

What Is Contagion: a roundtable

By Candice Lin, Mel Y. Chen, & Jih-Fei Cheng

What is “contagion”? What scientific, linguistic, cultural, visual, aesthetic, and affective cues imbue the concept with meaning and force?

Candice Lin: I have been thinking about contagion in relationship to the “animacy hierarchy,” a concept I learned about from Mel’s book *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* ([2012](#)). I am curious to start this conversation by wondering about when a disruption or fluidity of animacy hierarchies serves a colonial project, and when the inability to hold distinct hierarchies of being acts subversively as a challenge to such power. I’m thinking, for example, of contagion as the confusion of categories or upending of this animacy hierarchy that occurs when inanimate objects or non-human beings like plants become racialized in description. I’m thinking here of your writing, Jih-Fei, on 19th century descriptions of diseased tobacco as “going mulatto,” or your writing, Mel, on the animating and racializing of toxicity in childrens’ toys.

In my recent research, I’ve been looking into descriptions of porcelain created when Europeans sought to imitate it and find the secret recipe. Porcelain was noted for its attributes such as hardness, whiteness, and imperviousness to staining by foreign drinks like coffee or tea — all racialized terms that seem to belie a fear of cultural contamination or miscegenation. This is further complicated when we think about the ways in which porcelain was also used for its small size of pores to filter bacteria and viruses for domestic, colonial water purification projects as well as scientific study.

Jih-Fei Cheng: Thank you, Candice. The connections you draw highlight what is possible in thinking about “contagion” as the inevitable transgressions of our artificially given discrete categories of existence. In order to understand “contagion” as the parsing of differences, borders, and iterations of power, we must also pursue the word’s definitions as “with,” “touch,” and the forms of desire, intimacy, and pleasure that it also conjures. To do so, I believe we must begin with histories and presences of colonizations, or coloniality, and processes of racialization.

As you point out, Mel’s (2012) illumination of the “animacy hierarchy” underscores how our determinations of what is valuable correspond to whether we perceive that thing, person, or entity as alive or dead. The racialization of the non-living and the attribution of lower sentience to racialized peoples are coeval. For instance, viruses are thought of as non-living entities because they do not possess a metabolism and, therefore, cannot reproduce without a host cell. Thus, we think nothing about “killing” a virus and we often use militaristic terms like “invasion” and “defense” to describe the medical condition and treatment of viral infections ([Cohen 2009](#)). At the same time, we conceive of national security and defense in the terms of virality when we describe “terrorist cells” or “sleeper cells.” In both cases, the idealized healthy citizen is

imagined as white, cisgender male, heterosexual, and able-minded and -bodied. For example, in 2014 *CNN News* ran the following television headline in response to concerns over the Ebola virus outbreak in parts of western Africa, including Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia: “[EBOLA: THE ISIS OF BIOLOGICAL AGENTS?](#)”



Image Source: <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/what-is-ebola>

Mel Y. Chen: Thank you both for such incisive and wide-ranging thinking; I want to sit with it. At this moment, two briefer things come to mind that contagion almost demands we establish in order to use it conceptually; both have to do with the status of a thing. First, if contagion is a process or even a condition, then the very materiality of things, of the constituents or the operands, the stuff of contagion, is what lends contagion its processual nature. It's not only the proxy-livingness of viruses but their associative-constitutive richness, by which HIV or AIDS itself becomes associated with and hence constituted by, sex; and by which, consequently, sex grows to accommodate the (re) productive, or replicative, traffic of viruses themselves. No notions seem safe from interconstitution, not least those intimately woven into national or transglobal political life.

Second, one key aspect of settler colonialism is its overwriting of extant ontologies ([Zoe Todd](#) might add that this includes its imposition of majoritarian ontological concepts). These overwritings are never well mapped and never complete; as we've learned, colonialisms are riven with partialities and failures, and yet devastation needs no rule of quantity or mass to be powerful. The degree and laws by which interconstitutions come to be understood as constitution itself (and can survive the status as a new object), the compositional or energetic nature of a thing, are hence in contention. That's another way perhaps to understand the events at Standing Rock: a prospective pipeline's constitutive and naive objecthood quietly but assuredly fuels the logics of exchange and transport (and capital) and indeed “natural

resource” that seem to make it necessary, a circuit of conviction to which Native and other tribal and organizational allies' voices of contestation have been so powerfully raised. Since contestations of this kind have been raised against settler colonial practices for centuries, it might be interesting to think about what particular contagions have been animated and potent in the lead-up to the recent turn of events in which the US Army Corps of Engineers withheld the granting of an easement for further construction under Lake Oahe.

JFC: That makes me think of [Ed Cohen's](#) (2011) tracing of the term *virus* to the Latin eponym *hospes* and [Scott L. Morgensen's](#) (2011) use of scholarship by Patrick Wolfe on settler colonialism as a structure, Giorgio Agamben on *homo sacer*, Michel Foucault on biopolitics, and Achille Mbembe on necropolitics, to generate a theory of settler colonial biopolitics. Drawing upon Cohen and Morgensen, I argued previously regarding the foundational [tobacco mosaic virus](#) (2015), that the idea of the “parasite” as a vector for contagion relies on a nation wherein the “host” is the “civilized” and (close to/often) white heterosexual citizen. This centering of whiteness and heteropatriarchy is only made possible through the historical dispossession and assumed evisceration of Native peoples and the enslavement, hypervisibilization, and policing of African-descended peoples on a global scale. Other racialized bodies are temporarily incorporated, through subjugation, as “guests” into the nation. However, bodies of color are generally targeted as “parasites” for immediate or protracted genocide in order to maintain the white supremacy of the “host.” The interrelated meanings of “host-guest-parasite” are foundational to settler colonialism, modern nation-building, viral pandemics, and global security. To presume that the “host-guest-parasite” relation existed prior to Native dispossession is not only ahistorical. Rather, this presumption further entrenches the “host-guest-parasite” as the supposed natural order, thereby re-instantiating the violence of settler colonialism and diminishing our capacity to imagine relationality beyond this modern and racial/ethno-supremacist formation.

When we confront settler colonialism, we are forced to contend with the colonial divisions and fundamental interrelatedness between the microbiological and the global, the non-sentient and sentient, and the scales and gradations in between. For instance, in her sculptural installation [You are a parasite \(2015\)](#), Candice's scaling of an insect-like head to the size of an adult human, if not larger, forces the human viewer to examine presumptions around propriety. Inside of the insect-like head is a small table of offerings including cordyceps tea, which is parasitic to insects and invertebrate animals, but used as medicine in some that have been described as “Tibetan” and “Chinese” traditions. The tea and other offerings are situated on top of a pink faux sheepskin, thereby humorously and pleurably highlighting the manufactured degrees of separation and gradations of difference. Here, the “human” (read: white, cis-gender, heterosexual, and able-minded and -bodied male) is displaced atop the animacy hierarchy and confronted with the logic of settler colonial violence. Who is the predator and who is the prey? Who is consuming who? If our natural instincts are to exterminate parasites to make space for ourselves as humans, then what do we make of our fantabulations and nightmares about being overtaken by parasites?

To contain, then, is to also contaminate, and to make inevitable contagion.

CL: In the sculpture of mine that you mention, the insect head is a cave (about 10 ft x 8 ft x 11 ft) in the shape of an ant head. I was thinking about the ant-decapitating fly that lays its larvae in the body of the ant and changes the ant's normative behavior as it grows within her body, until finally it releases an enzyme that dissolves the ant's neck tissue. The head then falls off, and the fly is birthed through the jaws. The whole show was trying to think about alternate forms of reproduction of bodies. I was wondering what it would be like to live in a society that made fetishes and a built environment that reflected a celebration of parasitism, for example, as a form of interspecies reproduction or shared use of bodies, rather than in a society that structures value and produces anxiety around heterosexual same-species reproduction and "possessive individualism" (to use C.B. Macpherson's term).

When thinking about this etymology of terms, I'm really struck by this confusion between what is food (the body of the other) and what is the body (the self). The term parasite traces its meaning to beside-the-grain, and the host can also be likened to the consecrated host in Judeo-Christian culture. I'm thinking about something I heard in a lecture where Donna Haraway is explaining the scientist Lynn Margulis's theory of coevolution as a case of indigestion. That new cellular forms came about not through competition or mutation but through partially digesting each other. I love this idea of thinking about the way we make new forms (cellular, human, or nationalistic) as a process of bad gas and incomplete-cannibalism.

MYC: I wonder if this is an opportunity to think together about the work we do as scholars and artists in the current national and global political landscapes. I know that my desire to read fiction and to make art, not as an escape but as a necessary and continual act of radical imagination, in addition to ongoing support of the efforts of so many peoples and organized justice efforts whose resources are ever more challenged, has intensified. How do the two of you understand your work in relation to contagious pasts, presents, futures? Are there novel questions to ask that contagion thinking urges or demands? Is there anything to say here that doesn't just reproduce hackneyed rhetorics about political method, philosophies of action, and approaches to justice? Candice, I am thinking that your recent work might be said to perform an optimistic act of contagion; Jih-Fei, I think of your work as delineating contagious operations. Yet I could have switched my descriptions and that would also have been true. This may be a surface observation so maybe you could say something better here!

JFC: I really appreciate the generative insights and urgency to imagine beyond. In the face of the Trump election, we have enduring radical Black and Indigenous-led and transnational social movements like Black Lives Matter (#BlackLivesMatter) and the No to the Dakota Access Pipeline (#NoDAPL), as Mel mentioned, and the international call for the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions against Israel (BDS), to name a few. In addition to building solidarity with these movements and engaging these movements in scholarship, teaching, and cultural productions, I think it's critical as scholars, artists, and organizers that we continue to enact radical political imaginations at all scales and in all forms of intimacies.

If "contagion" is fashioned around the idea of individuals who are "at risk" for transmitting or acquiring sickness, then how do we intervene into the security logics that insist on severing non-normative and non-procreative intimacies to formulate a hierarchy of "good" vs. "evil"?

Candice, I feel, is asking us to think about contagion as forms of inextricability, entanglement, and symbiosis without judgment, including cannibalism, in order to push back against presumptions that any object or subject could be ontologically pure or characterized as innocent. Meanwhile, Mel seems to ask us to attend to the “interconstitutional” and “processual” operations of contagion, like the pipeline itself, that direct how we perceive livelihood (fossil fuels) and protect it against contamination (from those who are presumed undeserving and who are presumed to stand in the way of “progress”). If we investigate these contradictions and confluences, then “contagion” registers the paradoxical effects of capitalism and the false promises of piecemeal rights organizing and liberal egalitarian progress.

[Session](#): A roundtable discussion bringing people from different fields into conversation.