways in which the technologies themselves ontologically transformed in this process, to which I return below.

Murphy's approach sees 1970s white feminist activism as something more than *resistance* to the dominant US biopolitics. The book achieves a rare success in

both arousing profound admiration of past feminisms while at the same time demonstrating critically how, to use Murphy's terms, they consisted of 'counter-conduct', which was 'entangled' in various ways with US national and transnational racialised and imperial projects. One of the book's contributions is the effort made to explore in detail what whiteness meant in practice and what its implications were for the strand of feminist politics the author studies.

Murphy identifies four central dimensions of the 'larger layered biopolitical topology' (p. 15), through which she sees the formation of the feminist self-help groups in 1970s Los Angeles. The first of these is US Cold War politics, which involved the militarisation of fertility. In this case, some of the technologies used by feminist activists to control reproduction were also widely distributed by USAID-funded non-governmental agencies with the help of US family-planning experts around the world—under the name of 'research', to combat the so-called 'population bomb' and the turning of 'overpopulated' poor areas to communism. The second topological dimension is the economisation of fertility, in which the notion of 'freedom' to control fertility was deeply enmeshed with US political attempts to boost economic growth: with more or less voluntary access to this 'freedom', for example, as part of US Cold War economic planning projects abroad, it was assumed that women would direct their energies to work that supported the economy instead of raising children. As a third layer, Murphy identifies the industrialisation of medicine, and as a fourth, the connections between precarious agency, citizenship and governance of the possibilities of the technological alterations of life, which are captured by the term 'biocitizenship'.

The book's four analysis chapters provide fascinating readings of how, for example, the self-examination of vaginas and 'vaginal ecologies' performed in small groups contributed to the rethinking of scientific *objectivity*, and how the manual suction abortion device travelled from China to the USA, where it figured both in feminist activism and in US imperialist 'family planning' politics. Murphy's analyses contribute to discussions about new materialism and ontology by demonstrating how technical details are crucial to the analysis of feminist health activism but do not alone determine the ontology of a particular device. The ways in which a particular technology were visualised by the activists or other practitioners, their conceptualisation of what the device was taken to 'be', and the immediate contexts of its use brought ontological as well as politically crucial transformations to the device. For example, even if the suction technique *per se* was very similar in the two cases, conducting *manual suction abortion* in order to control population growth implied a very different politics than the practice of monthly *menstruation extraction*, where women could control their own menstrual flows.

The discussion of this particular technology makes me wonder whether a move beyond the strict frame of reproduction, and an opening up of the sex–sexuality–reproduction

nexus by attending to queer and trans history, might have strengthened the analysis as an additional topological layer. For example, Murphy does not address exactly why and how lesbians, whom she briefly discusses, participated in what she calls 'seizing the means of reproduction' in the title of the book. In addition, one of the activists noted about the meaning of menstruation extraction, 'We no longer wait passively for our monthly visitation ... for the first days' cramping to pass ... five to seven days for the whole process to stop. ... We choose to have or to not have, when, where, and how' (p. 160). For me, examples such as this cannot be understood merely as seizing the means of *reproduction*; rather, they resonate with other re-enactments of *sex*, such as transgender experiences and bodily practices where menstruating or not has also figured as a question of feeling the self as a gendered—or, to use Mel Chen's term, off-gendered—being. Nonetheless, I warmly recommend this well-written and thought-provoking book to anyone interested in race-sensitive and new materialist gender history methodologies, science studies and/or the history of feminist activism and health movements.

Mel Y. Chen focuses on *animacies* as conceptual orders of things in which binaries—such as animate/inanimate, live/dead, animal/human, mobile/immobile—*move*, effectively suggesting that accounting for these movements is crucial for the analysis of power relations. The book's research strategy adopts an 'Ahmedian' cultural studies style of writing; I refer here both to the broad interest and inspiration stirred in Feminist Studies (including this study) by the works of Sara Ahmed, and to the gathering of examples for analysis from wide-ranging sources and contexts, also called queer 'scavenger methodology' (Halberstam, 1998: 13). In Chen's work, examples range from the monkey in J.L. Austin's classic marriage example, which is at the centre of performativity theory, to the BP oil spill catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, to Hayao Miyazaki's animated film *Ponyo*. To any reader who might criticise this work for being eclectic, Chen offers the following: 'My archive of apes, theories, turtles, sensoria, cartoons, mercury particles, airborne skin, signifying lexemes, and racialized humans has seemed entirely logical, that is, to *me*; yet the label of "eclecticism" rings true, in my view, from a perspective that is wedded to institutional typologies of intellectual reference and styles of thinking' (p. 234, emphasis in original).

I am not altogether convinced of the explanation that, because animacy is 'an unstable terrain', 'its archives are not "pinnable"' (pp. 19–20). I appreciate the writer's preference for this choice of composition and writing style though, and certainly this approach provides a useful demonstration of the broad relevance of the question of animacy.

Animacies offers an important analysis of the connections between racialisations and queerings in relation to health, technoscience, biopolitics, mattering and

new materialism. The book includes a variety of useful examples, which are not possible to elaborate on here, concerning, for example, how understandings of disability are embedded in and produced by animal/human boundary-making and the racialised work done by animals in theoretical texts or political talk. I find the notion of animacy useful because it suggests a sort of poststructuralist reading of activity of matter, which serves to alleviate the seeming incommensurability between poststructuralist approaches and natural science-informed material feminisms. The book invites the reader to think 'how matter that is considered insensate, immobile, deathly, or otherwise "wrong" animates cultural life in important ways' (p. 2). One of my favourite chapters is Chen's analysis of the USA's 2007 panic in relation to lead in children's toys. This chapter acknowledges the toxic effects of lead and therefore its 'material' activities—an issue that has been foregrounded in a range of recent natural science-informed arguments about materiality. On the other hand, Chen's simultaneous recognition of the cultural work of animation, which follows important poststructuralist insights, points out that it is not 'lead itself', or lead in any context, that arouses panic because of its toxicity. A focus on animacy points out 'how the fragile division between animate and inanimate—that is, beyond human and animal—is relentlessly produced and policed' (p. 2). Rather than some 'matter' (human, animal, lead, etc.) being in itself animate or inanimate, this approach analyses the political consequences of the process within which such distinctions are made.

Significantly, in the US lead toy panic, the dangerous lead was animated as Chinese, an exogenous toxin threatening white and innocent American children. Such animations of lead resonated with the 'Yellow Peril' fears of the earlier twentieth century as well as with anxieties relating to US economic success. They also served the forgetting of lead paint in houses in impoverished US neighbourhoods as well as the threat to Chinese workers and the responsibilities of US companies for whom these toys were manufactured, in Chinese factories characterised in the media as 'irresponsible'.

Chen's book effectively demonstrates both the relevance of critical race analysis for science studies and new materialism and the relevance for feminism of attending to the animacy of matters such as metals. Chen's analysis demonstrates that, for example, lead is not simply 'inanimate matter', the study of which can be comfortably left to natural scientists. The book suggests that practically any matter can be animated, and analysing the gendered and racialised politics of such animations belongs to the very heart of feminism. Therefore, although the book pays little attention to gender as an analysis of 'women and men', it can be warmly recommended as crucial reading in feminist theory and cultural studies, and to readers interested in science studies, new materialism, and queer, animal and disability studies.

reference

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