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Lead's Racial Matters

Here I pluck an object from the lowest end of the animacy hierarchy: lead metal, a chemical element, an exemplar of inanimate matter. In the two previous chapters, I detailed how animality is coarticulated with humanity in ways that are soundly implicated in regimes of race, nation, and gender, disrupting clear divisions and categories that have profound implications ramifying from the linguistic to the biopolitical. In this final part, I bring animacy theory to bear on metals; first by looking at recent racialized discourses around lead, and in the next chapter by focusing on mercury toxicity to discuss the vulnerability of human subjects in the face of ostensibly inanimate particles. These particles are critically mobile and their status as toxins derives from their potential threat to valued human integrities. They further threaten to overrun what an animacy hierarchy would wish to lock in place.

Toys off Track

This chapter considers the case of “lead panic” in the United States in 2007 regarding potentially toxic toys associated with Chinese manufacture. I label this recent lead case a “panic” to suggest a disproportionate relationship between its purportedly unique threat to children’s health and the relative paucity of evidence at its onset that the contaminated toys themselves had already caused severe health consequences.¹ I measure this panic against other domestic public health

lead concerns, including spectacles of contagion, to investigate lead's role in the complex play of domestic security and sovereign fantasy (defined here as the national or imperial project of absolute rule and authority). I suggest that an inanimate but migrant entity such as industrial lead can become racialized, even as it can only lie in a notionally peripheral relationship to biological life. Rather than focus exclusively on the concrete dangers to living bodies of environmental lead, which are significant and well documented, I consider lead as a cultural phenomenon over and above its material and physio-medical character.

In the summer of 2007 in the United States, a spate of specific recalls and generalized warnings about preschool toys, pet food, seafood, lunchboxes, and other items began to appear in national and local papers and television and radio news.² In this geopolitical and cultural moment, the most urgent warnings were issued regarding toys. Lead's identity as a neurotoxic "heavy metal" was attributed to a set of toys whose decomposable surfaces when touched yielded up the lead for transit into the bloodstreams of young children, giving it a means for its circulatory march toward the vulnerable, developing brain. Nancy A. Nord, acting chair of the Consumer Product Safety Commission, issued a statement that declared, "These recalled toys have accessible lead in the paint, and parents should not hesitate in taking them away from children."³

Descriptions of the items recalled tended to have three common characteristics. First, they pointed to the dangers of lead intoxication as opposed to other toxins. Second, they emphasized the vulnerability of American children to this toxin. Third, they had a common point of origination: China, for decades a major supplier of consumer products to the United States and responsible for various stages in the production stream: "As More Toys Are Recalled, Trail Ends in China," reported the *New York Times* in June 2007.⁴ These alerts arose out of direct testing of the toys rather than from medical reports of children's intoxication by lead content in the indicated toys; as one *Consumer Reports* article said, "our latest tests find the toxic metal in more products."⁵ In other words, no children had yet to fall demonstrably ill from playing with these specific toys. One image for a lead testing kit, the Abotex Lead Inspector, shown on the company's website, shows a smiling white baby seated next to a plush toy (figure 13). The baby's right sleeve appears to have been pushed farther up its arm, so that its

TOP RATED KIT

ABOTEX **LEAD INSPECTOR[®]**
Lead Test Kit

PREMIUM LEAD TEST KIT

EASY TO USE

IMMEDIATE TEST RESULTS

ECONOMICAL

The only PREMIUM Lead Test Kit on the market that will test surfaces for lead, as well as water, and tell you the approximate lead release in the sample!

QUICKLY AND EASILY TEST:

Baby Bibs	Mexican Candles	Mini-Blinds	Plastic Parts
Ceramic Tile	Folk Remedies	Paint	Play Sand
Lunch Boxes	Lipstick/Make-up	Pet Toys	Pottery / Dishes
Electronics	Food Can Seams	Jewelry	Sidewalk Chalk
Plumbing	Soil/Dust	Toys	Water

13. Abotex Lead Inspector Lead Test Kit.
From the promotional website, 2007.

prominent skin contact with the toy can visibly indicate the intimate bodily contact between toys and children in the course of everyday play.

The toy's obviously facial front naturalizes the toy's status as a primary interlocutor for the infant. Its anthropomorphization reifies parents' fantasy that the toy must be a familiar and safe substitute for a "person." If the toy flower presents a friendly face to the socializing infant, the testing kit suggests that this idealized scene of interactivity has a threatening undercurrent. The logo features a silhouette of a man's face and a magnifying glass, a deliberate anachronism that makes it seem as if this kit will turn a parent into Sherlock Holmes, able to hunt down clues, searching for visible traces of lead as if looking for fingerprints in a board game murder mystery.

The Abotex Lead Inspector can investigate for a consumer which toys and other personal effects have toxic levels of lead. Its color-

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Resultant Color Produced Approx. Lead Release in parts per million (ppm) of the sample. PATENT #1,256,782	Faint Yellowish Tint	1-3 ppm
	Light Brown	5 ppm
	Medium Brown	10 ppm
	Dark Brown	25 ppm
	Black	over 50 ppm

14. Abotex lead color chart. From the promotional website, 2007.

coded test strips can be bought in quantities of eight to one hundred. Once one uses the testing strip, they can refer to a reference color guide (figure 14), for which the diagnostic colors range from a “faint yellowish tint” (the least toxic range) to “medium brown” to “black” (most toxic). Critical race scholars have usefully parsed the distinctions between “colorism” and “racism,” investigating how regionally and culturally specific discourses (including legal ones) regarding tones, shades, and colors may or may not synch up with relevant discussions on race.⁶ Yet the graded valuation of color—the higher valuation of light shades and lower valuation of darker shades—remains a popular habit of mainstream colorism in the United States, and the Abotex reference chart complies with this chromatic logic.

At the height of the lead toy scare, media outlets paraded images of plastic and painted children’s toys as possibly lead-tainted and hence possible hosts of an invisible threat; guest doctors repeated caveats about the dangers of “brain damage,” “lowered IQs,” and “developmental delay,” directing their comments to concerned parents of vulnerable children. Toy testing centers were set up across the country, and sales of inexpensive lead test kits like the Abotex Lead Inspector rose as concerned parents were urged to test their toys in time for the holiday season in 2007, in effect privatizing and individualizing responsibility for toxicity in the face of the faltering dysfunction of the FDA and EPA, whose apparent failure to regulate these objects was thrown into sharp relief.

One of the more prominent visual symbols of this recall debacle was that of toy trains, generally smiling, in different colors and identities. In this illustrative photograph accompanying an article on the toy recall in 2007 in the *New York Times*, an anthropomorphized engine is graphically headed off the tracks (figure 15). The photograph affiliates the toy panic with one particular toy, Thomas the Tank Engine, the eponymous head of the Thomas & Friends series. Originally



15. Thomas the Tank Engine headed off the tracks. Lars Klove, *New York Times*, June 19, 2007, from "RC2's Train Wreck," by David Barboza and Louise Story.

a creation of the British author Wilbert Awdry in a book published in 1946, Thomas the Tank Engine has spawned an entertainment industry that today spans the globe; its central significance to the toy panic is discussed later in this chapter. In this photograph, Thomas's open mouth and raised eyebrows suggest surprise at his derailing as the wooden tracks under his wheels gently curve away. The "maker" of Thomas & Friends toys, the U.S. company RC2 (whose manufacturing is outsourced to China), also produces Bob the Builder and John Deere toys, model kits, and the Lamaze Infant Development System; the prevalence of toys related to construction and industrial transportation reflects a slant toward fostering young masculinities.⁷

Other media images specific to lead-tainted toys abounded: stuffed animals, plastic charms, necklaces and bracelets, teething aids, and toy medical accessories such as fake blood pressure cuffs (these medicalized playthings were particularly ironic, since this toxic toy transposed expected subjects and objects: children were turned from future doctors and nurses back into the patients of public health). Pictures of the decontextualized toys alternated with images that included overwhelmingly white and generally middle-class children playing with the suspect toys.

While notions of lead circulated prolifically, lead itself was missing from these renderings. Neither the molecular structure of lead, nor its naturally occurring colors, nor its appearance in raw form or industrial bulk were illustrated. Rather, images of the suspect toys and the children playing with them predominated in visual representations of the toxic threat. Even the feared image of a sick American child that underlay the lead panic was not visually shown, only discussed in the text as a threatening possibility. Together, the associative panoply of images—the nursery-school primary color toys associated with domestic, childlike innocence and security—served as a contrastive indictment. The lead toxicity of painted and plastic toys became the newest addition to the mainstream U.S. parental (in)security map.

The ensemble of images seemed to accelerate the explosive construction of a “master toxicity narrative” about Chinese products in general, one that had been quietly simmering since the recalls in 2005 of soft Chinese-made lunchboxes tainted with dangerous levels of lead. Journalists, government offices, and parents drew alarming connections between Chinese-made products and environmental toxins apace. Their lists now included heparin in Chinese-made medicines, industrial melamine in pet food, even Chinese smog, which had become unleashed from its geographic borders and was migrating to other territories. The visual representations of Chinese toxicities not related to lead that flourished in 2007 included rare-earth magnets haphazardly arrayed in the intestines of a child’s X-rayed body; medicine vials; toothpaste tubes; cans of dog food; lipstick tubes; dogs lying on veterinary tables; and Chinese female workers in factory rows, in what Laura Hyun Yi Kang has called “one of the emblematic images of the global assembly line.”⁸ If RC2 shared legal responsibility for the lead found in Thomas the train, this fact seemed lost on the news media; it was the Chinese site of assembly (and the U.S. child as the site of contact or ingestion) that received the lion’s share of attention.⁹

A generalized narrative about the inherent health risk of Chinese products to U.S. denizens thus crystallized. But this narrative is a highly selective one dependent on a resiliently exceptionalist victimization of the United States. Chinese residents are continually affected by the factories called their “own,” through the pollution of water, air, food, and soil. A growing awareness of the regular failure of local and national governments to strengthen protections for residents and workers from industrial toxins has led to a dramatic rise in commu-

nity protests, lawsuits, and organized activist movements.¹⁰ These industries are deeply bound up with transnational industrialization, in which China has been a major participant for decades, as well as the vulnerabilities it generates. According to David Harvey, the governments of industrializing nations are tempted to “race to the bottom” in their striving for participation in systems of transnational capital. In the process, they are more than willing to overlook unjust labor remunerations or benefits and the lack of protection from adverse labor conditions. As a result, local populations and industry workers, because they are deeply tied to the very environments in which these industries are animated, must forcibly consume (literally) the by-products of those industries.¹¹

Within the United States in 2007, mass media stories pitched Chinese environmental threats neither as harmful to actual Chinese people or landscapes, nor as products of a global industrialization that the United States itself eagerly promotes, but as invasive dangers to the U.S. territory from other national territories. These environmental toxins were supposed to be “there” but were found “here.” Other countries, including Mexico, were named in relation to manufacturing hazards; yet, perhaps in proportion to its predominance in world markets, China remained the focus of concern for the vulnerability of the United States to consumer product toxicities. It seems no coincidence that just before this year, in 2006, China overtook the United States in global exports, a fact documented by the World Trade Organization and widely reported throughout 2006 and 2007.¹² This rise in manufacturing led to fears about the trade deficit, fears hardly contained—and in fact in some sense paradoxically fueled—by Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez’s proclamation that the swelling Chinese output was “not a threat.”¹³

Alarm about the safety of Chinese products entered all form of discourse, from casual conversations to talk shows to news reports. In what might be called a new, shrewd form of unofficial protectionism, Stateside citizens were urged to avoid buying Chinese products in general, even though such products are essentially ubiquitous given the longtime entrenchment of trade relations between the United States and China. That an estimated 80 percent of all toys bought in the United States are made in China is the sign of such entrenchment. An investigative reporter recounted that attempting to avoid anything “made in China” for one week was all but futile. He wrote, “Poi-

soned pet food. Seafood laced with potentially dangerous antibiotics. Toothpaste tainted with an ingredient in antifreeze. Tires missing a key safety component. U.S. shoppers may be forgiven if they are becoming leery of Chinese-made goods and are trying to fill their shopping carts with products free of ingredients from that country. The trouble is, that may be almost impossible.”¹⁴ One lesson of this panic was that inanimate pollutants could now “invade” all kinds of consumer products, and other pollutants could always climb on board.

The Chinese toy panic in 2007 was a twist on an earlier theme in recent U.S. history regarding the toxicity of lead. Since 1978, the year that the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission banned residential paint containing lead, there have been public-awareness campaigns and legislation regarding exposure from house paint. Lead-based paint is present in many buildings constructed before 1978, though public-awareness campaigns and municipal abatement programs have been quite successful in reducing the threat of residential lead to the middle and upper classes. More recently, however, environmental justice activists from polluted neighborhoods and public health advocates have insisted that lead toxicity remains a problem for children in impoverished neighborhoods. Lead poisoning among black children was thus figured as an epidemiological crisis linked to the pollution of neighborhoods populated largely by people of color, including older buildings whose once-widespread lead paint had not been remediated, and where lead-polluting industrial centers were located. But in 2007, news media coverage this kind of lead toxicity began to float and fade, overtaken by the heightened transnational significance of lead. Toys from China quickly became the primary source of threat, displacing this previous concern.¹⁵

I thus argue that a new material-semiotic form of lead emerged in 2007. This new lead was, despite its physiological identity to the old lead, taking on a new meaning and political character and becoming animated in novel ways. Why were painted trains and beaming middle-class white children chosen to represent the lead toxicity this time? If the spread of transnational commodities reached into all classes and privileges, how did middle-class white children morph into the primary victims of *this* environmental lead, when poor black children had previously been represented as subject to the dangers of domestic lead? Why could only China, or occasionally a few other industrial sites not in the United States such as Mexico and India, be

imagined as lead's source? Ultimately, what, or who, had this new lead become?

Animate Contaminants

At first glance, lead is not integral to the biological or social body. In the biomythography of the United States, lead is "dead." Rather than being imagined as integral to life, and despite its occurrence in both inorganic and organic forms, lead notionally lies in marginal, exterior and instrumental, and impactful relation to biological life units, such as organic bodies of value. The concept of animacy suggests there can be gradations of liveness. If viruses, also nonliving, nevertheless seem "closer" to life because they require living cells for their own continued existence, lead seems more uncontroversially "dead" and is imagined as more molecular than cellular. The meta-rubric of "animacy theory" proves useful here, as lead appears to undo the purported mapping of liveness–deadliness scales onto an animate hierarchy. Not only can dead lead appear and feel alive; it can fix itself atop the hierarchy, sitting cozily amid healthy white subjects.

Furthermore, lead deterritorializes, emphasizing its mobility through and against imperialistic spatializations of "here" and "there." The lead that constitutes today's health and security panic in the United States is figured as all around us, in our toys, our dog food, and the air we breathe, streaming in as if uncontrollably from elsewhere. Lead is not supposed to, in other words, belong "here." Even popular reports of the export of electronics waste to developing countries for resource mining still locate the toxicity of lead, mercury, and cadmium away from "here"; their disassembled state is where the health hazard is located, and disassembly happens elsewhere.¹⁶ Now, however, the new lead is "here," having perversely returned in the form of toxic toys. Lead's seeming return to the middle and upper classes exemplifies the "boomerang effect" of what the sociologist Ulrich Beck calls a "risk society": "Risks of modernization sooner or later also strike those who profit from them. . . . Even the rich and the powerful are not safe from them."¹⁷ The new lead thus represents a kind of "involuntary environmental justice," if we read justice as not the extension of remedy but a kind of revenge.¹⁸

While the new lead fears indicate an apparent progressive development of the interrelations of threat, biology, race, geographic speci-

ficity, and sovereign symbolization, lead's present-day embodiment may not be such an unusual admixture. It is instructive to trace lead's imbrication in the rhetorics of political sovereignty and globalized capital, remaining attentive to what is present and what is absent. If lead is at the present moment imagined to come from places *outside* the geographic West—in spite of the longtime complexity of transnational relations—and to threaten definitive U.S. citizenry, then how might we assess its status against a history of race rendered as biological threat, and a present that intensifies the possibilities of biological terrorism? How might we contextualize the panic around lead as a hyper-stimulated war machine in which the U.S. government perceives and surveils increasing numbers and types of “terrorist” bodies? And how does a context of an increasingly fragile U.S. global economic power texture and condition this panic, one that sits adjacent to discussions of contamination and contagion?

While lead has long worn an identity as a pollutant, associated with industry and targeted in environmentalist efforts, today's lead might first suggest a new development in the domain of contagion discourse. Contagion can be invoked precisely because the touching and ingestion of lead represents, for children, a primary route of exposure, just as with “live” biological agents. Yet there may be still further structural forces at play. Priscilla Wald, writing about complex narratives of biological contagion, has shown how epidemiology itself can be informed by circulating “myths,” understood as stories that are authoritative and serve to buttress communitarian identity.¹⁹ One could argue that the black children who disappeared from the lead representations did so precisely because the new lead was tied to ideas of vulnerable sovereignty and xenophobia, ideas that demanded an elsewhere (or at least not interior North America) as their ground. However, as I will argue later, black children did not quite disappear. In the United States, the genuine challenge of representing the microcosmic toxicity of lead and a human group's vulnerability to it defers to a logic of panics, falling back on simplified, racially coded narratives. Such narratives, by offering ready objects, doubly conceal the deeper transnational, generational, and economic complexity of the life of lead.

The behavior of lead as a contaminating, but not technically contagious, toxin (but, again, not necessarily as a pollutant in wall paint or as an airborne dust) contains many of the elements of Wald's “outbreak narrative,” a contemporary trope of disease emergence involv-

ing multiple discourses (including popular and scientific) that has been present since the late 1980s. Wald asserts that the specific form of the outbreak narrative represented a shift in epidemiological panics because it invoked tales that reflected the global and transnational character of the emerging infection and involved the use of popular epidemiological discourses to track the success of actions against the disease. Lead, however, is not a microbe, not an infectious agent; it does not involve human carriers like those profiled in Wald's examples of outbreak narratives. The lead panic depends not on human communicability but the toxicity of inanimate objects, so it is technically not the stuff of contagion. What it does clearly and by necessity involve, however, is transnational narratives of the movement of contaminants in the epidemiology of human sickness. In migration (the Pacific Rim) and source (China), the lead story significantly resembles the SARS epidemiological and journalistic trajectories of 2002, when the "outbreak" occurred. Finally, lead's major route of contamination is by ingestion, and it is epidemiologically mappable; when lead is attached to human producers, even if transnationally located far away, a kind of disease vectoring still can happen, even if its condition is not (even transitively) communicable.

Yellow Terrors

There is in fact very little that is new about the "lead panic" in 2007 in the United States. At least, we can say that it is not sufficient to turn to popular and scientific epidemiology's overapplied cry that contemporary ailments bear the mark of this globalizing world's heightened interconnectivities (a cry that says, for instance, that lead travels more than it used to, which would require us to accept, somehow, that lead came only from China). In fact, anxieties about intoxications, mixings, and Chinese agents have steadily accompanied U.S. cultural productions and echo the Yellow Peril fears articulated earlier in the twentieth century. That lead was subject to an outbreak narrative works synergistically with these anxieties, and these narratives may indeed have been partially incited or facilitated by them. One wonders in particular about the haunted vulnerability of "Western" sites that Elizabeth Povinelli incisively describes as ghoulish health:

Ghoul health refers to the global organization of the biomedical establishment, and its imaginary, around the idea that the big scary

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bug, the new plague, is the real threat that haunts the contemporary global division, distribution, and circulation of health, that it will decisively render the distribution of *jus vitae ac necris*, and that this big scary bug will track empire back to its source in an end-game of geophysical bad faith. Ghoul health plays on the real fear that the material distribution of life and death arising from the structural impoverishment of postcolonial and settler colonial worlds may have accidentally or purposefully brewed an unstoppable biovirulence from the bad faith of liberal capital and its multiple geophysical tactics and partners.²⁰

Povinelli traces a kind of looming materialization, in the form of threatened health, of the latent affects of imperialist “just deserts.”

The recent lead panic echoes, yet is a variation of, the turn-of-the-century Orientalized threat to white domesticity, as detailed by Nayan Shah in relation to San Francisco Chinatown in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth.²¹ Shah describes local investments in white domesticity in this period and its connection to nationalism and citizenship. Two perceived threats to white domesticity came in the form of activities believed to reside exclusively in Chinatown: prostitution and opium dens. Significant among concerned white residents’ and policy makers’ fears at the time was the contractibility of syphilis and leprosy, which was imagined to happen in direct contact with the Chinese, whether this contact was sexual or sensual in nature. Notably, they also worried that the passing of opium pipes “from lip to lip” was a major route of disease transmission; this image resonates with the licking scene of contamination of the lead-covered toys, a scene to which I return later.²² This indirect mode of imagined transmission resonates with the nature of the lead panic, for the relation of contamination in the case of both the opium pipes (disease contagion) and the new lead (pollution, poisoning) is one of transitivity. While the imagined disease transmission mediated by an opium pipe was more or less immediate and depended on proximity, if not direct contact, between human bodies, the new lead is imagined to be associated with national or human culprits somewhere far away.

Since the current reference to lead produces an urgent appeal to reject Chinese-made products, and since mentions of China arouse fantasies of toxins such as lead, heparin, and so on, then in effect, lead has in this moment become just slightly Chinese (without being personified as such). That is to say, on top of the racialization of those in-

volved, including whites and Chinese, lead itself takes on the tinge of racialization. This is particularly so because lead's racialization, I suggest, is intensified by the *non*-proximity of the Chinese who are "responsible" for putting the lead in the toys: that is, lead's presence in the absence of the Chinese, in a contested space of U.S. self-preservation, effectively forces lead to bear its own toxic racialization. As toys become threatening health risks, they are rhetorically constructed as racialized threats. This racialization of lead and other substances both replicates a fear of racialized immigration into the vulnerable national body at a time when its economic sovereignty is in question and inherits a racialization of disease assisted by a history of public health discourse.

The corrupted Chinatown arguably still lives, albeit now understood as an entire nature covered in irresponsible factories that spread their poisons far and wide. In the twenty-first-century lead panic, exogenous (that is, "unassimilated") mainland Chinese still stand to face the old accusations of ill hygiene and moral defect. Thus, today's images of toy-painting laborers too readily attract narratives of moral contagion: they demonstrate irresponsibility toward "our" consumers and blithe ignorance of the consequences of their work, properties that effectively reinforce their unfitness for American citizenship. This is a moral standard that has already been increasingly imposed on the working class by legal and social expressions of U.S. neoliberalism.

Chinese lead panics are sticky; they are generated by, and further borrow from, many already interlaced narratives. The spread of war discourse within the West and of the imaginary fount of bioterrorist plotting, dramatized by the U.S. government in its second Gulf war, was a convenient additive to narrations about toxins.²³ Bioterrorism involves the intentional use of toxic agents that are biologically active, even if not "live" themselves, against populations. They often cannot be perceived by the naked eye. While bioterrorist intentionality cannot be attached to the lead narrative (the China case might more aptly be called "bioterrorist negligence"), it is nevertheless fairly easy to read the discourses on lead as a *biosecurity threat*, conflating the safety of individual bodies with the safety of national concerns.²⁴ Other biosecurity threats have also been recruited as "Asian," in the case of contagious diseases such as SARS and bird flu. Consultants and safety advocates deemed red and yellow colors—precisely those colors used to indicate heightened levels of "security threat" in U.S. airports—to

have particularly dangerous levels of lead and suggested color as an effective criterion (“profile”) by which toys should be identified and returned.²⁵

Thus, lead was an invisible threat whose material loci and physical provenance, much like a terrorist “ sleeper cell,” needed to be presumed in advance and mapped—not only geographically but sensorily, sometimes through visual coding schemes like color itself (recall the Abotex lead test color chart which codes faint yellow the least toxic, black the most).²⁶ Popular responses both in the United States and in other countries affected by the China toy recall bore this out; one blog entry’s title, for instance, was the indignant “Why Is China Poisoning Our Babies?”²⁷ News about heparin contamination in pharmaceuticals originating from China became particularly explosive when it was thought to be deliberate, highlighting the sense of insidious invasion in the same way that bioterrorism does.²⁸ Given the apparent, blithe disregard or dysfunction of both the Chinese and U.S. governmental safety controls along the way, the sign of biosecurity and protection falls on the head of a young child who wishes to play with a toy, and by implication, that child’s parents. Indeed, the body of the young white child using a toy train is not signified innocently of its larger symbolic value at the level of the nation; its specific popularity suggests this metonymic connection.

The last few decades have seen a strengthening of affects around terrorism, associating it with radical extranationality as well as nonstate agentivity. Jasbir Puar has incisively examined the escalating agitation around purported “terrorism,” particularly its potential to consolidate national interests (including white and neoliberal homonationalisms) in the face of such a perceived threat.²⁹ Indeed, nonstatehood, while always potentially unstable, has come into a mature relationship with the imagined *possibility* of terrorism. This is evidenced, for example, by the fact that in 2010, Senator Joe Lieberman proposed that Congress enact the revocation of citizenship from those who demonstrate financial support or other forms of allegiance to organizations deemed “terrorist” by the United States. Under these conditions, the invisible threat of cognitive and social degradation in the case of lead meant that the abiding, relatively more methodical, and diversified work of environmental justice activists on lead toxicity was here transformed into something that looked less “environmental” and increasingly like another figure in the war on terror, a war that marked the diffuseness,

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unpredictability, and sleeper-cell provenance of enemy material and its biological vectors.³⁰

This “war on terror” was doubly pitched as a neomissionary insistence on the dissemination of the “American way,” including its habits of free choice and its access to a free market at its core defined by the proliferation of consumer products. Thus, the very title of a *New York Times* article by Leslie Wayne published in 2009 about corrosive drywall for new homebuilding sourced from China, “The Enemy at Home,” betrays toxic drywall’s coding as a biological threat metaphorized as war (itself not at great notional distance from “biological warfare”).³¹ The idea of this “enemy at home” makes lead into a symptomatic signifier of a war of capital flows, particularly the struggle over trade protectionism and the Chinese resistance to allow the Chinese yuan to float against the dollar, a resistance that has only recently seen a measured lessening as of this date of writing (2011). Lead is animated to become simultaneously an instrument of heightened domestic panic, drawing from and recycling languages of “terror,” and a rhetorical weapon in the rehearsal of the economic sovereignty of the United States. A story by the financial-interest magazine *Forbes* at the height of the toy recall made these slippages baldly evident: “Chinese Toy Terror.”³²

What are blended in this collapse of narratives, and what are of particular interest here for animacy, are precisely the subjects and objects, recipients and perpetrators, terrorists and innocents, of lead toxicity. In other words, the fused stories about lead *displace* the normal agents of the contagion narratives and scramble the normal pairings between protector and protected and self and other. As such, they cannot rhetorically function as effectively as they might strive to function. This easily recognizable failure of boundaries may be the sole rehabilitative counterthrust of the new lead panic.

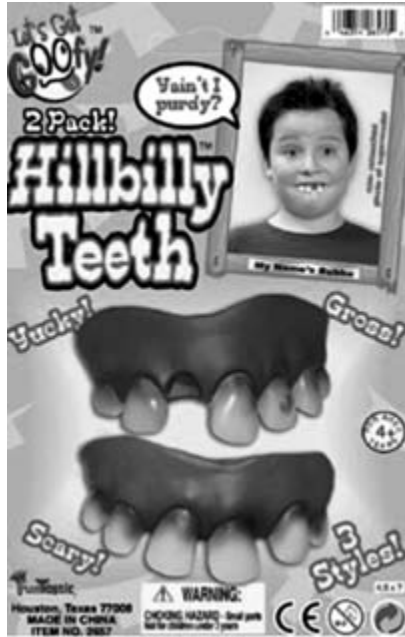
Lead's Labors

The image of the vulnerable white child is relentlessly promoted over and against an enduring and blatant background (that is, unacknowledged) condition of labor and of racism: the ongoing exposure of immigrants and people of color to risk that sets them up for conditions of bodily work and residence that dramatize the body burdens that projects of white nationalism can hardly refuse to perceive. Blithely

overlooked—or steadfastly ignored—are the toxic conditions of labor and of manufacture, such as inattention to harmful transnational labor and industrial practices that poison, in many cases, badly protected or unprotected workers.³³ Other persistent conditions include the invisibility within the United States of the working, destitute, or agrarian poor in favor of idealized consumers who are white and middle or upper middle class; electronic wastes as extravagant and unattended exports of the United States to countries willing to take the cash to mine it; the dumping of toxic wastes and high-polluting industries into poorer neighborhoods within municipalities; and common practices in the United States of exporting products of greater toxicity than is permitted within its own borders.³⁴ Here, the cynical calculus of risk, race, and international trade continually reproduces a specific configuration of toxic expulsion to othered lands or peoples. As Cheri Lucas Jennings and Bruce H. Jennings report, the international economic director of the World Bank suggested that third-world countries might be better off trading for the toxic waste of first-world countries, since “poverty or imminent starvation” were a greater threat to life expectancy than the toxicity of the waste they would receive.³⁵ Within the United States, these authors point to the greater access to less persistent toxins (such as pesticides) by those with economic privilege, leading to a bifurcated distribution of greater and lesser toxic infusion along lines of both class and race.

The contemporary fears in the United States about lead contamination and mental degradation are complexly interwoven with race, class, and cognitive ability, both as they externally manifest (that is, the racialization of imports from China) and as they dovetail with internal registers of classism and regional stereotyping. Take, for example, one toy, Hillbilly Teeth, made in China and distributed by the company Funtastic (of Houston, Texas), which was recalled due to concerns about lead in 2008 (figure 16). The recall notice of this product issued by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission singled out the gray paint on the teeth as the source of lead.³⁶ Though it was coded as threatening or harmful due to its potentially tainted plastic (which would by design be placed in the child’s mouth), one could equally find alarm in its perpetration of classed, ableist, and ruralized violence in its identity as a toy.

The package’s cardboard backing depicts a smiling, presumably “nonhillbilly” white male child wearing the denture insert, and the



16. Funtastic's "Let's Get Goofy" Hillbilly Teeth, made in China, recalled in 2008. Source unknown.

discolored, out of proportion, and otherwise imperfect teeth are designated “yucky,” “gross,” and “scary.” An inset fake frame, labeled “My Name’s Bubba,” has a cartoon speech bubble (“Yain’t I purdy?”) that uses a distorted caricature of rural or Southern accents. The prefatory and framing “Let’s Get Goofy!” resembles the youthful refrain “Let’s Get Retarded!” and signifies a willful and temporary loss of rationality and cognitive measure. The extant class coding of the “bad teeth” further builds on the myth of rural and working-class degradation by hinting at the acute dental issues that often accompany addiction to methamphetamines (aka “meth mouth”). Methamphetamines are the most recognized drug problem in “hillbilly country,” that is, the rural South and Midwest. The juxtaposition of *Hillbilly* and *Teeth* reminds us that both the urban gentrified center and the pastoral myths of the United States have their own white undersides.³⁷ Against such a consolidated scenario, the leaden gray-tinted tooth paint seems even more intent on the protection of a limited few, the urban kids who

have the voluntary luxury, every year on Halloween, of assuming the mask of fallen class and intellectual ability, only to snap it off later.

A different toy, however, sat at the center of the lead panic in 2007: the expensive toy series Thomas the Tank Engine, seen earlier. Thomas and his “friends” are immensely popular objects and are accompanied by a range of lucrative tie-ins, including a television show, games, activity books, candy, and other merchandise bearing Thomas’s characteristic blue “body” and round gray and black face. These are not only meant for children. The series is marketed to middle-class parents who insist on high-status “quality” products, which in this case are tuned toward boys and quite explicitly direct their proper masculine development. An article from the *New York Times* in 2007 explicitly associated the toys’ high prices with their presumed quality and safety. The article bears one visual image, a photograph of the “James Engine” from the Thomas series, and a description of one member of the vulnerable population (identified as children), a white four-year-old boy whose mother points to the expectation of “quality” for these toys and whose class membership appears to be middle to upper middle class: “The affected Thomas toys were manufactured in China. . . . ‘These are not cheap, plastic McDonald’s toys,’ said Marian Goldstein of Maplewood, N.J., who spent more than \$1,000 on her son’s Thomas collection, for toys that can cost \$10 to \$70 apiece. ‘But these are what is supposed to be a high-quality children’s toy.’”³⁸ Presumably, the “cheap,” working-class McDonald’s toys are the toxic ground on which the nontoxic quality toys are to be built and compared.

Goldstein may have a point about the train’s symbolic privilege, at least. Trains occupy an iconic place in the mythology and economic actuality of the creation of the American West. Symbolically and materially, trains are intrinsically connected to commerce and the circulation of economic goods as well as, in the United States, to a hidden history of Chinese labor. Both the extension of railroad systems to the American West and the development of the Sacramento River Delta in California heavily depended on imported Chinese labor that was rendered invisible in certain interested histories of labor.³⁹ Narratives about lead toxicity in toys from China largely obscure the conditions of Chinese labor in the production of these toy trains.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, these narratives deploy the fact of labor obliquely, in an explication of the pathway of toxicity (lead must be painted on). How to explain this incipient visibility?

An accusatory narrative in which Chinese are the criminal painters of the toy Thomas trains sets things up differently from the story of the Chinese laborers who extended the railroads to the American West: while the latter were made invisible in the interest of the white ownership of land, property, and history, for the toy painters the conditions of labor needed to be made just visible enough to facilitate the territorial, state, and racial assignation of blame, but not enough to generally extend the ring of sympathetic concern around the workers themselves.⁴¹ Indeed, I found very few instances among concerned parents or journalists in the United States in which lead was also understood to be a source of toxicity for the immigrant or transnational laboring subjects who take part in the manufacture of the product.

So, the story of lead, a story of toxicity, security, and nationality, is also necessarily about labor: when it is registered, and when it is hidden, and who pays what kind of attention to whose labor. The regular erasure, or continued invisibility, in the lead narratives of the textile sweatshops, device assemblers, and toy painters, who are largely young women who have migrated into the Chinese cities from rural satellites, renders quite ironic the care work that is so poignantly provided by the toys—and transitively by the women who make them. The transitive criminalization of Chinese toy assemblers is all the more ironic when we consider the routinization of childcare inside the United States by African Americans and immigrants from Central and South America, the Philippines, South Asia, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, for middle-class parents of all ethnicities.⁴² In some respects, the economy itself and changing kinship structures have increasingly meant that parents hire help while they work away from home, a creep of the care crisis into higher echelons of society, as feminist labor scholar Evelyn Nakano Glenn notes.⁴³ From the 1980s, middle-class mothers increasingly joined the labor force as neoliberalism took hold in the racialized sphere of the care of children: as they increasingly left the house and their children, “mothers had to accomplish more intimate care in less time,” suggesting that care work be taken up by others in their place.⁴⁴ The racial mapping of the desirable subjects in the United States thus occurs in the context of the erasure of its disposable ones; I refer here to Grace Chang’s notion of (immigrant female) “disposable domestics.”⁴⁵

Just as lead particles travel, so too does Thomas the train. It is a mobile vehicle, not only symbolically but also materially, one that has

journeyed from England to the United States to China and back again. And indeed, a trip I took to China in 2010 revealed many knock-offs of Thomas, who is just as popular there as he is in the United States. These packaged toys, puzzle books, and candies were immediately recognizable but had slightly incorrect English spellings of his name, such as “Tromas,” or “Tomas” (figure 17), as if to match the impossibility of perfect translation. These “illegal” copies show that, like the lead he allegedly carries with him on his back, Thomas is not containable within a given trajectory of movement and desire. The global spread of this commodity complicates the one-way vector of contamination from China to the United States, indicating a multi-directional flow. And yet, little is still known within the United States about how these toys may or may not harm Chinese children or the Chinese workers who produce them.

I referred earlier to a mode of transmission—from contaminated toy to child—as one of transitivity. For the late-capitalist, high-consumption, and highly networked sectors of the world, transitivity has arguably become a default mode not only of representation but of world-relating. The asymmetry of this world-relation is no barrier to the toxic effectivity of simmering racial panics. The sphere of the world that is well rehearsed in the flow of transnational commodities, services, and communications has become the perfect “host” for such transitivity, or at least the collapsing of transitive relations into conceptualizations of immediate contact. Patricia Clough, in her theorization of the complex, even nonhuman, agencies and affects participating in television and computer-consuming information societies, aptly writes that “even as the transnational or the global become visible, proposing themselves as far-flung extensions of social structure, they are ungrounded by that upon which they depend: the speed of the exchange of information, capital, bodies, and abstract knowledge and the vulnerability of exposure to media event-ness.”⁴⁶

An advertisement on the airport trolleys in Shanghai Pudong Airport (figure 18) in June 2010 demonstrates this relentlessly productive metonymic and economic transitivity. The text reads, “Your Eyes in the Factory! Book and Manage your Quality Control on [www .AsiaInspection.com](http://www.AsiaInspection.com),” in stark white letters on a red background; below the website name is an icon of inspection, the magnifying glass. In an inset picture, a male worker—possibly an inspector, possibly an assembler—handles a product. The transitivity here is not between the Chinese workers and the toys they have assembled, but rather



17. Super Tomas Series toy train set, outdoor market, Guilin, China, 2010. At lower right, the first three Chinese characters are *to-ma-sz*, a phonetic spelling of Thomas. Photograph by the author.



18. Airport trolley ad for Asialnspection.
Photograph by the author, June 26, 2010.

of participants in production monitoring. It exists between the eyes of international corporate managers, the advertisement's English-reading addressees, and another set of eyes that is ambiguously either that of local Chinese inspectors or that of remote cameras that focus on Chinese workers. The ad further represents the interest in surveillance, glossed here as more benign "quality control," that arose after the toxicity of Chinese products illuminated Chinese production as a troubled site.⁴⁷

Blackened Lead

Some years ago, as I indicated earlier, before the domestic narrative largely disappeared in favor of the Chinese one, the greater public was invited to consider the vulnerability of black children to lead intoxication. What happened to this association? Did it simply disappear, as I first hinted? Or did it meaningfully recede? I turn here to take a closer look at the medicalization of lead. Lead toxicity is medically characterized as at least partly neural; that is, it involves the nerve system, most notably comprising the brain and nerve pathways throughout the body. Medical accounts of lead toxicity, including those in-

voked in the toy lead panic of 2007, invoke its ability to lower the intelligence quotient (IQ) of a child. The IQ measure bears a distinctly eugenicist history and remains the subject of controversy regarding whether it has adequately shed its originary racial and socioeconomic biases.⁴⁸ Indeed, to what extent might we imagine that lead-induced IQ loss not only threatens the promise of success in an information economy, but also involves subtle racial movement away from whiteness, where the greatest horror is not death but disablement, that is, mental alteration and the loss of rational control?

Julian B. Carter's study of neurasthenia, or "nervous exhaustion," and its characterization in the 1880s by the neurologist George Beard as a specific property of genteel, sensitive, intelligent, well-bred whiteness (rather than, it was assumed, as a property of the working or peasant classes) gives us a more specific backdrop against which to consider neurotoxicity and its connection to the new lead's poster boy, the white middle-class child. Carter argues that the very vulnerability expressed by neurasthenia as a property cultivated primarily in privileged whites, both men and women, is what legitimated their claim to power in modernity, even as industrialization was blamed as a cause of the condition.⁴⁹

Within the United States, "blackness" has its own specific history with regard to rhetorics of contamination, not least the "one drop of blood" policies against racial mixing and miscegenation. Later policies of racial segregation in the Jim Crow South were also linked to white fears of contamination. Referring to the debates in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Saidiya Hartman writes of white concerns about the "integrity of bodily boundaries and racial self-certainty." She notes, "As *Plessy* evinced, sitting next to a black person on a train, sleeping in a hotel bed formerly used by a black patron, or dining with a black party seated at a nearby table not only diminished white enjoyment but also incited fears of engulfment and contamination."⁵⁰

Lead contamination in the United States continues to be scrutinized for its racial bias, albeit unevenly. One recent contested conjunction of African American populations and lead was a study led by the Kennedy Krieger Institute. This study, conducted between 1993 and 1995, tracked lead levels in the children of Baltimore public housing occupants (primarily African Americans) who were exposed to various degrees of lead toxicity in residential paint, without adequate warning of the dangers of that lead. A storm of debate erupted around

this study, in which healthy families were recruited to live in lead-contaminated houses. (This experiment harked back to the notorious Tuskegee Institute study, conducted between 1932 and 1972, which monitored poor black men who had syphilis but neither treated nor informed them in any way about the disease.)⁵¹

I have claimed that the year 2007 represented a year of transition, as a new and imaginatively more dominant, exogenous Chinese lead was entering the public domain. In this very same year, National Public Radio symptomatically both remembered and forgot received knowledge about domestic lead toxicity. First, a National Public Radio (NPR) show called “Living on Earth” updated its coverage of a longitudinal study on the urban poor and lead toxicity. That same year, another NPR show noted the higher levels of lead toxicity among African American children and pronounced these statistics “puzzling,” leaving it at that.⁵² “Puzzling”: this illogic or failure of deduction occurred despite all kinds of widely available evidence pointing to increased urban regional pollution, lower access to information, and lower financial capacity to remediate or conceal lead paint. This easy disregard explains how black children in representations of toxic lead largely disappear and are replaced by white children: the national security project of the United States is less interested in profiling African American children as victims of lead poisoning, especially when the “new” lead is now situated as an externally derived attack.

Even the “remembering” of urban toxicity in the NPR “Living on Earth” show in 2007 is of a certain kind. This show updated its audience on an acclaimed longitudinal study on lead’s effects on children that was begun in the 1970s, led by Kim Dietrich of the University of Cincinnati, and revisited over the years by NPR. Dietrich reported that early exposure to lead toxicity can be linked to later criminal behavior. By design, the study was focused on “inner-city” children, according to Dietrich, “who are largely minority.”⁵³ In the NPR update in 2007, which functions as a symptomatic piling-up of racial constructs, Dietrich actively legitimated the interviewer’s prompts, gathering a stunning assemblage: poverty, proximity of weapons, violence, lead, and poor nutrition together as collective determining factors for inner-city criminality:

GELLERMAN (interviewer): So if you look at inner cities, if you look at the poor, if you look at their exposure to weapons, you look at their exposure to violence, you look at their exposure to lead, and

their poor nutrition. Is this sort of the perfect combination of factors for crime?

DIETRICH: Yes, it's in a sense, the perfect storm. Uh, the environment provides a lot of incentives for crime. The child is in a community where he or she sees violence—the availability of guns, the availability of illicit drugs. So I would say that the inner-city environment provides the weapon, lead pulls the trigger.

“Lead pulls the trigger.” This metaphor of weaponry is used to characterize a latent violent criminality domestic to the United States, naturalized to an urban underclass of color, using a co-construction of guns, “ghettoes,” and racialized pathology. In some sense, it is an old story: to pump someone full of lead is to kill them. But the form and objects of death have become molecular, and intentionality has shifted to neglect, and a fragile self-identification rather than potency reshapes the threat into the other person, conflated with the lead that afflicts them.

Contrast this metaphor of weaponry to the title of the *New York Times* article on toxic Chinese drywall, “The Enemy at Home,” which partakes of a war metaphor not because of some naturalizing co-construction of guns, “ghetto,” and racialized pathology, but in relation to a *transnational* (that is, extra-domestic) exchange that simultaneously seems to threaten representative individual bodies and criminalize Chinese trade participation. This enemy, that is, should not be at “home,” with this word understood both as a generalized national body and as the domicile of family units (who are in a position to afford the construction of new homes).

One wonders to what degree any newfound alarmism about the vulnerability of black children to environmental lead can succeed, given the abiding construction of *affinities* between racist constructions of blackness and those of lead, long integral to the American racial and gendered corporeal imaginary.⁵⁴ A racial construction of blacks as already unruly, violent, contaminated, and mentally deficient lies inherent in the current neoliberal economy, which not only positions people of color in a labor hierarchy that matches them with literally disabling forms of manual labor, but is also conditioned and supported by a growing and incredibly powerful prison industrial complex structured according to race, class, and gender.⁵⁵ If lead exposure itself is associated with cognitive delay, enhanced aggressivity, impulsivity, convulsions, and mental lethargy, then we might read

such characterizations of blackness as attributions, or intimations, of disability, as much as we already understand them as damaging racial profiles. Eric Lott's study of blackface minstrelsy relates the suturing of impulsivity or sudden bodily displacement to fears about black masculinity in this performance culture in the United States. Lott reads Charles Dickens's account of the dancing in a New York blackface performance as stunned by its spasticity: "the whole passage reads as if Dickens did not really know what to do with such energy, where to put it."⁵⁶ Would lead toxicity, hence overdetermined with legacies of the negative characteristics of blackness, succeed quite so successfully as an imagined property of other racialized bodies, such as the Mexican braceros of the Second World War and modern-day maquiladora workers, both of whom have suffered from lead toxicity?⁵⁷ If disability can be read into constructs of blackness, disability itself is also a critically important axis of difference. Scholars such as Nir-mala Erelles and Andrea Minear point out the dangers of being both black *and* disabled; the authors suggest that within critical race feminism, while disability is sometimes recognized, it can often analytically function for scholars as a "nuance" of intensity rather than its own structural difference, leading to a loss of complexity in the reading: "the omission of disability as a critical category in discussions of intersectionality has disastrous and sometimes deadly consequences for disabled people of color caught at the interstices of multiple differences." These are just some ways in which criminality, race, and disability can be mutually produced and reproduced.

Thus, it is not necessarily correct to judge that African American youth are now no longer viewed as vulnerable to lead. Rather, it is easier to imagine that in this pointedly transnational struggle between major economic powers, black children are now the less-urgent population under threat. It is, instead, as if black children are constructed as more proximate to lead itself, as naturalized *to* lead; they serve as new ground to the newest figure.

In the case of the Thomas trains, lead toxicity is racialized, not only because the threatened future has the color of a white boy, but also because that boy must not change color. The boy can change color in two ways: First, lead lurks as a dirty toxin, as a pollutant, and it is persistently racialized as anything but white. Second, black children are assumed to be toxic; and lead's threat to white children is not only that they risk becoming dull and cognitively defective, but precisely that

they lose their class-elaborated white racial cerebrality, and that they become suited racially to living in the ghettos.⁵⁸

Queer Licking

Let me return to the visual symbolic of media coverage of lead toxicity. The florid palette of toy-panic images yielded two prominent and repeating icons. The media representations favored a pairing of images: on the one hand, the vulnerable child, more frequently a young, white, middle-class boy; and on the other hand, the dangerous party: Thomas the Tank Engine. The iconic white boy's lead toxicity must be avoided: he should not be mentally deficient, delayed, or lethargic. His intellectual capabilities must be assured to consolidate a futurity of heteronormative (white) masculinity; that is to say, he must not be queer. This is not only because one of lead's toxicities reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is reproductive disability and infertility; I suggest here that one aspect of the threat of lead toxicity is its origin in a forbidden sexuality, for the frightening originary scene of intoxication is one of a *queer licking*. Here again is the example of the white boy, who in the threatening and frightening scene is precisely licking the painted train, a train whose name is Thomas, a train that is also one of the West's preeminent Freudian phallic icons.⁵⁹ This image of a boy licking the train, though clearly the feared scene of contamination, never appears literally, or least I have not found it appearing literally; rather, if a boy and a train are present, the boy and the train are depicted proximately, and that is enough to represent the threat (the licking boy would be too much, would too directly represent the forbidden). But suggestions are sometimes loaded onto the proximities. In one representative image from a website alerting its readers to RC2's recall of Thomas the Tank Engine trains, we see the head and chest of a blond boy lying alongside a train that is in the foreground. The boy's moist lips are parted and smiling, his eyes intent and alert; he grasps a dark-hued train car with his right hand, gazing slightly upward at it. The other cars, receding toward the camera, fall out of focus. The scene is—at the very least—physically and emotionally intimate, pleasurable, and desirous.⁶⁰

On its website, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a fact sheet about lead, including the following statement under

the heading “how your child may be exposed”: “Lead is invisible to the naked eye and has no smell. Children may be exposed to it from consumer products through normal hand-to-mouth activity, which is part of their normal development. They often place toys, fingers, and other objects in their mouth, exposing themselves to lead paint or dust.”⁶¹ The language here, which means to reassure anxious parents, twice uses the word *normal* in describing children’s orality: their hand-to-mouth activity is “normal . . . part of their normal development.” This redundancy betrays a nervousness about children, with its language of proper development and its delineation of what is or is not permissible in normal play.

Returning to that fantasy that images could only approximate: what precisely is wrong with the boy licking the train? Two things are wrong: one, the boy licking Thomas the Tank Engine is playing improperly with the phallic toy, not thrusting it forward along the floor, but putting it into his mouth. Such late-exhibited orality bears the sheen of that “retarded” stage of development known as homosexuality. I am invoking the impossible juncture between the queernesses “naturally” afforded to children and the fear of a truly queer child.⁶² I recently had a conversation with a British man in his seventies about the lead panic within the United States. With a twinkle in his eye, he said, “We had that lead in toys when I was young! Perhaps we just didn’t suck them?” To me, his comment highlights the kind of temporal limitations on some kinds of national memory, the invested forgetting that is necessary for such a lead panic to become so enlivened.

Given that lead’s very threat is that it produces cognitive disabilities, the scene of the child licking his toxic train slides further into queerness, as queer and disabled bodies alike trouble the capitalist marriage of domesticity, heterosexuality, and ability. The queer disability theorist Robert McRuer writes of the development of domesticity within capitalism that the “ideological reconsolidation of the home as a site of intimacy and heterosexuality was also the reconsolidation of the home as a site for the development of able-bodied identities, practices, and relations.”⁶³ Exhibiting telltale signs of homosexuality and lead toxicity alike is simultaneously to alert a protected, domestic sphere to the threat of disability. One could say that lead itself is queered here as a microcosmic pollutant that, almost of its own accord, invades the body through plenitudes of microcosmic holes (a child’s skin), sites the state cannot afford to acknowledge, for the queer vulnerabilities they portend.

Animacy theory embraces the ramified sites and traces of shifting being. It claims first that the tropes by which lead threatens to contaminate “healthy” privileged subjects relies fundamentally on animacy hierarchies. Lead can drag vulnerable people *down*, through variously “lesser” positions of animateness, into the realms of the “vegetable” or the nonsentient. At the same time, it has already weighed on some bodies more than others. The strength of anxieties about lead toxicity microcosmically, and very compactly, demonstrates that race, class, sexuality, and ability are unstable. These are not assured categories or properties that could operate intersectionally in a binary analysis, but are rather variably “mattering participants” in dominant ontologies that cannot therefore securely or finally attach to any body. Animacy theory objectifies animate hierarchies, assessing their diverse truth effects against the mobilities and slippages that too easily occur within them, and asks what paths the slippages trace. The next chapter focuses on the peculiar affective mediations wrought by toxicity, expanding beyond the paranoid images of altered bodies and minds produced by the fearful ensembles of U.S. biosecurity that are recounted in this chapter.

Notwithstanding my claims about lead’s racialization in relation to a Chinese context, lead is of course not always specific to China. Rather, like any toxin, perhaps especially because it is not alive, it can be detached and reattached to diverse cultural and biological forms. This means that it is readily racialized, but with a set of preferences provided by the discursive structures it inhabits. Lead as a toxin, more generally, has already become in this global context racialized in excess as nonwhite; for instance, Mexican lead-tinged candy also received much media attention in 2007.⁶⁴ Yet lead’s attachment preferences are perhaps not so flighty as one might first think; the “yellow hue” of today’s lead seems to swirl in with the “brown” and “black” layers of lead’s naturalized image.

I have suggested here that the mediation of lead in and around categories of “life” in turn undoes lead’s deadness by reanimating it. In other words, lead has the capacity to poison definitively animate beings, and as such achieves its own animacy as an agent of harm. By examining the signifying economies of health, imperialism, and degradation that paint race onto different bodies, and by directing attention to the multiplicity of “contact zones” of those engaging lead—from working on the assembly line, to using the new products that contain them, to the downstream use of the products, to the re-

Chapter Five

cycling and mining of them—we witness the inherent brokenness of “races,” “geographics,” and “bodies” as systems of segregation, even as they remain numbingly effective in informing discourses of combat, health, and privilege. An environmental history of toxic objects must minimally register the gendered, laboring, and chronically toxically exposed bodies of globalized capital, which systematically bear less frequent mention in narratives of toxicity than the cautionary warnings from the seat of U.S. empire. With this registration, lead’s spectacle remains connected to the possible forging of justice.