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# Racialized Toxins and Sovereign Fantasies

Mel Y. Chen

How might one properly represent a toxin or infectious agent, and what directives inform that propriety? How might toxins take on characteristics well beyond their physical properties? This essay meditates on extended meanings of toxicity, using the 2007 U.S. case of “lead panic” about toxic toys associated with China. I label the lead case a *panic* to indicate its disproportionate status among cases of domestic intoxication, threats to children’s health, and the relative paucity of evidence that the contaminated toys themselves had caused severe health consequences.<sup>1</sup> I further measure this panic against intriguingly parallel spectacles in early-twentieth-century fiction and film in the United States to investigate lead’s role in the complex play of durative sovereign fantasy; *sovereign fantasy* is defined here as the national or imperial project of absolute rule and authority. I focus on the notion that an inanimate but invasive entity such as lead can become racialized, even as it can only lie in notionally peripheral relation to biological life units. Rather than focus on the concrete dangers to living bodies of environmental lead, which are ever more present and material and are well documented, in this essay I wish to think about lead as a cultural phenomenon over and above its material and physio-medical character. Along the way, I wish to ask these questions: If lead is now imagined to come from places strictly *outside* the geographic West—in spite of the longtime complexity of transnational relations—and hereby threaten definitive United States/“Western”

citizenry, then how might we assess its status against a history of race rendered as biological threat and within a present that considers the possibilities of biological terrorism? How might we contextualize the panic around lead in terms of a hyperstimulated war machine in which the U.S. government perceives and surveils increasing numbers of imagined terrorists? And how does a context of increasingly fragile U.S. global economic power condition this panic?

In the summer of 2007 in the United States, a spate of warnings and recalls of preschool toys, pet food, seafood, lunchboxes, and other items began to appear in national and local newspapers and television and radio news. 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. These alerts arose from direct testing of the toys, rather than from medical reports of children's intoxication by lead content in the indicated toys. One of the more prominent visual symbols of this recall debacle appearing in newspapers and websites was the series of images of Mattel brand Thomas & Friends series of toy trains, all smiling, in different colors and identities, sometimes graphically headed off the tracks. Mattel is a U.S.-based corporation with heavy use of transnational labor, but it was the Chinese source of lead that received the most attention. Other images specific to lead-tainted toys abounded: soft plush toys, plastic charms, necklaces and bracelets, teething aids, Chinese workers either solitary or in tens of seated factory rows painting trains and other objects, toy medical accessories like toy blood pressure cuffs. Pictures of the toys alternated with images of overwhelmingly white children playing with the suspect toys. Painted and plastic toys' lead toxicity became the newest addition to the mainstream U.S. parental (in)security map. Despite earlier, serious intimations of toxic exposure, lead has only now so sturdily enjoyed the status of quick reference.

While notions of lead circulated prolifically, in fact no industrial forms of lead were shown in raw form, no molecular structure of lead was 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 text as a threatening possibility. Together, the associative panoply of images—the flrid, primary color toys associated with domestic, childlike innocence and security—served as a contrastive indict-

ment. 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 2005 recalls of Chinese-made soft lunchboxes tainted with dangerous levels of lead.<sup>2</sup> Inanimate pollutants could now “invade” all kinds of consumer products, and other pollutants could always climb aboard. Other countries were named in relation to manufacturing hazards; yet, perhaps in proportion to its predominance in world markets, China remained the focus of concern for U.S. vulnerability to consumer-product toxicities. Alarm about the safety of Chinese products entered all form of discourse, from casual conversations to talk shows to news reports. U.S. citizens were urged to avoid buying Chinese products in general, even though this was quite impossible in view of how entrenched U.S.-China trade and manufacturing relations had become.

At the same time, one of the sustained concerns of environmental justice activists that did receive minor media coverage among U.S. liberal interests—the effect of lead paint on children in impoverished neighborhoods and the greater levels of lead toxicity among black children—began to float and fade, become unhinged by the heightened transnational significance of lead. In some sense, lead was, despite its physiological identity, taking on a new meaning and political character. Why were painted trains and beaming middle-class white children the only way journalistically to represent something so tiny it couldn’t be witnessed in action by the human eye? How did racial polarities snap so neatly into place such that white children were the primary victims of *this* environmental lead, when it was black children who had previously been represented in relation to the dangers of environmental lead? Why could only China, or occasionally a few other non-U.S. industrial sites such as Mexico and India, be imagined as lead’s source? Ultimately, who, and what, had this new lead become?

### **Live and Dead Contaminants and Modern Transitivity**

At first glance, lead is not integral to the biological or social body, and this seems particularly true of the social body that constitutes Western imperialism. In the biomythography of the West, lead is “dead.” Rather than being imagined as integral to life, lead notionally lies in marginal/external and instrumental/impactful relation to biological life units, such as organic bodies or social units. Although lead is a commonly understood pollutant, long associated with industrial purposes and targeted in environmentalist efforts,

today's lead might first suggest a new development specifically in the domains of immunity discourse and in vocabularies of contagion. Contagion can quietly circulate here since the touching and licking of lead represents, for children, a primary route of exposure, just as with live biological agents. Yet, in being noncontroversially dead and being imagined as more molecular than cellular, lead takes a step afield from live or semilive agents like bacteria and viruses. Furthermore, the lead that constitutes today's health and security panic in the United States stands, in my view, in significant relation to the seat of U.S. empire rather than to its periphery. Lead is not supposed, in other words, to belong "here." Even 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. Now, however, the new lead perversely returned in the form of toxic toys, and it is threatening "us" at our very core. While the new lead seems to indicate an apparent progressive development of the interrelations of threat, biology, race, geographic specificity, and sovereign symbolization, lead's present-day embodiment may not be such an unusual admixture. Like other toxins, it is instructive to trace lead's imbrication in the rhetorics of political sovereignty and globalized capital, while being attentive to what is present and what is absent.

The vulnerable body is both individual and social, complicating how the behavior and threat of a toxin may be rendered or how truth claims may be assessed. Immunity as a notion resists being merely a property of a singular individual; immunity necessarily becomes a communal property characterized by states and (cultural) practices.<sup>3</sup> In the presence of directed political investments, biological "fact" gives way, or becomes more tethered, to ideology. Donna Haraway assumes ideology's presence even in seemingly irreducible biological givens. For Haraway, the immune system is before the fact a blend of myth and knowledge, a multifarious "map drawn to guide recognition and misrecognition of self and other in the dialectics of Western biopolitics." Rather than a discrete series of biological facts and structures, Haraway's concept of the immune system cannot be reduced from the complex of political interests, scientific dogma, ideas of normal and pathological, research findings, and experiences of the body that constitute it.<sup>4</sup>

Priscilla Wald has shown that, in the presence of strong narrative demands, scientific accuracy can give way to mythical representations, where a *myth* is a story that is authoritative and serves to buttress communitarian identity.<sup>5</sup> Gwen D'Arcangelis writes, in the case of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) and its association with Chinese

“chickens, ducks, and pigs,” how microbial modes of transmission were explained by way of news-media images or texts that tied human to nonhuman animals.<sup>6</sup> Finally, one prominent earlier, mechanically similar, AIDS myth of origin involved Africans either slaying for food, or having sex with, monkeys. Thus, images of the cultural practices of others, if sought from a vulnerable position, can easily slide into fodder that strengthens defensive or protective nationalist sentiment and build a sovereign project. Indeed, 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 (at least not interior U.S.) as their ground.

There is therefore tremendous slippage, and a failure of origins, among narratives and images of immunity (or vulnerability). Whether we are talking about a body's immunity or a country's, it seems clear that many stories and images will participate in defining what comprises that immunity; such complexity at multiple levels is a matter of course. 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 recent lead panic echoes, yet plays variations on, the turn-of-the-century orientalized and queer threat to white domesticity, as detailed by Nayan Shah in relation to San Francisco Chinatown in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>7</sup> Shah describes local investments in white domesticity in this period and its connection to nationalism and citizenship. A perceived threat 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.<sup>8</sup> This indirect mode of imagined transmission comes closest to the nature of the lead panic. The indirect relation of contamination in both the case of the opium pipes (disease contagion) and the new lead (pollution, poisoning) is one of *transitivity*. While the imagined opium pipe-mediated disease transmission was more or less immediate and depended on proximity, if not direct contact, between human bodies, the “new lead” is imagined most saliently to be associated with national or human culprits “on

the other side.” It is entirely possible that the cross section of the world that is hypernetworked and is well rehearsed in transnational commodities, services, and communications has become the perfect host for imperial transitivity, or at least the collapsing of transitive relations into conceptualizations of immediate contact. For the late-capitalist, high-consumption, and highly networked sectors of the imperial centers of the Western 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 imperial panics.

If the reference to lead leads to an urgent appeal to reject Chinese-made products, and if mentions of China arouse fantasies of toxins such as lead, heparin, etc., then, in effect, lead has in this moment become just a bit Chinese. This is to say that on top of the racialization of those involved, 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 *nonproximity* of the Chinese who are assumed to be responsible for putting the lead in the toys: that is, lead’s presence in the absence of Chinese, in a contested space of white self-preservation, effectively forces the lead to bear its own toxic racialization. As toys become threatening health risks, then, 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 sovereignty is in question and inherits a racialization of disease assisted by a history of public health discourse.

The behavior of lead as a contaminating, but not contagious, *toxin* (but, again, not necessarily as a pollutant in wall paint or as an airborne dust in dry, windy areas) contains many of the elements of Wald’s “outbreak narrative,” a contemporary trope of disease emergence involving multiple discourses (including popular and scientific) since the late 1980s. Wald asserts that the specific form of the outbreak narrative represented a shift in epidemiology-type panics in that 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 on toxicity of inanimate objects, so it is not the stuff of contagion, formally speaking. What it does clearly and by necessity involve, however, is transnational narratives of the movement of contaminants in the epidemiology of human sickness. Furthermore, 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.

Ultimately, the representation of Chinese lead is the collapse of several different kinds of narrative: Wald's aforementioned outbreak narrative; toxicity stories that are not outbreak narratives, like Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge*, or studies of environmental racism (such as those found in *The Environmental Justice Reader*);<sup>9</sup> and, finally, bioterrorism. *Bioterrorism* involves toxic agents that are biologically active, even if not live themselves. Although bioterrorist intentionality cannot be attached to the lead narrative (the China case might more aptly be called the blend "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 or sovereignty of) national concerns. Popular responses have borne this out; one blog entry's title, for instance, was the indignant "Why Is China Poisoning Our Babies?"<sup>10</sup> News about Chinese-origin heparin contamination in pharmaceuticals became particularly explosive when it was thought to be deliberate, highlighting the sense of insidious invasion in the same way that bioterrorism does and calling up the specter of Typhoid Mary from the past. Given the apparent blithe disregard or dysfunction of governments' (both the Chinese and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration [FDA]) 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 toy train—using young white child's body is not signified innocently of its larger symbolic value at the level of the nation. Its specific popularity suggests this metonymic connection.

What are blended in this collapse of narratives, and what are of particular interest here, are precisely the subjects and objects, recipients and perpetrators, of lead toxicity. In other words, the fused stories about lead *displace* the normal agents of the contagion narratives, the normal pairings between protector/protected and self/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.

### A Controlling Serum

Today's lead panic has instructive parallels with a 1932 film, MGM's *The Mask of Fu Manchu*. These parallels are not merely coincidental,



as both instantiate the vague directives and appropriable objects of sovereign imagination. In analyzing one well-recognized, yet rarely discussed, scene from *The Mask*, I mean to suggest neither a transhistorically indexical, nor a neat historical, relationship between the Fu Manchu film and the form of our present-day health alerts. What I do wish to suggest is the idea of enduring *sovereign fantasy*, which exists at the level of cultural myth and which uses current resources at hand. The example also illustrates how an inanimate substance can be quickly racialized, and, even more importantly, that its very meaning can come to depend essentially on its racialization.

The film *The Mask of Fu Manchu* was based on a novel of the same name and published the same year, one of a series of such novels written by the British author Sax Rohmer in the 1910s–50s.<sup>11</sup> The novels' massive popularity in both Britain and the United States was driven by colonialist and Yellow Peril-type sentiment, customized to the political situations of each region, concerning the rise of Chinese immigration and labor in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and fears in the mid-twentieth century about rising East Asian powers. Rohmer's series in particular achieved immense popularity in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. They inspired a series of Fu Manchu films, from the late 1920s to the 1960s (and on), including *The Yellow Claw* (1921), *The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu* (serial, 1923), *The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1930), *The Drums of Fu Manchu* (1940), *The Face of Fu Manchu* (1965), and *Vengeance of Fu Manchu* (1968). The films constituted a genuine mass-media phenomenon that left aesthetic and thematic traces in later films. They also provided a consistent, albeit extravagant, imaginary fount through which to define U.S. citizenship against Asian moral decline. One break came in 1942 when the Chinese government protested that the Fu Manchu film then under production would endanger a U.S.-China wartime alliance; the film was suspended in response. This moment supports the now broad understanding that the symbolism of the Fu Manchu novels and films was not only consistently attuned to nationalism, but was both orientalist and exophobic, in line with contemporaneous policies designed to minimize Chinese attempts at citizenship.<sup>12</sup>

Fu Manchu, a criminal supreme who aspires toward world domination, is described in an oft-cited, dense compendium of description in an early Fu Manchu book, *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*:

Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present, with all the resources, if you will, of a wealthy gov-

ernment—which, however, already has denied all knowledge of his existence. Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu-Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man.<sup>13</sup>

Fu Manchu is depicted as an extranational agent with limitless resources. He is depicted as a perverse race man, sinister and intelligent, and endowed with scientific knowledge, which is the West's very means of mastery over its environment, social and geographic.<sup>14</sup>

In *The Mask*, a number of British explorers have arrived in the Gobi Desert to locate and seize the death mask of Genghis Khan before Fu Manchu does: the mask has special powers in the hands of an evildoer, and Fu Manchu aspires to world domination. The Europeans' move is therefore in the interest of forestalling Asian or Third-Worldist domination. (Fu Manchu controls a multicultural coven of accomplices, albeit not necessarily in the spirit of coalition so much as exploitation.) In one of the film's pivotal scenes, Fu Manchu concocts and injects a controlling "serum" into the body of a desirable (and, arguably, desired) young male British explorer named Terrence Granville.<sup>15</sup> With a full array of bubbling test tubes, uniformed assistants, and other cinematic icons of "scientific" paraphernalia, Fu Manchu dons a lab coat and proceeds to move from station to station, beginning with a boiling preparation (presumably the herbs and his own blood), and then traps a tarantula and extracts its fluids with a syringe while a large iguana (the dragon?) stands by. He collects a snake with a hook and hands it to an assistant, who induces the snake to bite the forearm of one of the loin-clothed black slaves standing at attention. Mixed venom and blood is extracted from the slave's arm as he dies. All the while, Fu Manchu describes his preparation: "This serum distilled from dragon's blood, my own blood, the organs of different reptiles and mixed with the magic brew of the sacred seven herbs will temporarily change you into the living instrument of my will."<sup>16</sup> Once the serum is complete, Fu Manchu injects it into the neck of the alert and alarmed Terrence, who, like the slaves, wears only a loin-cloth. Terrence then falls into a trance and proceeds in the next few scenes to do Fu Manchu's bidding.

Such indulgence in the crafting of a mixture of substances surpasses the simple citation of blood that can index miscegenation, drawing special attention to the florid threat of mixture. It seems to suggest that, even if the method is scientific, the collection of agents in itself, above and beyond the serum's threat of psychological control, bespeaks a terrifying chaos and a peculiar intimate threat, of species, nation, race, and loyalty. Fu Manchu's serum is "distilled" from a mixture of human, nonhuman animal, and herbal elements.

It might also bring to mind an inverted opium den (the stuff of disease panic in turn-of-the-century San Francisco Chinatown, whose queer angles were prominently examined by Shah),<sup>17</sup> in which the queerly mixed inhabitants of the den are all made to cohabitate, to mingle, to luxuriate in their miscegenated, queer splendor, all inside a vial of serum. In the case of Fu Manchu, the very infusion into an innocent's body of a premixed serum explodes the bounds between self and other such that the boundaries themselves seem to refuse detailing. (If portions of a spider can be injected into the neck of a man and have an effect on him, does it not mean that we are not so biologically distinct?) At the same time, the serum serves simultaneously as an inoculant and an intoxicant, confusing the subject and object of the action, transforming the meanings of desire and of contact.

A *serum* is defined as the *clear*, nonplasma, uncoagulated constituent of blood,<sup>18</sup> which seems to evade a direct "blood" reading of miscegenation and offers a kind of medicalized negative in its place. That Fu Manchu's serum is composed in part of nonhuman animal constituents somewhat legitimizes the immunological character of the term, since a human serum is often derived from the blood of immunized animals. Yet, the *immunization* sense of serum here seems lost on the plot, since Fu Manchu is using it not as an immunizing agent, but as an intoxicating one in two senses: literally drugging, as well as liberating desire. Fu Manchu's serum has the effect of absencing or displacing will, just as truth serum might expose a truth against the wishes of its host. But the presence of self is not obliterated; it is mediated. Ultimately, the controlling psychotropic effect of the serum confuses the boundary between (immunizing) inoculation and infection. (*Inoculation* essentially involves the introduction of a substance with some goal directed toward the immune system of the host—only the primary sense is the strengthening of immunity; a secondary sense involves infection.) The injection also allows us to think about blood mixing as a literal act *and* as a metaphor for racial and species miscegenation. Ultimately, the serum, more than any other visual or textual entity in the film, is made to bear *and* transmit its own complex racialization. This doubled rhetorical duty is particularly true, indeed often required, of fictive fluids that bear the symbolic weight of racial mixing.

### Prominent and Hidden Vulnerabilities

Fu Manchu, the doubly marginal man, is a blended figure in more ways than race and nationality/ethnicity, being a cosmetic amalgam

of the vampiric indigenous (to the West) Jew and the sinister, scheming exogenous Chinese, as well as being himself suggestively animalized (“feline” in the texts; see the earlier excerpt).<sup>19</sup> His physical representation, one that equivocates between hairy masculinity and clawing felinity, literalizes the animalizing appliqué of a colonialist imagination concerned with its Others and is itself gendered by it while being not only feline, but also queer, and transgender. Indeed, Fu Manchu’s queer gendering poses an embodied threat; the filmic representation of this body, it could be argued, suggests the perceived toxicity of a racially gendered body that simply won’t behave. This nonbehaving body echoes the strains of the Yellow Peril, sounding alarms about unwelcome laboring bodies that will not retreat to their country of origin, as well as about the possibility of a rising Asian body of power.

It could be argued that mainstream Western imperial representative vocabularies have promulgated a relative fungibility of bodies of color, whether those bodies belong to that empire or exceed it. This fungibility in part conditions the extravagant range of external representations of people of color, from human to animal, from ethereal to abject, from child of the earth to jaded prostitute. Here we are talking not about marginal men so much as marginally human others.<sup>20</sup> Juxtapose the fungibility of represented bodies of color with the literal fungibility of the young white child (for instance, the boy playing with trains) at the seat of U.S. empire, the one who appears most poignantly in representation as one who must be protected from Chinese lead. The white child’s fungibility is literal in that it is simply understood as a property of ingestion, a vulnerable body, representationally coherent yet invadable by toxic substances. Lead toxicity is neural; that is, it involves the nervous system, primarily represented in terms of the brain and intellect.<sup>21</sup> Common discussions of lead toxicity in children, including those discussions in 2007’s toy lead panic, invoke its ability to lower the IQ (intelligence quotient) of a child. It is useful here to note that the IQ measure bears a distinctly eugenicist history and remains the subject of controversy regarding whether it has adequately shed its ordinary racial and socioeconomic biases.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, to what extent might we imagine that lead-induced IQ loss, in the popular imagination, not only threatens the promise of socioeconomic success and the American Dream, but also involves subtle racial movement away from whiteness—and where, as in the case of Fu Manchu’s Terrence, the greatest horror is not death, but one’s mental alteration and loss of rational control?

Two hidden aspects of the lead panic are convenient to the development of a sovereign U.S. fantasy. The image of the vulnerable

white child is relentlessly promoted over and against an unacknowledged and yet blatant background condition of labor and of racism: the ongoing exposure of immigrants and people of color to risk, which 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: inattention to harmful transnational labor and industrial practices that poison—in many cases, badly—our unprotected workers;<sup>23</sup> the invisibility within the United States of the working, destitute, or agrarian poor<sup>24</sup> compared with idealized white middle-class or upper-middle-class consumers; electronic wastes as extravagant and unattended exports of the United States to countries willing to take the cash to mine them; the placement of toxic waste and high-polluting industry into poorer U.S. neighborhoods; and common U.S. practices of exporting products of greater toxicity than permitted within its own borders.<sup>25</sup>

Despite what Nayan Shah describes as the late-nineteenth-century Christian—and class—borne “uprighting” of a corrected and modernized Chinatown populace and an adoption of discourses of health and hygiene, in the case of this 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: irresponsibility to *our* consumers and blithe ignorance of the consequences of their work, properties that effectively reinforce their unfitness for American citizenship. Such ideas of moral scourge have already been increasingly socially and legally imposed on the working class in the United States’ late-capitalist, neoliberal economy and mind-set.<sup>26</sup> Narratives in the United States largely obscure the fact of labor, but nevertheless deploy it obliquely in an explication of the pathway of toxicity: lead must be painted on. Yet, I found very few instances in which lead was also understood to be a source of toxicity for the immigrant or transnational laboring subjects who participate 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 attention to whose labor.

The U.S. empire’s desirable subjects are racially mapped in the context of the erasure of its disposable ones. Two government-funded experiments are of note here: The Tuskegee Institute (1932–72) syphilis study was conducted on poor black men who had syphilis, but neither treated nor informed them in any way about the disease. Decades later, the Kennedy Krieger Institute (1993–95)

lead-paint study tracked lead levels in the children of public-housing occupants who were intentionally exposed to various degrees of lead toxicity in residential paint without adequate warning of the dangers of that lead. In both cases, matter-of-fact logic was applied to what might be called disposable populations in the name of scientific advancement. Many years later, a 2007 National Public Radio show noted the higher levels of lead toxicity among African American children and pronounced these statistics “puzzling,” leaving it at that. This illogic or failure of deduction occurred despite all kinds of widely available evidence pointing to urban regional pollution, access to information, and 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: a national security and sovereignty project that is invested in its own whiteness cannot afford to profile African American children as victims of lead poisoning, especially when the “new lead” is now situated as an externally derived attack.

Notwithstanding my claims about lead’s racialization in relation to a Chinese context, lead is of course not specific to China. Rather, like any toxin, precisely because it is not alive, it can be detached and reattached to diverse cultural and biological forms. This means that it is *readily* racialized, with a set of preferences provided by the discursive structures it inhabits. As a pollutant provoking more severe effects in urban inner cities, it can always be reracialized as black, for instance. And 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. Most stubbornly of all, lead’s potential whiteness remains only a possibility, a property to be violently resisted.

By foregrounding the lived experience of bodies—whether those working on the subcontracted, transnational industrial assembly line; those mining discarded U.S. electronics for metals to sell back to their local manufacturers; those who receive the new products and are exposed to the same toxins; and, finally, those who receive the products downstream before discarding them—we are forced to witness the inherent brokenness of raciality itself as a system of segregation even as it remains numbingly effective in informing zones of combat and privilege. To embody the multitudes of difference while recognizing toxicities moving in and out of racial zones, any environmental history of an object must recognize the gendered, laboring, and chronically toxically exposed bodies of globalized capital, from sweatshops to factories to cottage industries to polluted neighborhoods, which systematically bear less frequent mention in narratives of toxicity than the cautionary warnings from

the seat of U.S. empire. Indeed, that history must also include those at the end of the line, the consumers of all kinds.

Ironically, Fu Manchu's filmically miscegenated serum, injected into his innocent white captive, told, and reinstalled, a truth about their coconstitution and about their shared inhumanity or posthumanity, effectively answering Fu Manchu's animalization (as feline) and racial hybridity by racially hybridizing and reanimalizing a white man (with arachnid, lizard, snake, etc.). In the larger scheme, such a serum dramatizes as fluid the communal sharedness of even the most opposed bodies, querying the toxic impact of radical difference. Similarly, it might be that what this crisis of transnational lead can do for us—once its histories are less sketchily told—is to point up the permeabilities and fungibilities shared by all bodies, and the vulnerabilities we necessarily bear to one another. Thinking and feeling through *this* lead as transnational entity, rather than its image as the Chinese(-borne) bioterrorist killer of the white American child—as manufacturer's industrial factor, labor's by-product, elemental traveler through stages of evolution of the consumer product, *and* a biophysical toxin to all bodies that have come in contact with it—may serve to soften or elide preformulated segregations of subject and object and of “races” and geographies, revealing sovereign fantasies' false terms, and allowing desire to surface and move us toward less caustic, and more nourishing, reflexes.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> By no means do I wish to reason only on the basis of available medical evidence. But, to the degree that lead toxicity was medicalized, there were no known reports of poisoning from the specific toys that were recalled. It is the relationship between the high levels of panic and low levels of documented poisoning that points to a disproportionate response. Documented poisoning may be an unreasonable criterion, however, given that one of lead's most particular dangers is when exposure to it is chronic, rather than acute.

<sup>2</sup> Visual representations of non-lead-related toxicities included rare-earth magnets haphazardly arrayed in the intestines of a child's X-rayed body; Chinese workers in cramped rooms with elemental tools that constitute their “cottage industries”;

medicine vials; toothpaste tubes; cans of dog food; lipstick tubes; and dogs lying on veterinary tables.

<sup>3</sup> Ricardo Esposito's *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) examines interrelations of biopolitics, modernity, and immunity. Beginning with a communal vision of immunity and yet seeing historical and present-day biopolitical engagements of "immunity" as primarily consisting of the "negative protection of life," Esposito endeavors to redefine biopolitics in terms of a more hopeful, communitarian one that is generated *of* life. Esposito's suggestions may well describe more recent forms of U.S. activism in environmental justice movements, as well as in other areas: antiwar coalitions, antiviolence campaigns, immigrant-rights movements, etc. See also Julie Sze, *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), for a detailed examination of New York-based environmental justice activism.

<sup>4</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Gwen D'Arcangelis, "Chinese Chickens, Ducks, Pigs and Humans, and the Technoscientific Discourses of Global U.S. Empire," in *Tactical Biopolitics: Art, Activism, and Technoscience*, ed. Beatriz da Costa and Kavita Philip (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 429–42. D'Arcangelis also links the representations of SARS in the United States to the context of U.S. imperialism versus a palpably ascending Chinese power.

<sup>7</sup> Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). See particularly chapter 3, "Perversity, Contamination, and the Dangers of Queer Domesticity," and chapter 4, "White Women, Hygiene, and the Struggle for Respectable Domesticity."

<sup>8</sup> A phrase from Allen S. Williams, *The Demon of the Orient and His Satellite Fiends of the Joint: Our Opium Smokers as They Are in Tartar Hells and American Paradises* (1883), quoted in Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 54.

<sup>9</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1992); and Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, eds., *The Environmental Justice Reader* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Other ambiguous and not so ambiguous titles included the conservative website Americans Working Together's "As China Poisons Our Children with Lead, China Has 50 Million Kids in Military Camps" and "Greed, China Poisoning Our Children with Lead."

<sup>11</sup> Sax Rohmer, *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (New York: Doubleday, 1932).

<sup>12</sup> From the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, Chinese identity was subject to various controlling efforts, including legal efforts at containment, exclusions from citizenship, and public health strategies. See Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (New York: Twayne, 1991); Shah, *Contagious Divides*; and Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> From Nayland Smith to Dr. Petrie, in Sax Rohmer's *The Insidious Fu Manchu* (1912), 13.



<sup>14</sup> Tina Chen notes that, while “the surface rhetoric of the books condemns Fu Manchu for attempting to build a Chinese empire, the Doctor’s techniques of collection and demonstration actually mirror *Western* imperial practice.” His expertise in science arguably lies at the heart of this imperial practice (“Dissecting the ‘Devil Doctor’: Stereotype and Sensationalism in Sax Rohmer’s *Fu Manchu*,” in *Re/Collecting Early Asian America*, ed. Josephine Lee, Imogene L. Lim, and Yuko Matsukawa [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002], 218–37).

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the novel referred only to an amnesia-inducing “drug” called “kaapi” for which Fu Manchu had perfected fourteen variations of dosage, but the film version transformed the drug into a “serum,” and, like the drug, this serum had a critical plot role.

<sup>16</sup> In Rohmer’s novel *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, the drug is described by Fu Manchu as follows:

One of your own English travelers, Dr. McGovern, has testified to the fact that words and actions under the influence of this drug—which he mentions in its primitive form as kaapi—leave no memory behind. I have gone further than the natives who originally discovered it. I can so prescribe as to induce fourteen variations of amnesia, graded from apparently full consciousness to complete anesthesia. . . . Anamnesis, or recovery of the forgotten acts, may be brought about by means of a simple antidote. (81)

<sup>17</sup> Nayan Shah, “Perversity, Contamination, and the Dangers of Queer Domesticity,” in Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 77–104.

<sup>18</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, [www.askoxford.com/dictionaries](http://www.askoxford.com/dictionaries).

<sup>19</sup> Judith Halberstam details the queer, semiticized character of the vampire against a larger study of Gothic horror figures in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> While my focus here is on U.S. imperial representations, I do not mean to imply that such representations have absolute global dominance. Rather, in the complex global exchange of language and information, transnational representations emerge from different national/regional sources and can be both competitive and contested. Han Chinese, for example, once prominently imagined white men as barbaric themselves. Separate work will investigate cross-national contestations of the vocabulary of toxicity and biological threat; for instance, asking about the value of Mattel-overseen lead painting to Chinese communities, and tracing competing interactions between representations.

<sup>21</sup> Although several scholars have pointed out the rhetorical importance of expressing vulnerability in U.S. imperial or nationalist expressions of sovereignty, Julian B. Carter’s study of neurasthenia (nervous exhaustion) and its 1880s characterization by its coiner, 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 is what legitimated their claim to power in modernity, even as industrialization was blamed as a cause of the condition (“Barbarians Are Not Nervous,” in *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007], 42–74).

<sup>22</sup> The first U.S. IQ measure was broadly and inaccurately adapted from the French Simon-Binet Scale by H. H. Goddard, who believed that intelligence was inborn and could not be altered environmentally; the IQ measure factored prominently in his and others' eugenicist efforts. Since then, several biases inherent in the test have been recognized, including the fact that IQ can dramatically change in relation to one's environment.

<sup>23</sup> For example, see Winona LaDuke, "Akwesasne: Mohawk Mother's Milk and PCBs," in *All Our Relations* (Cambridge, MA: South End, 1999); Linda Nash, "Fruits of Ill Health: Pesticides and Workers' Bodies in Post-World War II California," in *Landscapes of Exposure: Knowledge and Illness in Modern Environments*, ed. Greg Mitman, Michelle Murphy, and Christopher Sellers, Osiris, 2nd ser. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 19:203-19; and *Maquilapolis: City of Factories*, a film produced by Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre (2006), [www.maquilapolis.com/](http://www.maquilapolis.com/).

<sup>24</sup> Consider the case of Funtastic's recall of Hillbilly Fake Teeth Sets, the single package's cardboard backing depicting a smiling, presumably nonhillbilly white male child. Recall reported on *Toys, Naturally* website, <http://toysnaturally.com/>.

<sup>25</sup> Pediatric mercury-laden vaccines serve as one example of such practices. The FDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) bought up surpluses of U.S.-banned thimerosal-preserved children's vaccines and then oversaw their exportation to countries outside of the United States. On 15 October 2008, President Bush signed into law the Mercury Export Ban, which prohibits by 2013 the export of elemental mercury from the United States. The United States has been a major source of mercury distribution throughout the world, particularly by selling its stores of surplus mercury to industrializing countries. The ban does not, however, address the continuing export of electronic wastes (which contain lead, mercury, cadmium, and other toxic chemicals) to industrializing countries for resource mining, which results in highly toxic exposures.

<sup>26</sup> The Moynihan Report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965), which scapegoated black women in its diagnosis of African American distress, was just one example. The Personal Responsibility Act of 1995 also served to indict those on welfare as being responsible for their fate, enough so that it radically decreased welfare support and increased eligibility requirements.