

Animacy as a Sexual Device

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter explores the relationships between gender and sexuality and the linguistic concept of animacy. Opening with an overview of linguistic animacy, it moves into a discussion of its import for discussions of forms of sociopolitical power such as colonialism, and their relationship to dehumanization as well as agency. It explores the potentiality of animacy for revisory approaches to humanity, turning to the use of animacy in the particular case of the pronominal “it” in considerations of linguistic gender and transnational trans identity. The chapter concludes with a reiteration of the ways animacy is useful as a sexual device.

Keywords: agency, animacy, colonialism, dehumanization, linguistic gender, queer, trans

Introduction

What counts as a life, and how are imaginations of the nature of lives tasked in the determination of what is proper for them, as beings with intimate lives, intimate orders? I have often turned to animacy as a heuristic and as an imaginative—but also “real”—aid in addressing these questions.

Linguistic animacy initially seems a curious, but ultimately eclectic, research topic. I first became interested in the role of language in managing hierarchies of life and of actional capacity when I was introduced to linguistic approaches to animacy in crosslinguistic studies of grammar. The linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein (1976) wrote a signal early work suggesting that “animacy hierarchies” were an important area of intersection between meaning and grammar; they could be found, as they were defined, in seemingly all languages.

As a linguistics term, *animacy* most generally refers to the grammatical characteristics of the sentience, personhood, mobility, or liveness of noun phrases; a humanist might interpret these features as varied forms of agency. I note here, too, that grammars represent structuring aspects of language that are considered relatively obligatory to language

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users. Considering both the ubiquity and flexibility of language, there is social and political significance in the fact that noun phrases index either the wielders of, or those things or beings subject to, the powers described by a verb. If these powers are, in essence, correlated with grammatical features, they have the sense of being locked-in, less available to conscious intervention, and more likely to allow language to recirculate its complicity with existing configurations of social power.

Ultimately, when animacy is placed in the context of academic and social-movement questions of agency, liveliness, sentience, personhood, and mobility, as well as humanness and dehumanization, at a time of sharpening interspecies, political-economic, environmental, and social justice reckonings—we see concerns as varied as the “new materialisms” or posthumanisms, the prison abolition movement, the interdisciplinary field of environmental humanities encompassing feminist science studies, Marxist feminisms, critical animal studies, disability theory and disability justice, the Sioux-led movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline, or the Black Lives Matter movement in and beyond the United States which asserts the value of Black trans lives—the ubiquitous linguistic traffic of animacy and the background work it does become potentially very important. What, for instance, might animacy reveal about the “everyday” work that language does to quietly set, or explicitly reinforce, systemic discrepancies in life-worth among people? How are the logics of animacy used creatively—and insidiously—to encode colonial contradictions by which the colonized could not, almost by definition, achieve forms of sequestered humanity that favor colonizers?

One of the central features of the imagination of “life,” arguably, is sexuality. Rather than a marked or exceptional conception, sexuality is understood in queer scholarship to inform the heteronormative timeline for a presumably ideal or standard life. Sexuality also informs the reproductive mandate of a species, of certain religious traditions, of certain biopolitically prioritized beings (in the name of eugenics, ostensible economic betterment, and more) and of others without such priority, such as in the case of Black and indigenous and disabled women who have been subject to involuntary sterilization. Sexuality itself is deeply entangled with notions of race, sex, and gender.

This chapter opens with an overview of linguistic animacy, then moves into a discussion of its import for discussions of forms of sociopolitical power and their relationship to dehumanization. It explores the potentiality of animacy for revisory approaches to humanity, turning to the use of animacy in the particular case of the pronominal “it.” I conclude with a reiteration of the ways animacy is useful as a sexual device.

Linguistic Animacy

First, how does animacy work linguistically? Here are two sets of examples, beginning with English and followed by Mandarin Chinese equivalents for comparison. Imagine that each noun phrase (*the food, we, the mice, cats, hikers, rocks*) has associated with it a

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characteristic level of liveliness, mobility, personhood, or sentience (or some combination of them).

Example 1: Linguistic Animacy in English

1a. The food that we eat.

1b. The mice that cats catch.

1c. The hikers that rocks crush.

(Source: Mak, Vonk, and Schriefers 2006)

Example 2: Linguistic Animacy in Mandarin Chinese

2a.	我wo3们men2	吃chi1	的de0食shi2物wu4
	We	eat	food
2b.	猫mao1	吃chi1	的de0老lao3鼠shu3
	cat	eat	mouse
2c.	石shi2头tou2	压ya4死si3	的de0爬pa2山shan1人ren2
	rocks	crush	hikers

(In Mandarin Chinese, note the use of relativizing particle “de.”)

The last English sentence (1c), for native English speakers, often yields a hesitation or double take, whereas the Mandarin Chinese equivalent (2c) does not, in itself, cause confusion. In English, relative clause structure has additional grammatical restrictions on the placement of the noun phrases, namely that they must occupy positions according to their relative animacy. While Mandarin Chinese, like virtually every other language, has grammatical sensitivities to animacy, a grammatical restriction of this type of relative clause does not exist. In sentences like those shown in Example 1, the noun phrase in the relative clause is commonly expected to have greater animacy than the noun phrase in the main clause, and this is the case in the first two sentences (in 1a, *we* has more *animacy* than *food*; in 1b, *cats* have more animacy than *mice*).

However, in the last phrase in the set, “The hikers that rocks crush,” the expectation is violated, since *rocks* are characteristically understood to have very little (or no) animacy, whereas *hikers*, as persons, are expected to have—particularly in an anthropocentric view—maximal or ideal animacy. Note that, linguistically, “subjects” and “objects” may not correspond to the semantic roles of the verbal action described, including the

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“agent” (actor upon) and “patient” (acted upon). This is especially true in some circumstances involving relative clauses, such as object-relative clauses. In “the hikers that rocks crush,” “the hikers” is what linguists would call a grammatical patient, since they are acted upon by the rocks, which are serving here as agent. In more linguistic-technical terms, we might explain these syntactic aspects as follows: Example 1c violates a grammatical rule for clauses in which either *animate* head nouns appear with *subject-extracted relative clauses* (the hikers who __ crushed the rock), or *inanimate* head nouns appear with *object-extracted relative clauses* (the rock that the hiker crushed __). The extracted object (*hikers*) is animate, violating the pattern expectation. But the inanimate-animate pair is simply a polarization of an ultimately relational (that is, nonbinary) model: that is to say, animateness is not only a gestalt of a multitude of clines (again, liveliness, mobility, personhood, and more, only some of which might seem to have binary values of “yes” or “no”), animacy itself is meant to operate via an approximate of relative animacy, as if actual animateness could be one-dimensionally compared in terms of “more” or “less.” To the degree that comparative or relational animacy matters, animacy becomes important to sexuality studies (and gender studies: “nonbinary” may rightly have gendered echoes for some readers. Animacy can be used to support or contest a biopolitical calculus or policy decision that may well depend on simplistic notions of gender or sex.).

For an expanded sexuality studies where relationality, interaction, genealogy, and intimacy become key terms for the determination of what is called or not called “sex,” it is the relative animacy of the participants—not whichever of the two is simply inanimate or animate—that requires more focus. Looking beyond the apparent obviousness of the non-agency of rocks, we can note that in a mainstream Western ontological imagination, rocks are simply much less likely to act on hikers than vice versa. They occupy not only different agentive places on a hierarchy, but such a hierarchy makes imaginable some relative acts and not others: for a given act, some patient-agent arrangements become stereotypical or calculable and thus are taken automatically, even become *grammaticalized*, while others do not. It is not necessary to claim every interaction, or intimacy, or proximity, as “sexual,” so much as to take the entire sphere as one having to do in part with both encounters *and* reproduction, or the cyclic nature of calling on, deploying, and restaging expected relationalities and thus taking a role in cultural reproduction. In this view, language’s creative command of agent and patient has the capacity to not simply represent the world, but to animate (or reanimate, reproduce) it, not only as a world of discrete individualized objects but as a world of relational entities. This is a lightly social constructionist account, to the extent that language (as Judith Butler 1997 might claim) is—among other devices—iteratively responsible for the re-citation of gender (and other) norms and expectations and as such, performs either the same or different worlds into being. And while the rock crushing described above might seem to be most obviously a nonsexual matter, note that there are fetish cultures called “crush fetishes” that involve crushing entities—inanimate objects, or living insects, with, in a popular example, heeled shoes. There is a commercial trade of fetish videos that often show only the heels and the object being crushed (not the identifiable owner of the heels, for example, removing the human agent from the scene and making additional room for the subjectivity or participa-

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tion of the viewer). In other crush fetishes, humans give themselves over to being crushed by often larger inanimate objects. Something becomes possible, queerly sexual, with the specificity of the crushing act, the give of the object beneath, and the variable animate relationality between the crusher and whatever is crushed.

Returning to the rocks example, the non-agentive rock story is given undue support given the English-language, primarily Western context for this anthology, which implicitly calls particular animate hierarchies into relief. Only specific ontologies would in fact deny agency or causal force to stones. For instance, many other cultures than the late-capitalist Western mainstream, including the pre-Columbian Aztec, Japanese animisms, and many other living cultures whether or not indigenous, consider stones as living beings or persons with not only some quality of liveness, but potentially possessing genealogical (such as ancestral) relations to people (Deloria 1999; Dean 2010). Such differences from “late-capitalist nonindigenous English” may not attain the level of a markedly different animacy hierarchy in the grammar; yet, in certain scenarios, the calculations will undoubtedly work differently. Nevertheless, due to colonial and economic devaluations of indigeneity, the effects of commodity capitalism, and the displacement of innumerable cosmologies by European ones, the living stone is a disprivileged account within Anglophone spaces. It is worth noting that many indigenous and anti-extractive contestations of such imposed cosmologies have yielded results, sometimes by profiling indigenous law within the legal domain. I think here of the granting of legal personhood status to the Whanganai River in Aotarea/New Zealand in 2017.

At the same time, dehumanizations of, let’s say, *factually* human persons—people who might qualify according to, say, genetic or other biological definition—have run rampant, putting the lie to the “post” of the postcolonial. The hierarchizations of structural poverty, disability or debility, race, gender, settlement, geography, sexuality, and many more factors not yet emergent or not yet nameable, fuel and assist patterns of exploitation and dominance in which certain persons are considered less fully human than others. If the human also sits at the top of an animate hierarchy, then the lie is also the cheat of applying animacy hierarchies within human being, or using its apparent scientisms (such as the attribution of lower agency, or nonsentience, to plants or other living beings like crustaceans, seemingly low on the hierarchy—an argument that is by no means simple and is seeing various forms of revision from plant scientists and anthropologists), to legitimate structural abuses within humanity and nonhuman animals and plant life and stones as well, in sum supporting the legitimacy of the entire imposition of a settler ecology. The confused calculus of relative agency in a colonial world yields the kinds of contradictions that are rightfully pled against in human rights and animal rights discourses, but generally these forms of plea do not extend to environment (not in that form), with the exception of the assertion of indigenous law. Within English/North American contexts, language reflects the same logics that question the humanity of a (definitionally “disabled”) person with extensive brain damage who is on life support and compare that life’s worth to animals of ostensibly lower cognitive function, as animal rights ethicist Peter Singer has done.

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The animacy hierarchy as a conceptual ensemble more or less adheres—with exceptions—to the following order:

Nondisabled males > Nondisabled females > Disabled persons > Nonhuman animals > Plants > Inanimates.

Any of these might further be organized by internal hierarchies, such as the animacy differences positioning mammals above insects. Within this hierarchy, a given entity (or a noun phrase that is categorized as such an entity) is assumed relative agency over what falls below it in the hierarchy, and is more likely to serve as patient for what is above it in the hierarchy. While a gender or disability scholar might immediately seize upon the top three categories and their segregation of gender such that nondisabled males are given maximal agentivity, others on the hierarchy might seem ordinary, or even useful—a nonhuman animal is more likely to act on a plant than vice versa. But the averaging function is precisely what violates and erases the internal diversity of a given class of things—whether of gender, disability, nonhuman animals, and so on, enabling rather than staying violence. So that while it might be appropriate to view the animacy hierarchy as a prevalent conceptual structure that might order liveness, sentience, agency, ability, and mobility in a richly textured world, we might do better to take this hierarchy (or its effective potencies, at least) as a politically dominant one that is given shape by some combination of the spread of Christian cosmologies, patriarchal capitalism, and the colonial orders of things. Such a hierarchy, treated by linguists as an avowedly conceptual organization of worldly and abstract things with grammatical consequence, also functions as a program for relative agency: grammar adds another level of logic to enforce which things can or cannot affect, or be affected by, which other things within a specific scheme of possible action. These normative priorities of matter and rules for action (including gendered ones) are what, I think, make environmentalisms seem unimportant (and furthermore make the weirdly scaled attentions of crush fetish sites feel exceptional). To the degree that the English language assists these priorities of matter, or what I have called, inspired by Sara Ahmed's (2004) usage, "affective economies," it aids in an implicit coercivity of cultural participation, by which one must hew to the given orders of things.

Yet I am most interested in not this dominant animacy hierarchy's norms, but its failings, what I call its "ambivalent grammaticalities," to find the ways that antihumanisms and other means of being relationally animate or inanimate become palpable. The latter part of this chapter will duly explore such an example. In part, this interest stems from an investment in a world that might be able to find its way through some combination of informed reach, a respect for indigenous worldings that exist today, and a form of tactile, rather than suprascopic, experiment. I am interested especially in departing from the precise biotechnological churnings that execute a biopolitics (the idea of political power or government, not necessarily through governmental bodies, which takes biological life as its point of management and control) determined by capital expansion. The relationalities involved in such a search I often think of as "queer," in that many humanly queer worldings do exactly this kind of work: they break away from orders and norms, they value decolonial sexualities, and they involve deeply relational rematerializations and alternative

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spiritualities that often have consequences for the blurring of speciesist material hierarchies. Furthermore, the queer reanimated worldings I imagine are not only beheld by humans; colonial forms of capitalism are one force that has rendered not only “human,” but nonhuman, life as but a shadow of its full-fledged possibility in the interest of extraction, commodity, and anthropocentric, colonial science. These images of nonhuman life, perhaps most baldly exhibited in the proliferation of nature shows today, depict the “norms” of sexuality that we well know are not all that animals do (I am thinking here of the impression made by early queer and trans takes on “the animal world” from Bagemihl 1999 and Roughgarden 2004, both from Western science perspectives). The reanimated worldings that are possible, therefore, do not in any way need to be novel, but woven “back” in.

In the original study of animacy by Silverstein (1976) that I mentioned earlier, selected indigenous American and Australian languages, including North American Chinookan, Australian Dyirbal, and other indigenous Australian languages, were all identified as sharing such hierarchies with Indo-European languages. That indigenous languages have been at the foundation of linguistic animacy theory, and yet that in terms of governance indigenous groups have been recipients of cosmological violence under settler colonialism, has a particular force of irony. As my book *Animacies* details (Chen 2012), some linguistic research can offer a dehistoricized account of animacy that risks neutralizing the invested political histories of the patterns observed in the scholarship. Indeed, colonial practices often use indigenous forms of trans-animate co-identification against indigenous people (as in: their primitivisms have not advanced to a proper understanding of justified human supremacy). Within scholarship these are tensions that I think are absolutely worth sitting with and exploring, not only to take in the radical violence of the ongoing occupation of indigenous spaces in ways that do and don’t mimic the more limited set of relations under European colonization, but to ask what ways scholarship habitually ignores or consumes indigenous knowledges and what are the ethical ramifications.

In this view, language is not just interesting for its own sake, it has material potencies by intervening in the mattering of the world around us. The endless crafting of language by all of its users has the potential to tell a lot about how people engage in the world around them. For cognitive linguists, language further informs about the structures of thought. Ultimately, animacy in the linguistic sense becomes one of many sites for exploring issues of differential agency and its governance and contradictions.

All of this has taught me that the relationship between language and what it refers to, constructs, or performs, is negotiable and substantiating; and that worldmaking must be an integral part of its activity, or rather, *is* an integral part, and so the question is how to make that world and what worlds to make, or collaborate on making, often within institutionally standardized traffics and ontologies. There is also the salutary possibility of dissolution and the failure of order—a recrafting that nudges intellectual humanities further from old forms of report and suggestion and perhaps closer to the material actancies and performativities of the arts. Risking indictments of madness but also perhaps freedom.

An “It” Manifest

Several years ago, I began to ask people not only to use “he” or “she” or “they” or the mix of these, but also “it” to refer to me, as a way for me to operate not only as an illegible Asian American trans subject within our broken system of pronouns, but also as I am an animal and a thing, both of which receive pronominal “it” in English. I offered this in grad seminars and animal studies classes and maybe a few other non-academic places, but all ones where I could build a meaningful context. I explained that I had what I thought was a tolerable combination of risk and privilege, as well as a social justice commitment that made my request far from cynical. Yet nobody took this proposition up—understandably, given the association of “itness” to histories of colonization, capitalism, that is—racism, objectification, dehumanization, commodification, thingness. Surely, too, this was a painful or perhaps offensive proposition, regardless of my invitation. But finally, in 2018, a disability and performance studies scholar and artist whom I very much respect, in my absence, asked my partner Julia Bryan-Wilson quite deliberately: “and Mel, how is it doing?” Julia replied without skipping a beat. Later, I marveled that this person—also Asian American, but sited differently therein—had actually taken me up on this invitation and in the signally most vulnerable use of the third person: in one’s absence.

Why had I asked for “it”? (Asked for it?) You can call “it” a third-person pronoun if you wish—“pro-nouns” linguistically being substitutes for nouns, pro-forms which function like a noun and substitute for a noun or noun phrase. In gender studies, particularly in the exercise of practices in the institutions and architectures in which gender studies gets housed, pronouns, like bathrooms, have seemed to be a big deal and then also over-represented. On the other hand, perhaps there is a reason why we trans and nonbinary folks continue to struggle with pronouns, despite the availability of more than 50 choices on Facebook (see also Conrod, this volume; Steele, this volume; Zimman, this volume).

Amid such disclosure, this section is entitled “An It Manifest.” It is not programmatic or coherent enough to be a manifesto (Julia’s initial suggestion for which I am grateful); rather, it’s a manifest, like a list of the travelers on board a ship. And most definitely it’s *my* it manifest, manifesting my “it”—manifesting in the sense of making *public*, but not in the sense of, say, promoting a sea change in approach or collective acts. I would never insist that my affinity with it-ness should extend to others beyond myself, but I present it here, tremulously, as not a program but a kind of invitation to rethink trans futures, radical objecthood of a sort. After all, Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein (2015) aptly wrote in an issue on trans and animals that “the indeterminate pronoun *it*, so many of us bore as a mark of our inhumanity, our sexual indifference.” Trans inhumanity is a constant challenge from without, and sometimes from within. For the most part, “it” has been the (pronominal and proverbial) third rail of third gender in common trans practice, even as some of us might in our off hours plumb the current wealth of radical speculative fictions, like Octavia Butler’s (2000) *Xenogenesis* trilogy, that proliferate genders, racialities, sexes, beings, things, and names and languages, animated places where “it” lives as well as “he” or “she.” In some ways, this sensitivity to the third rail makes every sense: one would *seem* to be making light of inhumanity, *even one’s own*, whether thinking about ani-

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mal identification or a history of felt trauma; and, no less, when faced with such stark histories and present-day forces that rob basic features of an ostensibly universal humanity from so many, or have set colonial terms that placed rare conditions on the achievement of humanity. Sylvia Wynter's (1994) "No Humans Involved" outlining academic orders of knowledge that produce an expert class within a California juridical system who can declare with ease, about young Black men caught up in its web, "no humans involved"; and her work on the colonial underwriting of Western bourgeois "Man" as a major term for a secularized human figure (Wynter 2003), have rightly informed contemporary attention to race as a primary means to intervene in the productive violence of the Human figure.

All this to suggest, then, that what I earlier might have called the "trans and nonbinary struggle with pronouns" is a much broader question of substantiation that is gendered, racialized, and more. The relief, or despair, of being substantiated pronominally cannot be imagined as a question limited to a self-nominating subculture of largely white transpeople; it gets messier precisely where intersecting forms of being present deepen risk.

"It" is nothing and everything. First, the "nothing." Constitutionally, "it" is indiscriminate and undiscriminated, failing at (taxonomic) precision. It has the vocal heft of nothing more than a particle, a grunt. It gives way to mass nouns, massification without substance specificity. Nothing becomes large blank spaces and question marks and the not-enough, as in, "You have nothing here." Nothing is the mess of multiple intersectional substantiation—sociopolitical categories and methods calling for them—that the rigorous substantialists judge "you have nothing here." The asymptote that approaches but never achieves the level of legitimated beingness—in a mode of pessimism and the economy of the privative qualification becomes: "nothing." "There was nothing there" is what I saw in iconic hand-waves by a UC Berkeley visitor assessing California before white settlement, erasing with his hand the richness of Ohlone life, and by a Japanese social science scholar describing the land populated by indigenous people now known as the Ainu in Hokkaido, Japan, at the time of its settlement by Japanese. "Nothing" also represents the unassimilation of Asian American gender, or, as David L. Eng and Shinhee Han (2008) write in a psychoanalytic mode, an attempt both to posit melancholy as the social mode of male Asian American gender at the same time that they depathologize it. They refer to the inhumanism of the perpetual alien and the inhuman productivity of the model minority trope.

I would be remiss, however, to ignore what I've learned from thinking with Karen Barad (2012a, 2012b) and their discussions of nothingness and voids; Barad makes clear that the vacuum of quantum physics cannot "be" nothing, for its ontological indeterminacy cannot yield a settled material status. As they write, "Virtual particles are on the razor-edge of non-being."

And so "it," too, is everything. It is the excess represented by the read of monstrosity (such as, but not limited to, the bodily excess of racialized movement, disabled technicity, crip time, nonbinary read as binary multiplicity). "It" is the constitutional nature of human being as one imbricated -co-imbricating—with exogenous chemicals and the affects

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that emerge. Call it distributed cognition, posthuman habitus. “It” is one generous and maybe also dangerous way to register genuine affective intimacies with objects, with animals, with the us-ness of such objects and animals. When you call me it, you affirm these queer and trans and lovely and strange and necessary connections.

Everything risks nothing, nothing risks everything

Furthermore, whether or not we are talking about language, there are logics of relative/interactive agency that involve the material world as perceived by those who use it. Some of us are understood as actors; others of us are not. The kinds of agency afforded some of us are more likened to animals or plants, given the elevated, enriched status of the Human, the sentimental politics that deprive some of us of the possibility of sentience, the narrowed and delineated embodiments that racialized and classed labor reinforce. Piled up into intersectionalities, already othered trans being veers toward the asymptote. But what asymptote?

In this era, when it comes to pronouns, transfolks also have “they.” After asking for a mix of pronouns that only ever got taken up by my niece and my best friend, I have started to use “they,” though it doesn’t always work. The story might go that this is a recent historical innovation, used in the 21st century due to trans language activists seeking pronominal solutions. Yet I was struck to have read Mark Balhorn’s (2004) work showing overwhelming evidence, both anecdotal and statistical, of the ubiquity of grammatically singular, *generic they* in Modern English speech and writing, found at least 23 percent of the time in each century of the OED since the seventeenth, indicating that this use of “they” has been available to writers of English for at least the past 400 years. The only difference in the previous use is that “they” is in this history not specific to trans or nonbinary people, it does not select for them, at least in terms of an antecedent—it’s just there because one is *uncertain*—and here we come up against identity again. I do wonder about the possibilities of a trans reading of this linguistic account, since it is fixed entirely in a gender-binary framework. Where might there have been gendered creativity or linguistic acknowledgment of that creativity? I would leave room for that historical positive identificatory usage of “they.”

What is unique *perhaps to this* time is the fact that the contemporary PGP (preferred gender pronoun) or gendered use of “they” in some cases positively frames a gender, as versus generically avoiding it or in response to an ambiguity in the referent (as in, “I found someone’s wallet, maybe they left it during the show”). This means that there is a temporality to *this* they that is forward-looking, world-anticipating, world-stitching, world-making.

Let’s not also forget that inanimate “it” could have its own reasons to slip into a place as a noun to refer to humans, and it’s by way of a genericizing relative pronoun. People are increasingly using “that” as a relative pronoun and neglecting to use “who” at all. “There’s the person that gave me the book.” That “that,” rather than “who,” has a leaky identification with “it.” Combined with the increasing use of “they” as a general reference

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to someone beyond trans recognition, I'm beginning to think that people aren't getting lazy, they are getting—dare I say—more honest?

In the literature, this historical singular “they” has been referred to linguistically as “epicene gender,” as a kind of gender-nonspecific human generic. I realize this epicene is surely not the same as trans and it is surely not the same as nonbinary: if you look up *epicene*, it says it refers to “having characteristics of both sexes or no characteristics of either sex; of indeterminate sex.” (Note that this definition refers to sex, not gender.) Notwithstanding *epicene*'s reliance on a narrowly selective set of sex features and a strictly binary expectation, it's instructive to me that *epicene*'s own use as a term derived from Middle English, from a derivation of Greek “common,” *koinos* or *epikoinos*. There is something there. Common. Various senses of common have circulated, contemporary to each other, going back centuries, and I do not know if they shared the same flexible terrain as *epicene*: “shared,” “circulating,” “ordinary.” To me there is something so very beautiful, so very right, about letting “shared” talk to “ordinary.” Ordinary as in not with immediate violence, an investment in a communion, a traveling together. Like this being is here, with us, and also part of me, and I can rest my senses on this without a start, that is, with peace and recognition, including of difference. Resting the senses with recognition and love. That is ordinariness when people or beings meet each other with possibility, not refusal.

But do you really want to do this “in” English? English is such a colonial language! Stuck with animacy logics, so hard to learn, used as a lingua franca of economic exclusion and domination, displacer of indigenous and local knowledges, coerced through schooling. Yes, and I also want to remember that it's Germanic grammatically and more than half French borrowings, and even more a conglomerate of so much stuff from everywhere and in constant motion and development—especially by those decidedly not in positions of power. It benefits from migration that is geographic and linguistic, and the transformations that are borne of that constant migration.

That is to say, English has not always been English as we know it. Languages are made substantial, given *difference*, in part by geographic boundaries limiting travel and thus influencing mutual rates of change—boundaries which may or may not coincide with those of nation-states. Those boundaries then create the very possibility of transition and crossing—a kind of transness. Languages then leak again because of inevitable migration, in spite of those boundaries. I can follow one leak between English and Mandarin Chinese that I am right now saying exists, and it does exist because I have just made it so.

In preparing for a talk related to this material, I was texting with my 84-year-old Chinese-immigrant father while on my couch:

[1:47 p.m., 9/23/2018] Mel: I am doing a talk that may be called “the it manifesto” on use of “it” pronoun as a response to gendered pronouns either as binaries or as a proliferation of options. Using Chinese third-person pronouns “ta” as a non-gen-

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der-marked third person pronoun as a reminder that this has not really been such a big deal in other places.

[2:05 p.m., 9/23/2018] Dad cell: The unfortunate and and misguided trend is that in most of the modern Chinese versions (mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, etc.) the use of gender-marked pronouns 他,她 has pretty much taken over. Clearly learned from European languages!

[2:18 p.m., 9/23/2018] Mel: Great. But the good thing is that spoken Chinese still cannot mark gender!

[2:25 p.m., 9/23/2018] Dad cell: I was just going to add this fact! Spoken Chinese is still gender free!

That is, a *non*-gender-marked third person pronoun is more a global norm among languages than its exception. This major point tells us a great deal about the sheer gender-binary imposition that the global use of English as a lingua franca and as the carrier language for mobile cultural phenomena has the potential to represent. In this sense, the U.S. West's disparate potency in the mandating of gender linguistic norms in its many elsewhere overlaps with the innumerable other violent projections of cultural imperialism: the shoving of forms of useless obligation, amid presumptions of superiority, upon others. This is not to say that these others have always accepted such imperialistic forms without resistance, wicked critique, mockery, or outright refusal.

In Mandarin Chinese “ta” in spoken Mandarin is the rough equivalent of “he-she-it”; “ta-men” with the “-men” particle is the equivalent of “them.” Ta might qualify as epicene, if you cared about gender specificity. Ta: the collapse of gender and personhood within one word. Of course, it doesn't turn over Chinese cultural norms of gendered difference, any more than pronominal movements in the United States can change anything. But there it is. It. Right alongside he/she, perhaps co-occupant in a linguistic ontology. Spoken Cantonese Chinese has a different pronoun, *cui*, which can refer to he-she-it but only living ones. In any case, to turn to “ta,” even in my mind while I say “it,” means this is simply not a basic reclaiming of an abjected word.

Until I dredged up the courage for it, this “it manifest” until now felt largely publicly unspeakable. You wanna do this now? “You can't say that now.” “We can't afford that kind of thing right now.” “It's too early.” “We are in crisis, can't challenge our humanity when it isn't afforded to everyone.” “Consider whose life is most at stake, i.e., you are not enough of an ‘it’ to be speaking in this way.” All of these things are true, I won't deny them; though I would also need to acknowledge that some of us, and not just those with privilege, don't want and haven't wanted this thing called “humanity,” and it surely hasn't felt there to give up in the first place.

But I also have to acknowledge that my felt need given the dire state of things is to turn—perhaps queerly and in solidarity—toward what is in fact real and yet feels most unacceptable, unreal, or even illegitimate when (at this time in the United States especially)

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the proprieties ordained by material conservatisms—the intensification of resource extractions, rejection of human labor, denial of reproductive rights and reproductive justice frameworks, assault on nonwhite populations and their securities, denial of trans being and queer being, genocidal logics—predominate. Within and without the institution, the pressure of fear and the push toward the normal and toward revived forms of hate, has only intensified recently, and I am just not ready in response to refrain from claiming what is indeed so real about so many of our existences. And yes, let's acknowledge what is undeniable about "it," what "it" carries. It: a means of dehumanization as a preliminary toward murder, genocide. It: similar means of assault toward trans people, racialized people, disabled people, women. It: a means of pillage of the lives of nonhuman animals, and the system of mass agricultural industrialization. It: the ideal label for a commodity. And/ but "it" as multiples, as a form of "they," as ensemble, as loss of individual identity.

Who is the "I," who are the "we's," that might refuse "it"? I refer to trans being, but I also refer just as much to disabled being, to Asian and Asian American being, to inhuman identification, to first generation immigrants in a country that doesn't know how to recognize you, to people who live with disability or mental difference. All of these things are things I can easily and immediately claim, and we could say they are all forms of trans; there are others I cannot claim. My first book *Animacies* (Chen 2012) mentions fundamental sympathy with the monkey (and toads), and holistically that is where I will always move. And I speak as someone who knew they were dead until they were in their twenties. Or, someone who knew it was dead until it was in its twenties. All of these things inform my "it." All of them together substantiate my "it." They are my "it" manifest.

This is not just a counteractive reclaiming; it is a language as much of tenderness and erotics, even of completion, as of cancellation. I am an "it" because I am both an object and an animal; to say this does not negate me but expands a sense of my self. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) writes of a world-making that can involve a praxis of curiosity and openness toward the nonhuman, her example being the fungal and labor-informed world of matsutake mushrooms. This is not a simple romance, however—there are far too many examples in which romancing the nonhuman or the animal or the posthuman is to posit a dehistoricized equivalence or exchange in which histories such as colonialism, slavery, the poisoned derivation of gender systems including transgender, continue to thrive undetected. Any "it" must keep in mind what swims within it, what histories make it do the work that it does.

I would like to think "it" is affirming. But context means everything. Pronominal choices, for me, vary depending on where I am. What I seek is not formal observance, as if in the pretense of shared rights, but, yes, affirmation, generosity, a willingness to welcome, and sometimes "it" does just this. It works this way because of the roiling and scrambling and togetherness left in a pool of stuff—all that isn't human, all that isn't at the top—that animacy can't neutralize. If animacy registers ways of being that are relational encodings, woven in with the matter of life, then it works as a sexual device insofar as it helps to choreograph the matter of life and nonlife and hence has a fundamental role to play in the reproduction of cultural politics, including biopolitics, and at the microcosmic level,

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has the power to work “queerly.” That is, the mandate for sexuality, at least theoretically and conceptually, is to be willing to bend assumptions of propriety, proximity, intimacy, including taxonomic ones and those rules regarding combinability, away from or beyond what is presumed imaginable, correct, foundational, or prior. These are the queer relationalities of animacy.

I began this piece as something more of a traditional paper, but after arriving at this queer place, my wish is to close the article from within it, rather than return to the traditional meta-form in conclusion. In the final gesture, then, I am mourning an earth that witnesses forms of extreme and numerous and condensed “climate” death, layered on and joining the necropolitical complexes of racial capitalism. Regardless of whatever future, this is inevitably shared and overlapping, as well as unjust and unevenly distributed. I am also always an animal and a thing—why wait, if new communions are possible now? Loving each other as we go, perhaps as Harawayan “compost” (Haraway 2015). Affirmation, generosity, a willingness to welcome.

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