

Playing with Everything:

Childhood, Animacy, and Biopower in *The Brave Little Toaster*

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An air conditioner to a lamp, a vacuum, a radio, an electric blanket, and a toaster:

“The whole bunch of you have got to have a combined wattage of five, maybe less. It's been years! It's scrap metal time.”

—*The Brave Little Toaster*¹

The five household appliances being spoken to—named Lampy, Kirby, Radio, Blanky, and Toaster, respectively—leave the summer cabin where they've been abandoned to find their now (mostly) grown “Master,” the boy (named Rob) who used them and played with them in his childhood. Thus begins one of the most venerated, critically acclaimed, and weird animated children's films of the nineties: Disney's *The Brave Little Toaster*. Figuring greatly within this film is a concept I will call *animacy*, borrowing primarily from Mel Y. Chen and their recent book *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. “Animacy” is a muddy term that we might describe alternately as “liveliness,” “the ability to affect,” or “sentience.” Children's texts are full of things like toys becoming animated in these senses; less common are animated appliances. Both gesture toward a world of animacy that functions through childhood: through play, childhood animates the “inanimate.”

This is not a revolutionary concept, perhaps. However, I insist that the animating force of childhood has biopolitical twists and turns that are more complicated than what might be at first imagined. Chen describes how animacy might illuminate our understandings of hierarchy and biopower: “Since biopower as described by Michel Foucault is thought in two ways—at the level of government, and at the level of

individual (human) subjects—how inanimate objects and nonhuman animals participate in the regimes of life (making live) and coerced death (killing) are integral to the effort to understand how biopower works and what its materials are” (6). The animacy of *things* (referring to “stuff,” “objects,” or “junk”) is a biopolitical force, and thus not one we should be content to maintain as childish, if by that we mean “facile” and “uninteresting.”

Although I have gestured toward a meaning of *animacy*, I do not wish to offer a particular definition for this concept, because in animacy’s openness, I think there is a generative power useful to this project. I follow Chen in maintaining that “animacy is much more than the state of being animate, and it is precisely the absence of a consensus around its meaning that leave it open to both inquiry and resignification” (4). In this light, throughout this paper, I will alternately use the terms *animation*, *animacy*, and *animatedness*, not necessarily maintaining sharp distinctions between them. I do, however, wish to point to what Chen calls an “animacy hierarchy,” which they borrows from the dissertation work of John Cherry. In an almost intuitive fashion, Cherry maps how linguistic markers posit a hierarchy of animacy, in which, for example, masculinity “reads” as more animate than femininity, able-bodied reads as more animate than disabled, humans as more animate than animals (which are in turn more animate than objects, which are more animate than concepts), and mobile or active objects as more animate than immobile or inactive objects (Cherry 314). Chen smartly links this hierarchy of animacy to biopower, as things lower on the animacy hierarchy are more apt to be allowed to die, or perhaps more accurately, be allowed to come to loss.

In this paper, I suggest that *The Brave Little Toaster* serves as an example for how childhood *animates*, and how that animacy figures into modern schemes of biopower

through hierarchies of animacy. I also argue that the childish impulse to recuperate “junk”—like the “scrap metal” the air conditioner calls the other five appliances—is a political project that, as we shall eventually see, is also particularly queer.

“You’re All a Bunch of Junk”: The Mark of Junkiness

It is perhaps no accident that *The Brave Little Toaster* appears in 1987, a time in the midst of both the Reagan (in the US) and Thatcher (in the UK) administrations—a time of increasing neoliberal control of economics, lives, and culture. In that moment—a moment in which ever-escalating material consumption and production under capitalism was (as it still is) the marker of “progress” and “the good life”—the potential of reclaiming “junk” (the outdated, broken-down remains of a bygone time) as a political project was as radical as it is today. In my reading, however, I focus on the implications of this story for the contemporary world, a world that, though twenty-six years distant, is still controlled by the (admittedly protean) specter of neoliberal economic projects.

Toaster, Blanky, Lampy, Radio, and Kirby are, in some ways and particularly at the beginning of this story, junk. They’ve not been trashed, smashed, and mutilated for spare parts, but they have been abandoned: “it’s scrap metal time.” Even at the end of the film, though, after the appliances’ reunion with Rob, there is still the sense that the appliances might be junk. Kirby, noted throughout the movie as a grump, has the last spoken line of the film. While travelling with the in the trunk of Rob’s car, the appliances are reflecting on their successful voyage, Blanky questions, “We did good, didn’t we?”; Radio launches into an exuberant (and fictionalized) newscast of their voyage; and Kirby intones as the film closes, “Aw, you’re all a bunch of junk!”

Thierry Bardini in *Junkware*, his book that claims that modernity is based upon a

culture of junk, maintains a difference between junk and trash: Junk is one step ahead of trash; it is in its penultimate step on the way to garbage. Junk is backward and outdated (Bardini 8). In their voyage, the appliances arrive at the Master's city apartment, only to find from the appliances in the apartment that he has left to retrieve them from the cottage. Then, in a song original to the film, "The Cutting Edge," the city appliances display their shiny new technological functions in contrast to the comparatively outdated band of appliances. For example, a toaster oven, interacting with Toaster, sings, "Hey, I can bake your biscuits, too—pop some Doughboy out for you. I'm micro-solid state, and that's no static," while "Not available in stores!" flashes on the screen in a parody of television commercials. In a consumeristic frenzy, the appliances are made to feel like "junk," abject ephemera that are not good enough for their Master. ("I'm glad the Master has such good appliances," Blanky later squeaks. "They . . . they . . . they're wonderful!" Lampy replies.) The city appliances then literally shove the gang out the window, into a dumpster, where they are promptly taken to a junkyard. Even after again being rescued, the appliances cannot escape the fact that they have been marked as outdated, even if still useful. Kirby's jab is only half in jest.

The Childish Impulse to Recuperate Junk

Jane Bennett, in her dazzling gesture toward a posthuman political ecology, *Vibrant Matter*, develops what she calls a "vital materialism," whose fundamental unit is "thing-power," the affective force that is inherent in all matter. For Bennett, all matter, including that which makes up humans—and that which makes up Sunbeam toasters, Kirby vacuums, and gooseneck lamps—carries some "vibrancy": "Each human is a heterogeneous compound of wonderfully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter. If matter

itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and object minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated” (Bennett 12-13). Bennett sees childhood as generative for thing-power: “*Thing-power* perhaps has the rhetorical advantage of calling to mind a childhood sense of the world as filled with all sorts of animate beings, some human, some not, some organic, some not . . . Thing-power may thus be a good starting point for thinking beyond the life-matter binary” (20). There is a recognition that the playful mind of the child carries with it an animating force.

Since animation is a technique that is associated with childhood—*The Brave Little Toaster* is, in fact, a childhood text—the linkage between animation as a technique and animation as a plot point points toward childhood as being an animating force. J. Jack Halberstam, in developing the “Pixarvolt” thesis in *The Queer Art of Failure*, states, “Animated films are for children who believe that ‘things’ (toys, nonhuman animals, rocks, sponges) are as lively as humans” (27). Halberstam sees CGI-animated films as part of a “silly archive” that “surprisingly foreground[s] the themes of revolution and transformation” (29).² Although *The Brave Little Toaster* is cel animated, not CGI, I believe that there is a bit of the queer, childish, revolutionary impulse in Toaster, Lampy, Blanky, Radio, and Kirby that Halberstam sees in other animated texts. Their messy, banded together assemblage—animated literally by Disney and within the text by the child—carries with it some of the same playful current of revolt, despite animacy’s attendance in matters of biopolitics.

I have been foregrounding the concept of “play” in the discussion so far because I believe that play is the arena through which the animating power of childhood comes into being. Psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott can offer some insight into the ways that

childhood play produces animation. In his much-cited *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott discusses the ways children create a “play area,” a not-space in which the child’s imagination can produce what he calls *preoccupation* that is neither quite internal nor entirely external. In describing the phenomenon of play, he says: “Into this play area the child gather objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality. Without hallucinating the child puts out a sample of dream potential and lives with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality” (69). The external objects that come into the play area are animated within that play space, serving the purposes of the child’s inner needs.

To augment Winnicott’s argument, what if we were to consider that the external objects in the play area already carry some animacy of their own? What if, as Bennett argues, the child’s-eye view of the world produces some sort of additional animacy that carries over into the play space? I am not implying, of course, that if we play with our toasters, they will grow eyes and talk to us, but I do mean to suggest that this childlike playing can increase our understanding of the affect already inherent in matter.

The child’s optic, “wrongheaded” as it is in producing a taxonomy of animacy “considered rife with errors, full of anthropomorphizing slippages between animal, inanimate matter, and human,” produces homes that become alive (Chen 27). The child’s gaze, with its hierarchies of animacy that place electric blankets on level or nearly level playing fields with a boy, can incite animacy into being.

Of course, in *The Brave Little Toaster*, this happens more literally. For example, Lampy tells the story of the first time his bulb burns out. He is in Rob’s bedroom in the cabin, shining his light so Rob can read. When his bulb burns out, he first freaks out,

believing that he is now worthless. When Rob replaces the bulb to continue reading, Lampy says, “I just glowed.” “I just glowed”—I read this as an enhanced form of the thing-power Bennett posits. In a fantasy film, thing-power can become literal animacy, and the animacy can directly be tied to the play of the child.

What about junk? Why is junk so important to the child? According to Bardini, “There is an affect in junk, even if this affect might be the last remaining before disaffection: junk might look disaffected (like a derelict industrial space), but we still feel attached to it. And it is because of this attachment, of that affect, that it might not be totally ludicrous to look for redemption, peace at last, in junk” (170). From the optic of the child, it is not ludicrous at all. From the optic of the child, junk is already animated; the affect of junk can be incited into *being*. The messy and nostalgic nature of junk appeals to the child through the “perverse” hierarchy of the child optic, an optic that delights in the inanimate. Found treasures, bric-a-brac, “junk”: these are the things that inhabit a child’s life-world.

At the end of the film, the now-grown Rob rescues the appliances from a trash compactor that will certainly destroy their animacy by crushing them into a tiny cube of matter. This may seem to complicate my argument, for an adult optic should not allow for the recuperation of trash in quite the same way. However, almost-adult Rob should still be read as a childish animator. Rob is still a boyish adult, making goofy expressions and accepting maternal care. When he leaves for the junkyard—where he expects to buy new appliances for his college dorm room—his mother calls “You forgot your sweater!”

“You forgot your sweater!” is the maternal call that still interpellates Rob as the boyish animator of the appliances. The nostalgic act of being reprimanded for not

wearing a sweater makes Rob firmly a “boy,” a “child” once again, a child who can then produce the animacies of childhood in the things he is nostalgic for, the appliances of his youth.

Child-Power: The Biopolitics of the Air Conditioner

Before the appliances leave the cabin, another appliance who has been living there with them makes an appearance: an air conditioner. Snide and pessimistic, the air conditioner belittles the more mobile appliances as naïve in their hopes that the Master will one day return to the cottage. In defense of her friends, Toaster retorts, “You’re jealous! . . . the Master never played with you!” to which Kirby adds: “Because you’re stuck in the wall!”

The effect on the air conditioner at those words is immediate. He angrily blows cold air, pushing the other appliances away. Becoming increasingly agitated, he shouts, “I like being stuck in this stupid wall! I can’t help if the kid was too short to reach my dials! . . . IT’S MY FUNCTION!” He soon loses control of his anger, short circuits, and literally blows a fuse, dropping his grill (which had functioned as his mouth) to the floor and becoming inanimate in the process.

Here we see the biopolitical effects of animacy for the air conditioner. Unable to move from his vantage point in the window, he can be read as “less animate” than the other appliances, a point he makes himself during his tirade. “I’m not an invalid!” he shouts, participating (unfortunately) in the disavowal of the abject position of disability. Being stuck in the wall, he is already less animated, and furthermore unable to be fully animated by the Master, who is “too short to reach [his] dials” and thus never plays with, never bestows with the animacy of childhood, the AC.

This fact is the piercing blow that sets the air conditioner's process of death into motion. This is where biopower comes into play. Foucault at one point describes biopower as “a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death” (138). The Master literally fosters animacy (which is not *quite* life, but for the purposes of this discussion, is close enough) in the other five appliances, but disallows it (not of his own fault, but still disallows it) in the air conditioner to the point of the air conditioner's inanimacy.

The sovereign power to take life directly has not been granted to Rob, but the biopolitical animating force he has—a force we might term *child-power*—sets into motion a biopolitics of the animacy hierarchy. Because the air conditioner lies lower on the animacy hierarchy—he is immobile in the window—the child-power of animacy eventually causes him to die.

Later, when he returns to the cabin, the (still boyish) Rob, who can now reach the dials, repairs the destroyed air conditioner. The care with which Rob treats the air conditioner, the love he gives, restores animacy to the appliance. After Rob, leaves, we see the air conditioner regain its animate eyes and mouth; he smiles. To be fixed warms the air conditioner—through the child who “fosters life,” he is returned into the biopolitical fold of animacy.

Animacy and the Biopolitics of Racialized Radios

As Mel Chen has pointed out, animacy is not necessarily a beneficial or even neutral force. In considering how animacy might also constrain, I wish to turn to Sianne Ngai's consideration of animatedness, an affect she identifies in her book *Ugly Feelings*. As will soon become clear, I would not suggest that Ngai's affect and Chen's conception of animacy signify *precisely* the same idea. I do believe, however, that the closeness

between the terms and the concepts they signify—“being moved,” “liveliness”—point to an admittedly muddled “animation” that is useful to mobilize in understanding the appliances in this film.

For Ngai, *animatedness* “seems to imply the most basic of all affective conditions: that of being, in one way or another, ‘moved.’” But animatedness is not as simple as that: “the seemingly neutral state of ‘being moved’ becomes twisted into the image of the overemotional racialized subject, abetting his or her construction as unusually receptive to external control” (91). Ngai unearths the ways in which animation works as a process of racialization, a process by which bodies are marked racially as overly expressive, exceptionally pliant, and unusually spontaneous.

I wish to examine the racialized implications of animatedness in *The Brave Little Toaster* specifically through one character: Radio. Despite being a red, faceless AM radio, and despite *all* of the characters having some aspects of animatedness, I think there are ways in which Radio is racialized throughout the film that crystallize aspects of Ngai’s argument. For example, throughout the film, the other characters call Radio “Loudmouth.” The overly expressive nature of the radio as a “loudmouth” who simply won’t shut up begins to create a linkage between Radio and a racialized animatedness in a culture that reads ethnic difference as an excess of affect.

Early in the film, when the appliances are doing their daily chores of keeping the cabin tidy in the Master’s absence, Radio plays as accompaniment Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti.” “A-wop-bom-a-loo-mop-a-lomp-bom-bom!” is an unruly excess of affect and is among the first impressions the audience gains of Radio. Playing the music of a well-known Black musician is the tone that has been set for Radio’s character throughout the

rest of the film. There are (perhaps indefinite) racializations at play in Radio's animacy.

Racialization crystallizes through Radio's music later in the film. Notably, besides "Tutti Frutti," there is only one other instance in which Radio plays a pre-recorded, well-known song (although he participates in the singing of other songs original to the film). During the appliances harrowing journey through the wilderness, they at one point begin to sink one by one into a mud hole (Kirby is the first to go, and all of the other appliances have tied their cords to him and are pulling to give Kirby a break). Radio is the last to begin sinking, and as he does so, he says "We'll sign off now with a suitable tune!" The song he begins to play, then, is Al Jolson's "My Mammy," from *The Jazz Singer*.

The implications of a radio performing blackface by playing the music of a Jewish man performing blackface are indeed muddled and messy. Michael Paul Rogin has convincingly argued that it is precisely through the use of blackface in performances such as these that Jewish men during the Jazz Age gained access to hegemonic whiteness (69). The racial problematics of this scene are compounded by the fact that Radio is voiced by John Lovitz, a Jewish actor. At the point of death, the already racialized Radio performs an overtly even more racialized, excessively animated caricature whose political effect is to move Radio "up" on the biopolitical hierarchy making a grab for whiteness.

This move is effective: Radio's last lament is overheard by Elmo St. Peter, the owner of a nearby spare parts show, who comes by and grabs Radio, and the rest of the crew from death. St. Peter is something of a childish man (he has a dog named Quadruped and stuffs himself with marshmallows after drinking a protein shake), and it is

his animating hand that rescues Radio from being allowed to die.

At St. Peter's store, though, Radio again becomes racialized into through his excessive animatedness. During his time there, he is again the first to speak to the other appliances, ever the "loudmouth." When the gang learns what happens in St. Peter's shop—appliances are mangled and dismembered so their parts can be sold for profit—Radio is the one who becomes overly excited. Taking up the bad cliché of horror movies—the trope of raced characters dying first—this trip back "down" biopolitical hierarchies (along with the fact that a customer comes in looking for radio tubes) causes Radio also to be marked for death/inanimacy. Although the other appliances spring into action to frighten St. Peter and save Radio, the biopolitical stakes of Radio's racialized animacies again resurface, revealing the twisted and turning ways animacy functions.

"It's a B-Movie": The Horrors of Abjection and the Queerness of Junk

I wish to turn attention now to the ways that junk might be queer, and to do so I remain in the workshop of Elmo St. Peter. Soon after the band of appliances first experiences the body horror of seeing a blender being dismember before their eyes to extract a blender motor—its cord being ripped out, motor oil dripping slowly onto the floor—the other appliances inhabiting St. Peter's back room, slightly deranged from their exposure to such horror, launch into song to describe their plight. A parody of early monster horror films, "It's a B-Movie" is not only one of the creepiest and most beloved moments in animated films, but it also illuminates, perhaps, how animating junk might be a queer project.

The other appliances of St. Peter's store recognize that they are junk: many of them are busted (there's a TV with a cracked screen and a cassette player that can only

“eat” tapes, for example) and those that aren’t have resigned themselves to the fact that it’s only a matter of time before they will be sacrificed for their only economic value, their parts. In this sense, they are *abject*, and their song illustrates the horrors of abjection: “Who will go / to that cellar down below? / Trouble is a-bubblin’ in the brew. / And while you’re down there, Mr. Vincent Price / Will give you good advice . . . It’s like a movie! / It’s a B-movie show!”

And yet, at the end of their song, the appliances are raised into the air by their cords, holding an ever-higher note backed by a pipe organ: they are exalted. By embracing the horrors of their abjection in a funhouse way, they have blurred the abject/exalted distinction, a move that Heather Love has marked as decidedly queer.³ The childish impulse to recuperate junk seeks to take the abject and exalt it through animation. In its breakdown of the abject/exalted binary, this queer recuperation pulses through junk and animates it. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed asks: “What kind of commitment would a queer commitment be? If anything, I would see queer as a commitment to an opening up of what counts as a life worth living.”⁴ The commitment to animating junk, to seeing it as an animacy worth being animated, for Ahmed, is then queer.

Toaster, too, herself blurs the abject/exalted distinction toward the very end of the film, when she risks her life to save the Master’s. In his quest to rescue his beloved junky appliances, Rob finds himself directly in the path of the trash compactor. Toaster junks herself by throwing herself into the gears of the trash compactor, stopping the compactor from smashing Rob, but only barely. She not only becomes abject/exalted by becoming the martyr for the Master’s sake, but she performs her functions wrongly: instead of

toasting bread, she becomes a gear jam.

Throughout the entire film, we see the messy band of a lamp, a toaster, a vacuum, a radio, and an electric blanket take their structured bodies and disidentify with them, in the sense of José Esteban Muñoz, to rescrumble them malleably and partially become something else.⁵ Blanky becomes a tent in the woods for her friends, instead of a warm covering for the Master's body. Kirby becomes an inflatable life preserver to rescue his friends from the river, instead of a sucking mechanism to remove debris from the Master's carpet. Through their animacy, they take perverse pleasures in performing wrongly.

In her discussion of queer objects, Sara Ahmed notes, "A queer furnishing might be about making what is in the background, what is behind us, more available as 'things' to 'do' things with . . . As soon as we notice the background, then objects come to life, which already makes things rather queer."⁶ Junk becomes queer when it takes a perverse pleasure in becoming useful, and this happens most often through the optic of the child. The childish impulse to recuperate junk, then, is queer in that it allows the background of things to come into focus. When we animate our junk, when we allow it to become "vibrant matter," we participate in a queer posthumanist project, one that allows for a more vital sense of the world to come into being.

I close here with another moment from "It's a B-Movie," a strange interlude in which a monstrous object is dropped in front of the other appliances. In a delightfully campy Joan Rivers impression, the thing says, "Look at me! I mean, really: barf, barf, barf. I'm a can opener, a lamp, and a shaver. Ohhhh, gawd, I'm a mish-mash!" before collapsing. She is presented as an object of horror, but an admired one. When we can

animate our mish-mashes of junky objects into a valued part of the world, one that can be approached on its own terms, things may be queer, but they will also be more vital.

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¹ Hereafter cited in text.

² It is also interesting to consider the fact that John Lasseter, who directed Pixar's *Toy Story* (the first CGI-animated feature film), originally developed the idea for *The Brave Little Toaster* film. *The Brave Little Toaster* could then perhaps be seen as a proto-Pixarvolt film.

³ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 178.

⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 168.