



Chen, Mel Y. 2012. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Book review by Katie E. Wetzel

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The book jacket of Mel Y. Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* describes this work as 'the first [book] to bring the concept of animacy together with queer of color scholarship, critical animal studies, and disability studies', which I would suggest makes Chen's work a foundational contribution to a complex and multivalenced discourse over the division between 'life' and 'death', or that beyond humans and animals. While these two areas may possess somewhat different goals, such as human life improvement versus species conservation, Chen reveals their commonalities as part of an ongoing discourse between the sensual and the dialectical. She opens *Animacies* by discussing the boundary that illness exposes between 'life' and 'death' in her own experiences, in order to consider what it means to be *animate*. While she avoids defining animacy as a general term, her use of this term enters into a larger discourse that situates that animate and inanimate as semantic and grammatical principles that hierarchically structure and modify the value of a subject or object of interest. However, in this book Chen complicates how animacy works within this discourse by problematising the ways that disabilities, illness, and otherness impact distinctions of animacy. This serves as a helpful way of theorising animacy, because it incorporates affect by grounding theories of life and liveliness in the sensual and visceral while still acknowledging the limits and restrictions we reach in our use of language and text.

The three-part structure of this book into topical segments on words, animals, and metals reflects the tension Chen highlights between our use of language and the subjects/objects we hope to describe. The first section draws on linguistics to



define animacy as ‘the quality of liveness, sentience, or humanness’, which as a result fabricates a ‘hierarchy of animacy’ and possibly restricts an entity’s ability to behave at a hierarchically different level. However, Chen also claims that while injurious speech can be objectifying, it still ‘paradoxically rel[ies] on animacy’ and thereby suggests that reanimation is possible (30). Her examples demonstrate how ‘figurative substitution of a human with an animal figure’ both removes human qualities and actively transforms the subject by sometimes empowering them, and sometimes lowering their position within an animacy hierarchy (44). Chen reaches this contentious conclusion by engaging with works from the socially and politically driven fields of disability studies, feminism, and postcolonialism. However, her union of these various fields to make her argument also suggests that these are the kinds of multifaceted gatherings that should happen in scholarly discourse.

Chen’s consideration of animality through queered and racialised notions of animacy, as well as human and animal relationships, is informed by her reading of the queered and fictional characters in visual culture. Chen uses these strange blendings of human and non-human animals and intimacies to address concerns of ‘transness’ across animacy boundaries and to critique the ‘apparently horrific intimacy’ involved in debates surrounding intentional blendings via animal transplants in humans (126). While the material she critiques appears somewhat eclectic at times, it is helpful for considering the way that language and visual texts circulate to influence and form culture across national and social boundaries. After all, her movement across and through these boundaries when addressing issues such as biopolitics manifested through animal genitalia (as well as their absence), biotechnology, and animal sexuality and bestiality, help disrupt conventional understandings of animacy and liveliness in order to begin a conversation about ‘queer-trans animality within a more porous understanding of animacy’ (155).

The final section of the book considers the non-traditional animality of lead metal at the lower end of the animacy hierarchy, while simultaneously rethinking inanimacy through human vulnerability to inanimate particles. Chen begins this section by addressing the ‘lead panic’ in 2007 in the United States, as well as the racialised and classist implications of the anxiety that surrounded the outsourcing of toy production and upper-end toy sales. She suggests that the lead narrative is actually about labor, sometimes made invisible or criminalised, but often drawing

on fears of contamination and disablement, and thereby further racialising and queering the lead conversation. Given current public concerns with environmental threats, this discourse on labor and contamination ties that physical danger to language and knowledge production formed and reformed since the Nineteenth-century. This final section ties together Chen's diverse subjects of analysis and offers a unique meditation on how we think about and discuss life of the past and present.

Chen's sophisticated and vigorous inquiry into animacy not only contributes insight and complexity to the field of affect theory, but deftly engages it with other more overtly politicised fields of disability theory, critical race theory, postcolonialism, queer theory, feminism, and ecocriticism. This text is helpful for those interested in issues of animacy and affect, particularly as they pertain to the racialisation of animals (human and non-human), the affective hierarchy of language, as well as the queer porosity between animate and inanimate entities. While Chen recommends a "queered political state of the present", she also reminds readers that the point of this investigation is not necessarily to reach a conclusion about 'animacy's ultimate failure or success', but rather to engage with the questions and regulations that direct issues of animacy amidst familiar and strange bodies, and thereby 'seek out and affirm the wiliness within' (237).