

Tranimacies

An Interview with Mel Y. Chen

Abstract TSQ editorial board member Eva Hayward interviews Mel Y. Chen to discuss the relevance for the field of transgender studies of Chen’s *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* and other work. The interview covers such topics as feminist science and technology studies, critical race studies, animal studies, disability studies, and environmental studies.

Keywords animacy, racial biopolitics, transgender, assemblage

TSQ: *Your book Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect has importantly connected emergent scholarships in animal studies and new materialism with more established theoretical traditions in critical race studies, queer theory, disability studies, and feminist studies. Can you talk about why it was important for you to bring these different analytics into conversation? How does animal studies, for instance, matter in thinking about critical race and queer theories? And why do you think animal studies has become so popular in thinking through twenty-first-century social problems, and what do you think some of the challenges or missteps of that thinking have been?*

Mel Y. Chen: First, I was drawn to Asian American and transpacific sites and motivated by a desire to see these sites considered—indeed, to generously materialize them—within both animal studies and whatever domains are named the “new materialism,” because their relative nonpresence fostered what struck me as strange renderings of both race and humanness.

I have spent years immersing myself in the different analytics you mention (and have yet so very much more to learn from each of them). Their applicability to animal studies and new materialism seemed self-evident. How odd it seemed that they weren’t talking more, but then I started to perceive, in my own casual obsession with discipline and field studies, why they weren’t. Disciplines and fields have institutional and practical histories that demand repetition without difference, and which also fall out into blockily segmented political imaginations—I’ve been leaning a lot on Kandice Chuh’s (2013) notion of “aboutness” as

an inertial force blockading intra- and interfield transmission. It's stunning to me that this has been so for so long (as if time had anything to do with it), and I think that many scholars, even while engaging in so much richly transdisciplinary and politically coalitional work that seems to be burgeoning just now, share this exasperation.

I'm compelled by the trajectories of connection and the genealogies owned and disowned by specific threads of scholarship, adjudicated through a deeply enmeshed and vitally consequential affective politics within that scholarship. I perceived both proprietary efforts to put off palpable contention, blithe disregard borne by reinforcing structures of privilege, willful ignorance, reductive quick-stepping (sometimes out of fear, it seems, for moving into the "dangerous terrain of race"), and, frankly, utter hostility and violent intent sublimated through the word, that effectively removed race in all its immense complexities from the stage, despite tremendously exciting movement in fields engaged with race-critical and transnational analysis. So, what might it mean to just do it, particularly in my felt need to honor the concrete risks that so many feminist, critical race, indigenous, queer, disability, and other less categorizable scholars and activists as well as artists of vulnerable self-exposure (and I am not talking only about "identity" here) made in giving me access to whole new terrains of possibility? I wanted to both bridge these passively or actively disparatized threads via a series of (re) suturing gestures that at the time felt politically dangerous, unimaginable, and thus somewhat magical-thinking when isolated from my sites of analysis. At the same time I wanted to be affirmative, and to leave massive room for race to articulate itself even in pages where I myself failed to fully respond to what was arguably a palpable demand. There are, for instance, ways I have attempted to address the role of coloniality in displacing indigenous materialities, but the book offers only questions with regard to—I've been thinking about this a lot—the combination of two things: the mechanisms by which settler-colonial materialities infix themselves and, in recoding terrain, become intimate fodder for multiple forms of violence; and the mysteries of animacy by which all documented languages, including indigenous ones, seem to share grammatical animacy, even while actions in relation to those animacy differences vary.

There are and will be failures—of a book's stated and actualized coverage, of its displacement, and in its "mis" reading; and I count my work resoundingly in that category. Books are products of pragmatics and, in my case, illness. With *Animacies*, I sank and swam at three different demanding temporalities: the timing of medical management, the scooping thrusts of thinking and writing in bits of time where chronic illness momentarily receded, and, let's be real, my own normative timeline for tenure. *Animacies* desired to unwind the ever shape-shifting and mutually constitutive factors of "race," "class," "sexuality," and "disability" beyond their habitual and sometimes hackneyed deployments (directly

related to the lag on politics registered above); to encourage unclosure over expedient closure, since I feel that at this time “we” are still articulating a deeply inchoate emergent politics even as “we” perceive what you call the “constant enfolding of matterings” that do not disavow the politics of race, sexuality, nationality, queerness, gender, ability. I do not want to be the agent of the passive condescension enacted by the multiple politics of book composition and at the same time, through some investment in argumentative closure, performing the further violence of promulgating the erasures that such a composition might suggest. Hence the book ends with a call to register the reader’s own accountings and wishes. This ostensible a-closure solves no problems but tries to be in keeping with a tradition of less persuasively “muscular,” and more engageable, thinking. This is not what some folks dismiss as relativism, but a self-consciously conversational project, as much as is possible in a book.

TSQ: *Because this interview is happening in the context of TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly, can you talk about how trans- or transgender figures in your scholarship? Do you see a similar hesitancy, if not fear, as you see regarding identified-as-white scholars engaging with race, regarding scholars not explicitly identified as trans taking up trans-identified or trans-oriented work? Do you see trans/gender providing you with heuristic tools that other interpretive frameworks have not (i.e., queer theory, critical race theory, feminist studies)?*

MC: I think there may be a hesitancy, but I’ll be honest: whiteness and its associated colonialities just feel especially sticky, to the detriment of all scholarship. And I think it is the perceived whiteness of trans studies that has put off many other folks, whatever their identitarian directions. There are plenty of wonderful exceptions, but just a few weeks ago my colleague attended a symposium at which it was alleged that “there are no trans scholars of color.” Using myself as an example: trans entered my scholarship a long time ago as a series of very important questions and critiques about gender that needed to be—thanks to trans studies for this very articulation—more than instrumental to queer theorizing. Oriented or identified? At the same time, there are tensions around identity and appropriation and humanness that today haunt trans studies just as other fields have had to undergo their analogous tensions. In what ways was it appropriate to bring trans analysis or meditations to a film about a racialized ape named Max bearing the mocking imprint of colonialism? Well, how could it not be relevant? There are still people who would say this is not relevant, but I am eager and excited for *TSQ*, under Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker’s direction, to take its readers to many unprecedented and weird places (which will turn out, of course, to not be so “weird” after all—for instance, taking endocrine disruptors seriously; I cite a piece of Eva Hayward’s [2008] writing on this). Call it the

poststructuralist postmodern, the anthropocene, or whatever, but many fields of study are experiencing a contradiction of full-throated renovation and simultaneous faltering insufficiency. This can lead to lovely gluey dialogues, that (to use another trans) go by the name of transdisciplinarity. But we don't have to call it that; it's happening anyway.

TSQ: *Similarly, can you talk about the “animal turn” and what you see as the promises and problems of this recent critical tendency?*

MC: Perhaps we could speak of a few animal turns. But where to begin? Going not too far back in scholarly history, Donna Haraway's (2008) integration of animal-specific scholarship with Marxist feminism, studies of colonialism, and science studies started one animal turn that dovetails with the more recent developments in critiques of humanism, which is only partially about species (or rather its fundament is buried deep). And then there is the incitement to rethink the place of animals in environments and in human lives, in part by respecting their own articulations, in part by putting greater stakes in a diversification of modes of “study” in “animal studies.” But to the degree that animals in our midst carry a lot of baggage—not just discursive but/and material—much of that baggage looks exactly like human histories of intrahuman violence. Retooling animal studies to turn in this direction demands thinking most deeply about the historical and geopolitical contexts in which the animals of our studies truly reside. At least, I am trying to think more and more deeply, and learning as much as I can from my colleagues. The animal turn should implicate trans studies and vice versa, since the history of animal research in biology and the history of the animation of “animal facts” in lay domains are soaked in imputations of gender—as well as sexuality.

TSQ: *We cobbled together the term tranimalities in an effort to think about how transitions, transformations, and other kinds of trans becomings are shaped by species: in sum, that trans itself is a species technology and is always involved with nonhumans. A concrete example: Premarin (an industrially produced estrogen sourced from pregnant mares, hence the name) is biochemically involved in the transitioning of some trans*women. In a very material way, these trans*women are kinds of “tranimalities.” How do you see this neologism, tranimalities, as doing particular and general kinds of work? Or, more generally, how do you think trans and animal/ities (or species, more generally) can benefit from becoming enfolded, intersected, or entangled with one another?*

MC: I really love this formulation and the example of Premarin. I might add my sense that trans is at once involved with, and buttressing/unbuttressing of, both

nonhumans and humans (but now that I think about it I'm sure you're thinking just this way). While the owning of animality is both a philosophical and a political decision that carries its risks (the "miracle" of deploying horseness in one's own bodily animation can be pitched alternately as enhancement, correction, replenishment, experiment, or submission), I do hope for the substantiveness of a "tranimal turn," at least to the degree that such investment yields some important articulations of species, gender, human, and transness in ways that allow environmental studies, animal studies, and transgender studies to account more deeply for their sometimes implicitly mutually enacted politics, whether or not at cross purposes with one another. For some reason, I'm thinking of, let's call it *transplantimalities*, as an example: I recall reading that some people who had organs transplanted from living donors came to feel "like" their donors in some ways that could not be explained. Why bracket the feeling as a human one? How does this work for trans-species organ transplantation? This formulation is so potent because its reach includes transplantimalities.

TSQ: *One of the most striking threads of Animacies is your attention to "animacy" as constant enfolding of living/dying, in/organic, human/nonhuman matters that do not disavow the politics of race, sexuality, nationality, queerness, gender. One of the critiques often lodged at new materialism or object-oriented ontologies is that they tend to deracinate matter in an effort to reclaim the agential/actorship of nonhuman objects. How do you balance a critique of anthropocentrism (that humans and human concerns are central) while maintaining an attention to intersectionality, assemblage, and other critical tools for attending to race, disability, gender, and sexuality?*

MC: I have been working on identifying and delineating a phenomenon I am calling "going cosmic"—a mode of speculation whose very grounds include an erasure of dehumanization that merges so well (as animacy hierarchies might foretell) with, say, animalness. Cosmicness is the enactment of a large-scale fantasy (sometimes imagined as tiny) that not only templatically erases the integrality of intrahuman difference but also misses its projective role—through less explicit investments in white supremacy or in empire—in the very growth of cosmic discourses. This is not an antiscience position; it is neutral to discipline. I have been inspired by Jodi Byrd's (2011) association of astronomical events such as the transit of Venus with the workings of empire (and in her book's instance, the deployment of indigeneity as grounds for empire). What becomes tricky is ensuring that it is not, however, the discourse of Western-genealogic science (as versus Indian mathematics, indigenous astronomies, and so on) that owns cosmicness, because such a claim furthers the gesture of empire.

Someone is in an awful hurry to reclaim the actorship of nonhuman objects, and despite what I believe to be the constitutional formation of objectness with animacies for which some humans are just as good fodder as anything. They are in just as much of a hurry to discard race and other similar factors as being a priori exteriorities or exceptional fault lines in the constitution of the human, rather than as substantive and unmarked conditions of enfleshment. Rather than posit equivalence among modes of dehumanization (sometimes suggested by lists), my book aims to point to the traffic among these modes.

Regarding intersectionality and assemblage: it seems important to recognize the institutionality and the political fabric of the names we use, while also suspending their absolute definitional fixity. As the term has come to be used, *assemblage* flexes in ways that allow us to detach from the immobilizing triangulations of intersectionality, thus to make interactions more supple. I find it much more useful to approach animacies, the hierarchization of bodies, the in/human “cut,” and transmaneuvers across that ontologizing divide through assemblage rather than intersectionality.

TSQ: *If we see “tranimalities” as a temporary site of critical engagement—knowing as we do that such sites change in the emphasis and analytical import—what yet unattended-to sites of inquiry do you see emerging out of these early efforts to think trans* and animals together? What remain ongoing challenges?*

MC: I am excited for the analytic (not necessarily constitutional!) disassembly of “species,” in which both trans and animal studies may delightfully participate. The expansion of trans studies may grow in as many directions as knee-jerk transphobias, which heretofore have been taken as elemental and irreducible, get undone by something else: transregistration. Otherwise, I look forward to the changes already afoot around whiteness and coloniality.

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