



The Necromolecular Nineties

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Training in one's own incoherence, training in the ways in which one's complexity and contradiction can never be resolved by the political, is a really important part of a political theory of non-sovereignty.

—Lauren Berlant (2019)

Introduction

Life-destroying baubles and anti-colonial polyethylene skateboards. Sharks soaked in formaldehyde and reality TV stars smeared in petroleum jelly. Supermarket death-worlds lined with lurid little soda pops and alien serums. Everything in “The Necromolecular Nineties” is off-gassing some kind of chemical agency by turns fetid and fabulous.

Toying with deviating notions of “chemical kinship” (Balayannis and Garnett 2020) and “toxic animacy” (Chen 2012) while engineering complex aesthetic modes at once deathly and seductive, humorless and playful, funky and pornographic, what I term “The Necromolecular Nineties” indexes a late-twentieth-century avant-garde moment intoxicated by chemical experimentalism. Drawing together an unorthodox assemblage of poems, plays, LPs, sculptures, novels, and theory-fictions by an alternative cannon of Black, queer, feminist, cyborg, and working-class post-modernists, I ask how late-twentieth-century aesthetics can help us to better confront the increasingly soft, diminutive, and molecular exertions of necropolitical power in a neoliberal world enveloped in the rude cadences of both postindustrial depthlessness and late-industrial degradation. As industrial chemicals and avant-garde aesthetics collide with an unprecedented abandon and rigor, I utilize an affect-oriented and relational strategy of *chemospheric reading*. This approach looks beyond the regimented ontologies of “molecular bureaucracy” (Hepler-Smith 2019), which often function as “dead zones of the imagination” (Graeber 2012), while using understudied late-twentieth-century cultures to reconsider the violence—by turns “slow” and “structural” (Nixon 2011)—arising from post-modernism’s “chemical regimes of



living” (Murphy 2013b). As we shall see, nineties culture contains multitudinous lifeworlds consisting of varying degrees of toxicity: it is a polythetic realm of “chemical spheres” or “chemospheres” (Shapiro 2015), that demands a non-linear and non-sovereign relational mode of reading.

As such, what follows is an adventure through “The Necromolecular Nineties,” which presents a soft taxonomy of the period’s divergent chemospheres via an affect-oriented analysis of the toxic animacies contained therein. Drawing on the critical theory of taxonomies that are “soft” (Smailbegović 2021), “speculative” (Palmer 2020), “weak” (Dimock 2020), and “nervous” (Haraway 1997), my own idiosyncratic taxonomy of nineties chemospheres works against the categorical hegemony of “molecular bureaucracy,” resulting in a “looser, rangier” and “nonsovereign” mode of “taxonomy that never quite taxonomizes,” as Wai Chee Dimock says (2020: 6-7). To this end, the chemospheres attended to herein intervolve the postindustrial period’s (1) playgrounds (Hamad Butt, Rammellzee, Bodys Isek Kingelez); (2) pharmacopornographic workers (Cookie Mueller); (3) consumerist dreamworlds (Harryette Mullen, Todd Haynes); and (4) simulated ghettos (Ishmael Reed, Percival Everett). From the structural violence faced by sex workers in the autofiction of Cookie Mueller through to the “necropolitical power” (Mbembe 2019: 38) of synthetic materials that demand who may live and who must die in the satirical ghettos of Ishmael Reed and Percival Everett, “The Necromolecular Nineties” writhes with misrepresentations of industrial chemicals that sharpen our understanding of neoliberalism’s decentered and abstract systems of power.

Metachemic Playscapes

In the summer of 1995, a toxic leak in the Tate Gallery pushed the nation’s flagship art museum into a public health and PR crisis. The chemical spill in question occurred by way of the British Pakistani conceptual artist Hamad Butt’s *Familiars* (1992), a work that presents a postindustrial playground of chemical desire, chemical abandon, chemical precarity, and chemical mortality typical of the Necromolecular Nineties analyzed herein. Composed of three interrelated sculptures, each precariously containing a different potentially deadly chemical—or as Butt notes, “(liquid) Cl₂ [chloride] intension units / (gas) Br₂ [bromine] extension units / I₂ [iodine] sublimation units” (Butt 2019)—*Familiars* is a ludic network of divergent “chemospheres” that foreground the deathly molecular cadences that supersaturate the late-twentieth-century’s ascensional “chemical regimes of living.” *Familiars I: Substance Sublimation Unit*, for example, assumes the playful and everyday form of a ladder that shatters if climbed, releasing a deadly cloud of iodine (Figure 1).

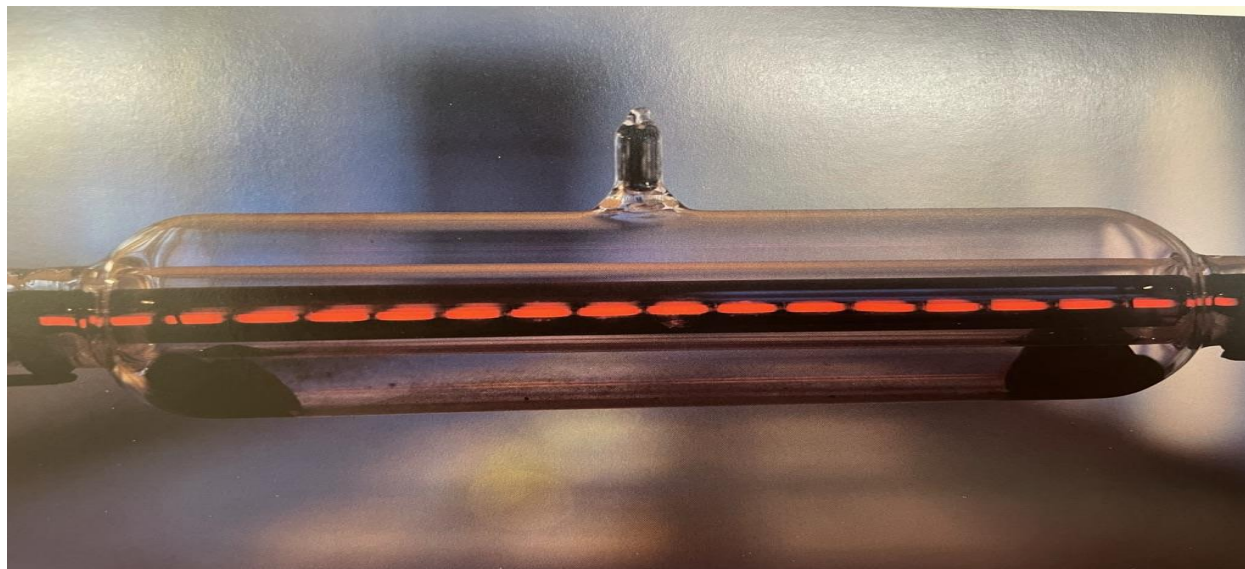


Figure 1. Butt, Hamad. *Familiars* (1992). Image reproduced in *Familiars* (1996). London: John Hassard Gallery.

In turn, *Familiars Part II: Hypostasis* features a trinity of arabesque arches, each holding delicate bromine tubes waiting to release a potentially deadly dark red gas, and *Familiars Part III: Cradle* assumes the mischievous form of a 1980s executive toy riddled with toxic quantities of chlorine—a pale green gas that, as Kevin Brazil notes, “dissolve[s] the lungs from within” (Brazil 2018) (**Figure 2**). As such, *Familiars* is exemplary of a 1990s avant-garde and its unprecedented exploration of the novel aesthetic possibilities of chemical experimentalism.



Figure 2. Butt, Hamad. *Familiars III* (1992). Image reproduced in *Familiars* (1996). London: John Hassard Gallery.



Containing and elaborating promiscuous relations between what modern chemists call the ‘Halogen Family’ of the Periodic Table, Butt’s deathly assemblage of iodine, bromine, and chloride units pivots on two key neologisms that recur throughout his published and unpublished essays and notebooks of the early 1990s—including “Apprehensions,” “Indications,” and “Placebo” (all c. 1992-1993)—all of which can help us to better understand this chemically-saturated moment in cultural history. The first of these neologisms is “sublimission”—a portmanteau of ‘submission,’ ‘sublime,’ and ‘sublimation.’ This concept anchors Butt’s aesthetic and scientific research in both the exact sublimation point of iodine (meaning the exact moment it morphs from a solid to a gas, without first passing through a liquid phase) and in the more mysterious, liminal, and alchemical machinations of what he calls the “iodine sublime” (Butt 2019).¹ In *Familiars I*, the iodine units continuously sublimate between solid and gas by way of a series of infra-red heating units contained in the vacuum-sealed rungs of the glass ladder. Alongside this rigorous chemical experimentalism, Butt develops aesthetic and alchemical theories of what he calls the iodine sublime’s “virtual synthesis of dialectic” wherein opposites—like alchemy and chemistry, rationality and irrationality, solidity and nebulosity—are commingled in a “metachemical convergence of vapour and solid, of alchemy and chemistry, of distraction and apprehension” (Butt 1996). Herein we find the second of Butt’s key neologisms in the novel concept of “metachemicals,” a term derived from Gaston Bachelard’s speculative philosophy of “*métachimie*” in *The Philosophy of No* (1940). Sublimission is, for Butt, one expression of what he calls “Metachemical Valency” (Butt 2019), or the capacity for different chemical substances to make and remake divergent realities and to render “the real in chemistry,” which is, as Bachelard says, “a realization” that must be incessantly renewed, remade, and reconstituted (Bachelard 1988: 45). Butt draws heavily on Bachelard’s *Philosophy of No* both in his published essays and in unpublished research grant applications, most obviously in his assertion in the short essay “Indications”: “I am interested in a relationship between art and science [...] and more tentatively the prospect of a metachemicals, which might have an equivalent kinship to metaphysics as chemistry does to physics” (Butt 1996).²

Together, the interrelated processes of sublimission and metachemicals showcase Butt’s fascination with the “radical uncertainties” of “substance” (Butt 2019), which also orbit Bachelard’s mid-century “*philosophie du métachimie*.” For Bachelard as for Butt, substance is multitudinous and process-oriented, compound and plural in its incessantly unfolding spheres of commixture and possibility. “There is no absolute purity of substance,” Butt

¹ Working with chemists from Imperial College London—namely Dr. Gary Rumbles—Butt’s research into the production of *Familiars I* led to novel experiments into the exact sublimation point of iodine.



writes, echoing Bachelard in his notebooks, “substance is inevitably inextricably bound (see quantum theory)[,] [a kind of] compound substance, [a] valent affinity” (Butt 2019). Consequently, whereas “metaphysics could have only one possible notion of substance because the elementary conception of physical phenomena was content to study a geometrical solid characterized by general properties,” as Bachelard writes, the speculative practice of metachemics presents the real by way of a “laminated reality,” or an ever-moving and overlaying multitude of variegated surfaces wherein “substance does not have, at all levels, the same coherence” (Bachelard 1988: 45). Crucially, it is these laminated realities of ever-moving, interrelated, and mesophasal chemical spheres presented in Butt’s *Familiars* that not only index a metachemic playscape rooted in what Bachelard calls the “dynamization of substance” (45), but come to encapsulate a wider and more complex moment in late-twentieth-century culture. Such a “laminated reality” of the metachemic playscape is, in turn, a world continuously deformed by what Michel Serres—Bachelard’s former pupil—later calls “the third principal element,” wherein rigidities of space and substance turn iridescent like a harlequin veil that is “many-coloured, [...] historiated, blended, tiger-striped, streaked, damasked” (Serres 2015: 158-160).³

Familiars is ‘ludic’ in the sense that it presents an aesthetic experience of toxicity through an architecture of the playscape. Synthetic materials augment multitudinous constructions of spheres or what play theorist Johan Huizinga calls “temporary worlds” that ricochet between intoxication’s compulsions and toxicity’s revulsions. These spheres—rich in convolution and revolution alike—are evident in the hazardous playspace of *Familiars* as the viewer is both mesmerically drawn toward touching and playing with the fragile sculptural toys and warned explicitly against getting too close. A chemospherics of risk crystallizes around each work amidst the more ethereal invitations to play. As such, *Familiars* seems to promiscuously underline entrenched toxicity—felt pertinently by non-white and non-heteronormative peoples—in Jean Baudrillard’s sense, that in the post-modernist’s lifeworld, “[r]eality has passed completely into the game of reality” (1993: 74). What Baudrillard refers to elsewhere as “the great game of simulacra, which makes things appear and disappear” (1998: 12) is for Butt a molecular or necromolecular playspace that dynamizes substance in order to better control bodies or to expose minoritarian peoples to divergent degrees of risk. In *Familiars* the post-modernist’s fetishization of “the smooth and functional surface of communication”—represented here through the executive toy—is indelibly linked to wider necropolitical agencies encoded with the capacity to choose who may live and who must die.

³ For an explicit example of Serres extending Bachelard’s laminated philosophy of metachemistry, see the many-layered “Emperor of the Moon” in Serres’s *The Troubadour of Knowledge* (1999).



Hazardism & the Alchemy of *Beængstelse*

For all its brilliant “metachemic” conceptualism and pioneering “speculative scientific practice” (Butt qtd. in Page 1996: 35), it was not until *Familiars* broke down with a potentially deadly iodine gas leak in 1995—almost a year after Butt died tragically young during the AIDS epidemic—that the world took notice. David Lister, writing for the *Independent* in August 1995, for instance, argues that *Familiars* is exemplary of a new post-modernist avant-garde of “hazardism” “among art movements of the 20th century,” finding its place alongside other hazardist works like Damien Hirst’s *Mother and Child Divided* (1993)—a work that not only went on to win the 1995 Turner Prize, but similarly caused a public health and PR crisis, leaking toxic levels of carcinogenic formaldehyde gas at the 1995 Venice Biennale (Lister 1995).⁴ Our aesthetic judgement of *Familiars* is at once obscured, undermined, and enlivened by its complicity with these more moronic—PR-friendly and public health averse—tendencies of Hirstean hazardism. The more *Familiars* leaks, ruptures, degrades, and disassembles into toxic ruin, the more Butt’s “postindustrial playground” morphs into a “late industrial” nightmare of “breakdown, trespass, seepage, degradation” (Ahmann and Kenner 2020: 418)—one populated by non-functional emergency escape ladders and deathly spears—thereby mediating the necromolecular valences of “slow death” (Berlant 2007).

“In dread there is the egoistic infinity of possibility,” writes Søren Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844)—and diligently copied by Butt in one of his notebooks—“which does not tempt like a definite choice but charms or fascinates with its sweet anxiety” (Butt 2019). *Familiars* is a bipolar work that glistens and screams between the cadences of collapse that ground the historical processes of late industrialism as well as the floating, ahistorical “dreamtime” (Limbert 2010) of a late-twentieth-century malaise regarding postindustrial jouissance. This Kierkegaardian paradox of “sweet anxiety” (or *Beængstelse*), wherein agents of “dread” come to “charm” as they unfurl the infinite finitudes of the possible, not only deftly describes Butt’s *Familiars* but also the wider enthralling and intoxicating dynamization of substance in the necromolecular chemospherics of the 1990s avant-garde. Caught between the conflicting lifeworlds of postindustrial gloss and late-industrial degradation, the 1990s avant-garde presents an astonishing archive of chemical

⁴ Later still, in the winter of 1995, the *New York Times* reports the Gagosian Gallery’s removal of a hydraulic sculpture by Hirst—simulating copulation between a dead cow and a dead calf entombed in formaldehyde—because of fears that the artwork will cause “methane gas” to “build up around the cows, causing an explosion or an unbearable stench” (Lyll 1995: 29). Appositely, another article in the *London Times* from 1995 also reports that the Tate was on the brink of banning the work from participating in that year’s Turner Prize “because of fears that a potentially harmful chemical could leak” (Gorman 1995: 7). Yet another formaldehyde leak from Hirst’s *Mother and Child Divided* occurred at the Tate Modern in 2012, a leak that was only recognized retrospectively in 2016 (*The Guardian* 2016).



experimentalisms also evident in works like Sylvie Fleury's faux-fur Mondrian-esque "Cuddly Paintings" such as *Tableau No. 1* (1992); in Carsten Höller's phials of phenylethylamine in *Pealove Room* (1993); in the confusions of Pyrex, Teflon, silicone, and Vaseline in Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint* series (1987-ongoing) and *Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002); and in ORLAN's experimental cosmetic surgeries in *The Reincarnation of Sainte-ORLAN* (1990-present).⁵

The Necropolitics of Teflon

"There is a reality that one cannot not know," says Cornel West in an interview with Anders Stephanson in 1989, speaking on how the Black experience connects to the so-called "hyperreality" of the post-modernist condition:

The ragged edges of the Real, of Necessity, not being able to eat, not having shelter, not having health care, all this is something that one cannot not know. The black condition acknowledges that. It is so much more acutely felt because this is a society where a lot of people live a Teflon existence, where a lot of people have no sense of the ragged edges of necessity, of what it means to be impinged upon by structures of oppression. To be an upper-middle-class American is actually to live a life of unimaginable comfort, convenience, and luxury. Half of the black population is denied this, which is why they have a strong sense of reality. (West 1989: 277)

West takes aim here at the homogenizing "Teflon existence" presented by post-modernist theorists like Baudrillard, prone to describing the post-modernist individual's experience of hyperreality as a that of a "sanitized sphere" or a kind of hyper-regimented chemospheric bubble of health and abundance. "[E]ach individual sees himself promoted to the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect sovereignty," writes Baudrillard, "in the same position as the astronaut in his bubble, existing in a state of weightlessness" (1988: 22). Yet, as West suggests, the mass proliferation of industrial chemistry's "chemical regimes of living" in the mid-to-late twentieth century is oddly outside of the normative working-class and lower middle-class Black experience to which Baudrillard's totalizing theories remain oblivious, and the same logic can be said to dictate a good portion of African American art and literature in the mid-to-late twentieth century. For instance, while Thomas Pynchon dedicates a good deal of *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) to unfurling the "virtuous triad of Strength, Stability and Whiteness" that sits at the core of mid-century industrial chemistry (Pynchon 2000: 250), Ishmael Reed's post-modernist

⁵ Appositely, ORLAN's fifth surgical-performance operation, *Opération-opéra* (1991), is based on the preface to Michel Serres's *Le tiers instruit* (1991)—the text that includes the "Emperor of the Moon"—and as such the former can be said to contribute to the history of the metachemic imagination that runs from Bachelard to Serres and beyond.



satire, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972)—like West—treats synthetic materials as simply outside the normative Black experience.⁶ Indeed, it seems environmental racism only begins to feed into post-modernist culture properly following the 1987 publication of *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States*, a report by the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ. As Françoise Vergès writes in “Racial Capitalocene,” the report “showed that race was the single most important factor in determining where toxic waste facilities were sited in the United States and that the siting of these facilities in communities of color was the intentional result of local, state, and federal land-use policies” (2017). One of the most damning aspects of the report was its demonstration that “three out of every five Black and Hispanic Americans lived in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites” (Vergès 2017). By contrast, one of the only references to synthetic materials in *Mumbo Jumbo* occurs in a description of the “headquarters of the Wallflower Order,” an exclusively white secret society:

You have nothing real up here. Everything is polyurethane, Polystyrene, Lucite, Plexiglas, acrylate, Mylar, Teflon, phenolic, polycarbonate. A gallimaufry of synthetic materials. [...] Nothing to remind you of the Human Seed. The aesthetic is thin flat turgid dull grey bland like a yawn. Neat. Clean, accurate, and precise. [...] Plastic will soon prevail over flesh and bones. Death will have taken over. (Reed 2017: 62)



Figure 3. Tarkovsky, Andrei (1972). *Solaris*. Moscow: Mosfilm.

⁶ It is important to note here that although in the 1950s, 1960s, and a good deal of the 1970s, Black art and literature tends to present itself as “outside” normative chemical regimes of living, Black people from this period most certainly would have been disproportionately impacted by the everyday toxicity augmented by the post-1945 proliferation of industrial chemistry. As of the early-to-mid twenty-first century, BIPOC communities continue to bear the brunt of toxicity that arises from our social and cultural infatuation with synthetic materials.



Reed's vision of synthetic plastic is one in which Baudrillard's hyper-hygienic antigravitational "bubble" collapses into a Mbembean "death-world" that both negates nature and embodies human excess (2019: 92). Baudrillard's "perfect sovereignty" of post-modernist whiteness is revealed to stand precariously upon something like what Keston Sutherland calls a "polyurethane fundament" (2005: 18) that acts like that which "is, as if death were not" (Bataille qtd. in Mbembe 2019: 70) and morphs through the shapes and forms of an infernal phylum of "synthetic materials" that, as Reed promises, "will soon prevail over flesh and bones" (2017: 62). The molecular dreamworld of the Wallflower Order HQ is in this sense akin to the exclusively white synthetic sphere of antigravitational death present in Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Solaris* (1973), most notably in the moment we find the frozen corpse of Dr. Gibarian enveloped in a plastic film, locked in a cryogenic chamber aboard another ultra-hygienic techno-utopian "death-world" in the sky (**Figure 3**). The blueprint for this cultural logic may well be found in the cartoonish death-world of the Disney-MIT-Monsanto's *House of the Future* (1957-1967)—an iconic chemospheric structure made entirely of thermoplastic, replete with googie TV screens and groovy Perspex blinds—which helps inaugurate the prototypical imagination of synthetic matter in the form of an explicitly white affectlessness, radiating little more than the deathliness of depthlessness.⁷ All amounting, as Reed says, to an "aesthetic [that] is thin flat turgid dull grey bland [...]. Clean, accurate, and precise" (2017: 62).

Crucially, however, this mid-century Space Age imagination of synthetic matter as a flat and turgid kind of medium for the white middle-class, "Teflon existence" death-worlds come gloriously undone throughout the Necromolecular Nineties as myriad queer, Black, feminist, and working-class artists and writers come to question their own entanglement—and their own complicity—in divergent chemical spheres and chemical regimes of living. Black Accelerationism and the wider aesthetics of Afrofuturism that contain it present a key facet of this understudied history of the synthetic imagination as it unfurls both outside and in opposition to the normative lifeworlds of "Teflon existence." The sculptural toys of artist Rammellzee's⁸ *Letter Racers* series (c. 1988-1995) and Bodys Isek Kingelez's *Ville Fantôme* (1996) present a vital iteration of this intersection of Black Accelerationism and Afrofuturism. Specifically, what we find in these works are artists who fold the "glossy skin" (Jameson 1991: 34) of postindustrialism into the messier, leakier, and degraded lifeworlds of a late-industrial ruin and, in the process, evince an aesthetic engagement with something like what Paul Gilroy calls a "politicized postmodernism" (1993: 15). Rammellzee and

⁷ We might also think here of the overwhelming whiteness of NASA and mid-century dreams of space exploration that depended on all manner of high-tech Mylar textiles, reinforced fiberglass chasses, and air-tight synthetic atmospheres. The first Black man in space was Guion "Guy" Bluford in 1983.

⁸ Sometimes stylized as "RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ," formerly Zagari Rammellzee.



Kingelez alike present heavily stylized reappropriations of consumerist junk, or what Francesco Bonami calls “dysfunctional consumerism” (1999: 12). Reappropriating bits of packaging, toy dinosaurs, bottle tops, novelty skateboards, cardboard cutouts, and discarded fan blades, the normative surfaces of consumerism—associated with the middle-class white experience of “Teflon existence”—are folded out, into, and through a synthetic imagination of alternative chemospheres that function in the manner of “a kind of toy philosophy universe” (Negarestani 2018) and remediate Baudrillardian philosophies regarding the gamification of reality.

Black Accelerationism & the “Toy Philosophy Universe”



Figure 4. Kingelez, Bodys Isek (1992). *Ville Fantôme*. Image by Cole Wilson for *The New York Times* (31 May, 2018).

Kingelez’s *Ville Fantôme* is a philosophical toy that shows us “a post-post Fata Morgana of the late twentieth century,” rich with gleaming synthetic skyscrapers and ultra-hygienic pavements that, as Bonami notes, “could be seen as a postmodern trap for the African subject” (Bonami 1999: 12). The joy of the “toy universe,” Negarestani writes, is in its capacity to offer “an outside view of ourselves” (2018); the maker of toy worlds is in this sense a kind of “poet-engineer” whose desire strives to render the virtual possible “not out of the caprice of making difference for the sake of difference—but out of the urgency of looking at the inherited world from outside” (Negarestani 2021). *Ville Fantôme* (**Figure 4**) is the gleaming and quietly composed nightmare of a future Central African city enveloped in something like what Stuart Jeffries calls the “Great Acceptance” (2021: 199) of neoliberal



idealism—wherein the “polyurethane fundament” of the post-modernist “death-world” and all its delusive “pleasure industries” come to envelope and strangle Kingelez’s homeland. “In the false society laughter is a disease,” write Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), “a disease which has attacked happiness and is drawing it into its worthless totality” (1997: 141). Kingelez’s *Ville Fantôme* plays with the toyification of place excited by post-modernism’s new arsenal of synthetic materials, coyly turning the period’s aestheticization of fun into a means of holding a mirror to this “false society” wherein “laughter” and “happiness” seem to proliferate like a “disease.”

“I’m a technocrat,” insists Rammellzee in a bizarre interview from 1995, shortly after describing the origin story of his theory of “Gothic Futurism” and “Ikonoklast Panzerism” as it developed across the previous sixteen years—beginning in approximately 1975. Working with an imaginary oil-tanker-funded Ph.D. student at MIT, a world-leading “injectionist [...] glue expert,” and conducting experiments injecting 5-lbs screws “with a gigantic 20-ft needle” in a supercooled chamber before X-raying them for “fissures” (Rammellzee 1995), we find an oblique expression of Rammellzee’s “toy philosophy universe” and its kinship with an emergent aesthetic of “Black Accelerationism” (Wark 2017) in its politicized deconstruction of the necropolitical agencies of a vicious military-industrial complex. Like everything he creates, Rammellzee’s *Letter Racers* (Figure 5) shimmers in the dark lights of this post-modern fantasy of “Gothic Futurism.”



Figure 5. Rammellzee (1988-1995). *Letter Racers*. Image by Vincent Tullo for *The New York Times* (26 July, 2018).



Rammellzee's self-styled aesthetics of "subconscious toyism" (Rammellzee 1979) are fastidiously and aggressively industrial, experimental, intellectual, chemical, political, and playful. For McKenzie Wark, "the original and best text on accelerationism" (Wark 2017) is Kodwo Eshun's theory-fiction about Black music in *More Brilliant Than the Sun* (1998), a work that offers a vital key to understanding the synthetic imagination of dynamized substance animating Rammellzee's Black Accelerationism and its imperative "to design, manufacture, fabricate, synthesize, cut, paste and edit a so-called artificial discontinuum for the futurhythmachine" (Eshun 1998: 3). If chemistry is the science of molecular combinatorics, then Rammellzee's *Letter Racers* transposes this science into a means of playing with the atomic architectures of the English alphabet and late-capitalist consumerism alike. Grasping the newfangled post-modernist plasticity of white sovereignty, the English alphabet is "remanipulated" and re-moulded by Rammellzee into an ironic war machine, such that "the letter is armed to stop all the phony formations, lies, and trickknowlegies placed upon its structure" (Rammellzee 1979). Across the 26 anti-gravitational alphabetical skateboards, *Letter Racers* showcases an assemblage of "dysfunctional consumerism[s]" that attack the sovereignty of the English language and its asphyxiating language of colonialism through the strange "polyrhythmachine" cadences (Eshun 1998: 82) of Black Accelerationism (**Figure 6**). Together, Rammellzee's oeuvre "breaks the morpheme into rhythmolecules," as Eshun says (25), reappropriating the necromolecular powers of industrial chemistry for the disarmament and obliteration of "all the phony formations, lies, and trickknowlegies" of an ever-moving and increasingly domesticated military-industrial complex. Here, the infantile fun and games of Kingelez's cardboard metropolis finds its demonic twin in the Junkspace War Machines of Rammellzee's own "toy universe."

Taken together, Kingelez and Rammellzee invite us to "ride with the blur," as Fred Moten says (2017), and to dream together of a different kind of synthetic world wherein the skyscapes of *Ville Fantôme* swarm with the decolonizing anti-gravitational alphabetical skateboards of the *Letter Racers*.



Figure 6. Rammellzee (1988-1995). *Letter Racers*. Image reproduced in *Rammellzee: Racing for Thunder* (2004). New York: Rizzoli.

Chemical Infrastructures of Softness: Anexact & Informed

“I think of globalization like a light which shines brighter and brighter on a few people,” writes Arundhati Roy, “and the rest are in darkness, wiped out” (Roy qtd. in Nixon 2011: 172). Attending retrospectively to some of the more overlooked chemical spheres of the late twentieth century post-modernist lifeworld means turning toward the likes of the downtrodden luxury cruise line floor-cleaners—the “Elite Special Forces-type crew” of “jumpsuited Third World Guys” (Wallace 2012: 51)—who are undermined and ignored throughout David Foster Wallace’s celebrated text, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (1996). In turn, methodologically, this entails extending the recent “chemical turn” (Liboiron et al. 2018) in the social sciences to bear upon the arts, bringing the work of chemical ethnographers—such as Nicholas Shapiro (2015), Eben Kirksey (2017), and Vanessa Agard-Jones (2013)—into closer dialogue with what Michelle Murphy calls the “chemical infrastructures” (2013a) and the “chemical regimes of living” (2013b) that come to the fore in the late twentieth century, as well as Lauren Berlant’s late work on the



affective spheres of late-industrial infrastructures (2016). In short, radically expanding our understanding of the agentic capacities of synthetic materials beyond both the flatline lifeworlds of a middle-class “Teflon existence” and the ontological rigidities of state-sponsored “molecular bureaucracy” means recognizing chemicals as “useful linking figures” in the mapping of “complex, multisited, and multiscalar phenomena” (Shapiro & Kirksey 2017) to the extent that divergent molecular compounds are treated as what Isabelle Stengers and Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent call “informed materials” (1996: 263).

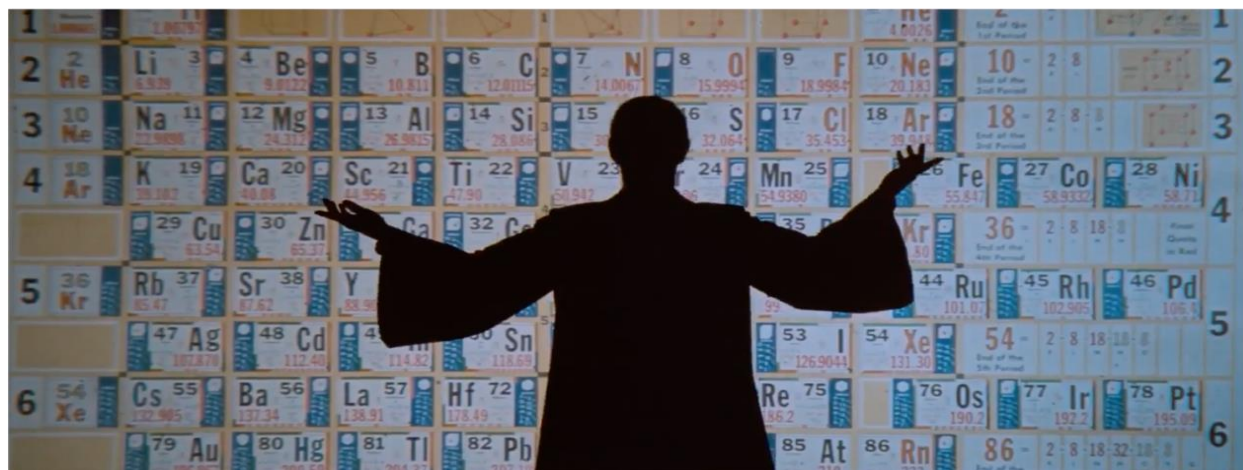
The informed materialism of necromolecular agents functions outside and beyond the closed “aseptic space” of the research lab, situated within the world’s ever-moving “living labyrinths whose topology varies in time” (Stengers & Bensaude-Vincent 1996: 263). Outside, that is to say, of the gridded Euclidean space of the scientist’s molecular diagrams and chemical formulas, and very much inside the “notched, indented, lens-shaped, umbelliform” (Husserl 1931: 208) and topologized lifeworlds of “an anexact space and time” (Derrida 1989: 120). The matter-flow of informed synthetics considered here thus errs determinately toward the complex, the mottled, the harlequin, and the protean. In turn, the “living labyrinths” that informed synthetics manifest in 1990s culture engineer a multitudinous and chemically induced kind of “polyspherology,” wherein different chemical regimes of living come to dictate “differently-attuned, differently-enveloped, and differently-air conditioned” chemical spheres (Sloterdijk qtd. in Shapiro 2015). As Shapiro says, “affective processes [...] are the primary means of discerning protracted and low-level encounters with domestic chemicals” (2015). The cultural logic of informed synthetics can help us understand what Berlant calls “the movement or patterning of social form, [...] the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure” (Berlant 2016: 393). By extension, this essay presents an affect-oriented approach to analyzing an overlooked archive of late twentieth century art and literature, which exhibits some of the “low-level” agencies that informed synthetics assume in an ascensional moment in the history of what we might call *chemical infrastructures of softness*.

“Chemical infrastructures” encompass “the spatial and temporal distributions of industrially produced chemicals as they are produced and consumed, and as they become mobile” across a variable network of atmospheres, landscapes, waterways, highways, commodities, state-sanctioned regulations, and licit and illicit supply chains (Murphy 2013b: 105). “With the term chemical infrastructures,” writes Murphy, “I am naming and imagining the many varied pathways of industrial chemicals as they permeate and structure life, both human and nonhuman” (105). The cultural and chemical valences of infrastructural softness explored herein tend to present a more diminutive, elastic, polymorphic, and process-oriented type of infrastructural agency relative to what Michael



Truscello calls the “necropolitics of infrastructural brutality” (2020). Whereas Truscello investigates the “necropolitical valences of operational, discontinuous, and ruined infrastructural assemblages” (Truscello 2020: 224) across a network of bridges, tunnels, railroads, motorways, dams, and industrial factories, for instance, what I call the chemical infrastructures of softness foreground the necromolecular valences of chlorofluorocarbon-loaded hairsprays and polytetrafluoroethylene-laced frying-pans, fast-fashion polyester textiles and carcinogenic agrochemical sprays.

Diverging from the chemical playspaces of Butt’s *Familiars*, Kingelez’s *Ville Fantôme*, and Rammellzee’s *Letter Racers*, an important cultural representation of such insidiously soft chemical infrastructures is evident in Alejandro Jodorowsky’s late-surrealist cinematic masterpiece, *The Holy Mountain* (1973) (Figures 7-9). Throughout *The Holy Mountain*, we are introduced to seven planets, each with a distinct alchemical ruler that appears in the post-modernist form of industrialist toymakers and nefarious financial advisors. On Venus, for instance, we find an industrialist specializing in the production of seductively soft synthetic textiles and luxury cosmetic products; on Jupiter we find an industrialist manufacturing eroticized machines like the “seX-Box”; and on Saturn we discover another industrialist manufacturing a series of hypnotic toys that subconsciously encourage children to commit war atrocities later in life. We even find an arms manufacturer developing eroticized grenade necklaces and psychedelic shotguns. Appositely, the American hip-hop group, Company Flow, later sample Jodorowsky’s depiction of such chemical infrastructural softness on their LP *Funcrusher Plus* (1997). Veering from humdrum chemical consumerisms (“crews disappear like blackheads on Oxy cream”) to sci-fi fantasies (“Through brain facilities with the science of microchemistry / This history of my hip hop is too deep to be dissected”), *Funcrusher Plus* is riddled with the playful yet exacting toxic animacies of “acid rain” and “lead paint popsicles” that arguably reach an apex in the track “Help Wanted.” Here, Company Flow sample a president’s orders from *Holy Mountain* as a clarion-call for the mass production of deathly new infrastructure: “gas-chambers, gas-schools, gas-universities, gas-libraries, gas-museums, gas-dance-halls, gas-whorehouses, etc.” This is sounded alongside a repetitious cybernetic alarm, which wails: “Workers needed in the miniature plastic bomb shop / Workers needed in the miniature plastic bomb shop / Workers needed in the miniature plastic bomb shop.”



Figures 7-9. Jodorowsky, Alejandro (1973). *The Holy Mountain*. New York: ABKO Films.



Chemical infrastructures of softness may well find their most sophisticated extrapolation to date in Paul B. Preciado's (formerly Beatriz Preciado) work on the mid-to-late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century's "pharmacopornographic era" (Preciado 2013). Reading the "pharmacopornographic" as not only a form of Foucauldian biopower but also a distinctly soft network of chemical infrastructures and chemical regimes of living draws attention to the fact that, as Preciado insists, "power acts through molecules" (78) in "the postindustrial, global, and mediatic regime[s]" of the late twentieth century (33). In a decentralized network of contraceptive pills, impotency treatments, mood regulators, licit and illicit psychotropic drugs, cosmetic enhancements, and synthetic hormones, the pharmacopornographic era is extensively entangled with a certain chemical regime of living that arises in the wake of wider advances in mid-century industrial chemistry. In turn, pharmacopornographic infrastructures function not by way of a hard network of concrete highways, airports, and bridges, but rather through a *soft* arsenal of gels, lubricants, creams, silicone sex toys, and synthetic drugs that Preciado describes as "a sticky molecular network trying to force its way into life" (412). To experience the pharmacopornographic era, Preciado suggests, is to experience "being a subject, at the price of becoming a gel" (412). As such, Foucauldian biopower morphs and mingles with something closer to what Kirksey calls "chemopower" (2020).

The social and political processes of constructing and controlling subjectivity within the soft infrastructures of the pharmacopornographic era are also, for Preciado, intensively governed by the "viscous subversion[s]" (412) of a soft species of molecular power that manifests itself through an animate network of molecular architectures or "microprosthetic" designs, utilizing something remarkably similar to the living lability of Stengers and Bensaude-Vincent's theories of "informed materials" (1996: 263):

If architecture and orthopedics in the disciplinary society served as models for understanding the relation of body to power, in the pharmacopornographic society, the models for body control are microprosthetic: now, power acts through molecules that incorporate themselves into our immune system; silicone takes the shape of our breasts; neurotransmitters alter our perceptions and behavior; hormones produce their systemic effects on hunger, sleep, sexual arousal, aggressiveness, and the social decoding of our femininity and masculinity. (Preciado 2013: 78)

As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), the mid-to-late twentieth century is increasingly awash with "transverse multiplicities that convey desire as a molecular phenomenon," or "as partial objects and flows" (2004b: 309), such that something like what Jean-François Lyotard calls the post-war period's "libidinal economy" can be said to be animated not only by the "ephemeral explosions" of "libidinal intensities"



(1993: 18) but also an increasingly sophisticated chemopower that functions through a range of synthetic consumerisms that simulate and disseminate “desire as a molecular phenomenon.” Further into the 1980s and 1990s, we see these new post-disciplinary agents of molecular control coalescing intensely in what Deleuze calls “extraordinary pharmaceutical productions” (Deleuze 1992: 3). By way of Preciado we can think of these molecular phenomena and “extraordinary pharmaceutical productions” as “microprosthetic” infrastructures that not only invent what Preciado calls “new molecular sensibilities” (2013: 83)—most explicitly in the form of new kinds of chemically-engineered synthetic subjectivities (“Prozac Subjects”, “cocaine subjects”, “silicone subjects” and suchlike [35])—but that become imbued with oversized levels of power, such that “power acts through molecules” in what Preciado calls “new soft technologies of microcontrol” (79).⁹

As Andrew Barry writes, molecules are never fixed but rather find complex and ever-moving agencies as they pass through divergent “informational and material environments” (2005: 52). More specifically, in reappropriating Testogel® into a politicized agent of molecular resistance, Preciado can be said to present a Whiteheadian—and by extension Deleuzian and Stengerian—conception of the molecular as not so much a distinct fixed object, like a table or rock, but as an ever-moving “event” that is persistently underway. As Whitehead says, “a molecule is a historic route of actual occasions; and such a route is an event” (1978: 80). For Preciado, this openness inherent to the molecular as a site of becoming is a platform not only for the construction of a new kind of soft chemopower or a “control lite, a bubbly type of control, full of colours and wearing Mickey Mouse ears” (211), but also for an entirely new radical politics of “modus molecularis” (141); of “molecular wonder” (43), “molecular joy” (47), and “molecular revolution” (142).¹⁰ That the pharmacopornographic era’s soft infrastructures enable new possibilities for “molecular revolution” as well as new societies of necropolitical control underlines Preciado’s sense that, as Bachelard and Butt alike reiterate, “substance does not have, at all levels, the same coherence” (Bachelard 1988: 45); molecules function in radically different ways in different “informational and material environments” (Barry 2005: 52). The value of attending to the divergent chemical spheres that erupt in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century culture resides here, in their capacity to help us better understand the ways in which synthetic matter comes to both obliquely control who may live and who must die,

⁹ See also Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s interest in the power—both repressive and liberatory—of “Molecular Creativism” that is catalyzed by the late-twentieth-century industrial chemist’s “factory of unhappiness” (2007: 123).

¹⁰ See also Guattari 1984.



while simultaneously proliferating what Sofia Ropek Hewson calls “molecular possibilities for resistance” (2018: 133).

Chemospheric Parataxis: Cookie Mueller in the Pharmacopornographic Ruins of Tomorrowland

Plastic prefab homes and hyper-combustible Freon® hairdos; Credit Bureau blockheads on Thorazine and psychedelic rituals performed on Formica floors; fistfuls of Dexadrine Spansules, glassine bags of heroine, and pink-pearl-luster nails attached with Crazy Glue. Cookie Mueller’s life-writing—first collected in the early 1990s in works like *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black* (1990) and *Garden of Ashes* (1990)—veers through a baroque network of soft chemical spheres. Mueller’s autofiction is read herein as a continuum of chemospheric parataxis that careens through a labile labyrinth of “silicone heart[s]” (Mueller 2022: 22) and polyester peyote ceremonies. It misuses and refuses Baudrillard’s “play of illusions and phantasms” (1994: 187) and draws out the post-modernist’s “ontological” attention to “world-making” (McHale 1987: 10) as a means of recounting the various chemospheres and temporary worlds she has passed through in the very real game of her own precarious life. Documenting a remarkable range of queer, feminist, and working-class chemical regimes of living—by turns seedy and precarious, violent and heart-felt, yet always indelibly human—the chemospheric parataxis of Mueller’s autofiction presents her own sense of life within the simulacrum of the mid-to-late twentieth century’s cheap sovereignties and libidinated economies. Mueller’s “game of reality” is one wherein she must wrestle incessantly for agency and control over her own destiny amidst myriad kinds of “sexopolitical subjectivity” (Preciado 2013: 73).

Mbembe’s large-scale necropolitics as commingled with Foucauldian biopower (which Preciado promiscuously extends by indexing the weaker forces of the necromolecular) also connects to Berlant’s smaller-scale interest in soft everyday “non-sovereign relationalities” and her infamous suggestion that “sovereignty is an inadequate concept” (Berlant 2007). “The Necromolecular Nineties” develops Berlant’s interest in the cheap, phony, and phantasmatic forms of sovereignty that proliferate in the post-modernist period—as in her insistence that “the ordinary subjects of democratic/capitalist power might best be redefined as only partially (that is to say phantasmatically or not) sovereign” (Berlant 2007: 756)—without entirely denying the strong political valences that interest Mbembe, Foucault, and Preciado. As Félix Guattari says in an interview with Tetsuo Kogawa in 1980: “I think we have to accept the idea that there will be a coexistence between two systems: a system of soft, fluid social control and a system of increasingly harsh repression, which liquidates all the old democratic systems” (Guattari 2015: 19). The liquescent force of both



soft molecular dreamworlds and repressive necromolecular regimes depends on a complex understanding of sovereignty in the mid-to-late twentieth century as increasingly meaningless (as Berlant suggests) as well as super powerful (as Mbembe infers). In turn, the polythetic chemospheres that come to the fore in the 1990s describe a new kind of molecular power that helps make possible such “non-sovereign relationalities”—dynamic and multitudinous, weak and process-oriented—in a kind of anexact and intense form of decentralized molecular sovereignty that remains tethered to the very “system of increasingly harsh repression” it superficially absolves. Cheap sovereigns are an expression of this “coexistence between two systems” that flourish under the conditions of “slow death” and that depend, as Jana Bacevic writes, on the proliferation of intensely precarious “labile environments,” (or necromolecular chemospheres) wherein “even attempts to temporarily maneuver to the side of (literally *laterally* to) structural pressures increasingly involve the acceptance of death.” Berlant “challenges the idea of death as a net effect of sovereign power,” as Bacevic glosses. Yet, in doing so, Berlant paradoxically underlines the fuzzy and multitudinous structures of a new kind of repressive system supersaturating our everyday chemical lifeworlds (Bacevic 2022: 131-132).

In 1967, an eighteen-year-old Mueller finds herself working in retail at “Nauvankauf’s Men’s Clothing Store” in Baltimore City, peddling “shoddy machine-sewn togs” to a predominantly Black working-class customer base (Mueller 2022: 22). As Mueller notes, the shop “was all a sham” (26), tricking the underprivileged into buying flashy overpriced clothing items on credit and locking them into interest-heavy loan repayments. As such, a good portion of Mueller’s job was not so much to sell the store’s latest line of “shiny two-tone sharkskin suits, loud sports jackets, and hot pink fake fur pimp hats” as to “make phone calls to people who were late with their layaway or credit payments” (26). Having “to gear up to be nasty” when performing in front of her racist boss and “do[ing] ridiculous things like threaten[ing] lawsuits for a pair of slacks” (26), the phony faux-lux chemosphere of Nauvankauf’s encapsulates a late-1960s moment of ascensional late capitalist exploitation. More specifically, Nauvankauf’s cheap synthetics—advertised as “Handmade [...] fine imported fabrics” (25)—are the gimcrack prostheses of an emergent species of the “aspirational sovereign,” the “humorless sovereign” (Berlant 2017: 308-310)—or indeed synthetic sovereign—that Berlant aligns with the “onset of neoliberalism” (305). Most explicitly, the phony chemosphere of Nauvankauf’s concentrates in the “ludicrous dark brown matted toupee” worn by the store’s “slimy boss [...] Mr. Sanders” (27). As with the early-1970s “Brillo-y toupee” (Berlant 2017: 306) that Irving Rosenfeld (played by Christian Bale) applies with farcical angst and ham-fisted precision in the opening sequence of *American Hustle* (2013), Mr. Sanders and his cheap toupee offer a paradigmatic example of the distinctly “humorless comedy” of “aspirational thingness” that envelops the



post-war period's "comb-over subjects" and their increasingly sophisticated narcissistic prostheses that mediate fantasies of synthetic sovereignty (Berlant 2017: 307-308). Furthermore, by working in collaboration with an increasingly omniscient "Central Credit Bureau" (28) to better prey on financially vulnerable customers, Nauvankauf's sells delusions of synthetic sovereignty to Baltimore's working class, engineering a farcically precarious power that functions in and through cheap synthetic goods. As Berlant writes, in neoliberalism "there is no corporate or individual sovereign acting deliberately to implant qualities in a collection of bodies" (Berlant 2007: 765), and Mueller's autofiction offers us a glimpse into the complex, decentralized operations of soft power wielded by a labile and multitudinous network of synthetic sovereigns flogging "desire as a molecular phenomenon."¹¹

If the gimcrack sovereigns of Nauvankauf's phony chemosphere describe a moment of ascensional neoliberalism, then we find a more mature iteration of these exploitative dynamics in Mueller's account as a "pharmacopornographic worker" (Preciado 2013: 286) go-go dancing at the "Purple Pussy Cat" strip club in 1970s New Jersey (Mueller 2022: 157). Here, the Purple Pussy Cat presents another precarious chemosphere of cheap vodka, cocaine, "pink sequined G-string[s]" (158), mirrored walls, and "dirty Dynel [...] fake fur bathroom rug[s]" (155). In turn, it is in the icky, comically eroticized imagery of 1970s strip dancers repurposing their bathroom floor mats into "dirty Dynel shag pad"—upon which they simply "lie down and start undulating" (155)—that we find the Purple Pussy Cat's paradoxical chemosphere of hyper-libidinated Taylorism. "It seemed so inane... convulsing there on a dirty Dynel shag pad on a 'stage,'" writes Mueller, "which was usually nothing but a flimsy fly-by-night platform the size of a dinner table, while stone-faced male loners sat in a circle around it" (155). Mueller's semantics consistently entangle the Purple Pussy Cat's eroticized chemosphere with both domestic imagery (of "bathroom rug[s]," "dinner table[s]," "pregnancy and breast-feeding" [157], "floor workouts" [159], and "Ziploc bags" [161]) and mechanized physical movements more typical of a machine age Taylorist workplace ("inane... convulsing", "pump the hips" [160]). As such, Mueller can be said to document the numbing reality of what Preciado calls "the real, ultrapaupeperized workers of pharmacopornographic capitalism" (2013: 287), wherein women perform regimented gestures of "inane... convulsing" atop repurposed bathroom carpets in sleazy bars. Furthermore, as Mueller's colleague Taffy explains, "these guys just want to look at

¹¹ Eventually, Mueller decides to fight gimcrackery with gimcrackery, hatching her own hustle to liberate the working-class populace of Baltimore so cruelly indebted to Nauvankauf's by deleting the store's database of indebted customers before running away to San Francisco. Before leaving, Mueller takes the time to call a handful of customers to tell them the good news, one of whom is a "Black Panther supporter," who celebrates the move as nothing less than "a political revolutionary action [...] he kept saying, 'Yeah! Right on! All right! Power to the People!'" (157).



something they can fantasize about. They like to feel horny, it makes them happy. [...] Lie there and look right into their eyes. Remember to do that part, otherwise it doesn't work. You have to make it personal." (2022: 159). In something like a fully-automated "Puritan erotics of power" (Preciado 2013: 279), Mueller then sacrifices her sense of self for the sake of her menial and repetitive—if intensely erotic—work: "I made myself look into this guy's eyes. It worked immediately. He started peeling off ones and handing them to me. This made me start putting some sex into the workout. I undulated all over the place, just like an eel in heat" (159). The eroticized chemosphere of the Purple Pussy Cat—in its floating assemblage of alcohol, drugs, slime-balls, sequined G-strings, and dirty Dynel shag pads—exists to facilitate precisely this hot and soft yet curiously emotionless and repetitive pharmacopornographic labor wherein all the worker needs to do is "lie down and stare into eyes and pump the hips" (160).

Eventually, after a terrifying run-in with a Brooklyn serial killer, Mueller hangs up her sequined G-string, where "it hangs to this day, gathering dust" (165) and sparkling in the twilight. Mueller's fondness for her sparkly "pink sequined G-string" helps us to "reorient relations with chemicals from villainous objects with violent effects to chemical kin," as Angeliki Balayannis and Emma Garnett write (2020), which provides a resource for political resistance in an otherwise "ultrapauperized" chemosphere of pharmacopornographic exploitation. Furthermore, Mueller's capacity to make kin and in turn maintain agency within the difficult chemospheres of Nauvankauf's and the Purple Pussy Cat stands in stark opposition to the "toxic-pornographic subjectivities" (Preciado 2013: 35) she encounters aboard Mr. Gyros's 75-ft cabin cruiser in 1980s New Orleans. Here, Mueller finds a petroleum dreamworld with "synthetics everywhere": rife with "plastic potted palms and plastic simulated bamboo chairs"; beige velveteen wallpaper; beige "polyester wall-to-wall carpeting" and "Naugahyde coasters"; thermoplastic faux-marble statues of "Venus de Milo"; "plastic flowers and fountains", "plastic silver plaque[s]", "plastic silver bucket[s]"; and "sleazy waiter types in white poly shirts and black poly pants" (Mueller 2022: 228-229). Not only is Mr. Gyros's kitsch cabin cruiser another vaingloriously phony and synthetic attempt to assert humorless sovereignty—his world is indexed by Mueller as a "parody of a '70s suburban disco V.I.P. lounge" that is, for him at least, "no laughing matter" (229)—but so too does it come to envelop and inflict a kind of necromolecular power over the others that inhabit it. Consider "Mr. Gyros's girlfriend," for instance, "a Creole beauty who was the current Miss New Orleans. With her lacquered hair, turquoise eyeshadow, and pink poly dress, she was in the perfect setting", writes Mueller, for "[s]he became one with the petroleum products" (229). Miss New Orleans 1983 is something like what Jess Diamanti and Imre Szeman call a "petrosubject" (2020: 141). In her "lacquered hair, turquoise eyeshadow, and pink poly dress," she is very much a



petroleum ornament that becomes “one” with the intensely neoliberal chemosphere of synthetic sovereignty that her boyfriend, Mr. Gyros, has so meticulously built for himself.

Hurting through Pennsylvanian pig farms and Haight-Ashbury LSD capping parties, B-movie film-sets for chainsaw-wielding hairstylists and grungy East Village flophouses, Mueller’s autofiction underlines the violent disparities that punctuate the mid-to-late twentieth century’s different chemical regimes of living. Much like that class of “individuals performing drag in response to sea level rise rather than (just) wringing their hands over it” and those who “profile endangered species while poking fun at them” (Seymour 2014: 101), Mueller’s autofiction wields “irony’s conceptual doubling” so as to refuse the didactic certitude of orthodox, white middle-class environmentalist writing and its often melodramatic “binarized logic of despair/hope” (5). Instead, in her own idiosyncratic way Mueller presents a “trashy environmentalism” built of and for the rude documentation of what such divergent chemospheres are actually like to live in and through, and in doing so she provides an invaluable testimony of environmental degradation in the mid-to-late twentieth century (189).

***S*PeRM**K*T* & the Funky Poetics of Toxic Exotica**

Harryette Mullen’s long poem *S*PeRM**K*T* (1992) is a searing and sneering ode to the toxic animacies of the globalized supermarket and its superabundance of competing chemical spheres. Forming a meandering multi-aisle mock-epic where dazzling blocks of poetic prose obliquely orbit a variety of commodity objects—from budget chocolate bars and Day-Glo soda pops to bubble bath bombs, overpriced sanitary pads, and wheeze-inducing insecticides—reading *S*PeRM**K*T* is a little like encountering an interwar surrealist’s lysergic descriptions of the chemical riches contained by 1990s consumerism. Mullen’s poetry is rich in the hyperbolic exotica of protean globalized supply chains and hyper-libidinated everyday consumerisms, presenting a late-capitalist chemosphere that is intensely off, odd, ill. Further, Mueller’s continuum of chemospheric parataxis is compressed in *S*PeRM**K*T* into a network of omnidirectional phrasal clusters that index wildly divergent chemical regimes.

Toxicity is funky, Mullen reminds us, in a hot and trashy kind of way.¹² Yet, as sanitary pads dissolve into the “leaks that steaks splayed on trays are oozing” and as “desperate pregnant nubile [...] stock girls deliver [...] space alien test tube babes” (Mullen 2009: 70-

¹² Mullen skewers the hypercommodified pretensions of the supermarket by wielding something like Amiri Baraka’s urgent poetics—“Flash! You’re poor / Flash! You’re ignorant / Flash, you’re in chains”—developed conterminously in *Funk Lore* (1995).



71), Mullen's supermarket is intensely weird and often nightmarish in its poetic presentation of a hyper-animated 1990s chemosphere that lunges periodically into the darker depths of what Derek Jarman calls a "demon Disney World" (1992: 314). Mullen's "disinfunktant" (2009: 79) poetics throughout *S*PeRM**K*T* are read herein as a perverse vision of the everyday supermarket as a volatile place of Day-Glo funkiness that spontaneously and habitually descends into cold and deathly toxicity. As Peter Selz writes in "Notes on Funk" (1967), the everyday aesthetics of the funky tend to feature "polychromed assemblage[s]" with a "cobbled together nature" and the term funky itself derives from interwar New Orleans jazz, before being recycled in the 1960s by West Coast artists into "a matter of attitude [...] indebted to the Dada tradition" (Selz 1967: 3). Unlike the cold, hard, and cool aesthetics of minimalism or structuralism, the funky is hot, groovy, swinging, ad hoc, zany, trashy, and maximalist. Relentlessly kinesthetic, Mullen's funky poetics of the 1990s supermarket present something like what Wark—writing of Eshun's Black Accelerationism—calls "a branch of psychogeography, but not of walking—of dancing" (2017). In turn, Mullen does not so much walk us through a 1990s supermarket in *S*PeRM**K*T* as groove and trip, moving out into and through the toxic folds of late capitalism's End Times funk. Mullen's poetry satirizes this chemical sphere of gaudy toxicity in a hot and sticky molecular network of "funkadelic [...] WordObject[s]" (Eshun 1998: 40) that weave together a decidedly "disinfunktant" descriptive mode. Toxic animacies and chemical kinships "whaaAAm across the stereoperceptual field" (Eshun 1998: 42) of *S*PeRM**K*T* as Mullen's synthetic imagination moves in illogical streams of "tidy toxic clean dregs folded in dumps with safety improved twist-off tops" (Mullen 2009: 79).

"Aren't you glad you use petroleum?" Mullen asks, parodying the infantile didacticism of the supermarket intercom (69). "Don't wait to be told you explode. You're not fully here until you're over there. Never let them see you eat. You might be taken for a zoo. Raise your hand if you're sure you're not" (69). The late-twentieth-century's burgeoning crisis of public and planetary well-being screams from almost every nook and cranny of *S*PeRM**K*T*. In the frozen aisles, say, where "frost-free fridget[s]" harbor "slab[s] of iced aged mammoth," Mullen reminds us that such beastly delights are "plucked from the frozone" that in turn plays host to "carbon dated ziplocked leftovers and a soothing multicolored safety tested plastic teething ring," as deep-time folds into the ahistorical dreamtime of depthless consumerism (73). Everything in this funky and nightmarish space of lude toxicity is off-gassing like some kind of fetid necromolecular soup. Mullen's animate synthetics are always busy, "sweating ammunition. A strychnine migraine is a p.r. problem. Every orifice leaks. No cap is tamper proof" (76). While toxicity crackles at the molecular level of the erring phonemes of Mullen's funky "WordObject[s]," *S*PeRM**K*T* is crystal



clear about the political meaning of “the white space of this galaxy” (96). “Bad germs get zapped by secret agents in formulaic new improved scientific solutions” (85), writes Mullen, as the humdrum stuff of washing-up detergent appears as a model vehicle of white imperialism, ready and willing to soften all manner of “sorted colored stacks”—from the “black grape of underwear” to “gringo derbies tipping Latina banana” (85).

Crackpot, Van Go, & the Chemospheric Simulacra of Ghettoized Blackness

“Looks like we have been abandoned,” says Mildred Warhaus in Ishmael Reed’s overlooked satirical play *Hubba City* (1996), “[l]ooks like nobody cares anything about whether we live or die” (Reed 2009: 173). Mildred is a tenacious citizen of “Hubba City”—“Hubba” being a street name for crack cocaine—a fictitious place based on “the North Oakland, California crack wars” of the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹³ A violent and unforgiving chemosphere supersaturated with licit and illicit chemical infrastructures—of ultraprocessed fast-foods, crack cocaine, prefab homes, exhaust fumes, and cheap textiles—is maintained by a complex decentralized network of gangsters, politicians, businessmen, landlords, police-officers, TV newscasters, ivy league drug smugglers, and others that act to indirectly condemn Black working-class Americans to death. “White people live in a different world from us. They’re free. They don’t have to worry about these crack dealers” (Reed 2009: 170), Mildred states, emphasizing the divergent chemospheres separating working-class Black Americans and middle-class white Americans in the 1990s, and underlining the fact that Hubba City’s population is “marked out for wearing out” (Berlant 2007: 761). As we shall see, at the core of Hubba City’s necromolecular chemosphere is a vicious simulacrum of Black masculinity that functions to condemn young Black men to premature death.

Reed’s satire centers on an ongoing battle between the mid-60s leader of Hubba City’s local “Crime Watch” group, Mildred, and the city’s juvenile gang leader, Crackpot. In turn, the systematic inaction of various police officers and politicians leads Mildred to visit the private lounge of “The Vassals of the Celestial Ocean”—an “all-white” members club—to speak with Krud, a criminal landlord who owns the properties that Crackpot and his gang work from (and whose Harvard-educated son, it turns out, supplies him with packages of Colombian cocaine). As Mildred explains to Krud: “the police don’t answer [...] I go to the councilperson and her assistant tells me to go to the Vice Mayor, and then I go to the Vice

¹³ Reed moved to Oakland in 1979 and lived for many years “on 53rd Street,” where he came “into direct contact with the side effects of the crack trade. But, [he] also learned that most citizens who reside in the inner-city are decent and caring.” As such, the play is presented by Reed “as a tribute to the brave members of the Oakland Crime Watch, who risked their lives to combat the invasion of their neighborhoods by criminal elements.” Specifically, the violent chemical sphere that Hubba City presents pivots on what Reed describes as “the inaction of the police and city officials in dealing with the crack problem.” See Reed (“An Essay”).



Mayor and he tells me to go to the Mayor. The Mayor is never in town. So I decided that since you won that place, I should come and see you about it” (184). Ever the lame and comb-over sovereign of neoliberalism, however, Krud’s response is as heartless as it is simple: “These are the eighties. We don’t cater to special interests anymore” (184). Crucially, the crisis escalates rapidly when Mildred stands up to Crackpot herself, disarming one of his lookouts and chasing his gang members out of the neighborhood, before being involuntarily transformed into a local celebrity by Martha Wingate, a “wellgroomed” Black middle-class TV news presenter. At this point, with his name and face splattered across the local media, Crackpot feels threatened by Mildred and her local “Crime Watch” organization and thus swears to take violent revenge. At this point, he launches into a monologue, likening himself to the multinational industrial chemistry giant, DuPont, whom he mistakes for a single individual:

why is everybody coming down on me? I read where one of these men who was running for president, DuPont I think the fellow’s name is, ran a company that’s responsible for the warming of the earth. Some chemical that you get out of an aerosol spray can and when it get into the space it makes a huge hole in the sky so that in five hundred years all mankind will be dead. At least I aint responsible for something like that, yet the people are mad at me. [...] And what about the government? They peddling dope too. They sell cocaine and heroin in order to buy arms for the people down in South America [...]. So I don’t see any difference between what I’m doing and what everybody else is doing. The way I look at it, the White House is the biggest crack house there is. (Reed 2009: 202)

Crackpot turns to the underlying hypocrisy of neoliberal politicians declaring a “war on drugs” while allowing the unprecedented rise of Big Pharma, agrochemistry, fast fashion, transgenically modified foodstuffs, plastic surgeries, and countless other chemical infrastructures and chemical regimes of living. Crackpot views his illegal chemosphere—supersaturated as it is with crack cocaine—as merely one chemosphere amongst a plurality of foaming chemospheres. As Crackpot is later reminded by Robert Hamamoto—a Japanese car salesman on the brink of becoming the first “non-white” member of “The Vassals of the Celestial Ocean”—his sovereignty is indelibly fragile, and he will never be accepted by middle and upper-class America: “You’re black. They know that the kind of wealth you have is transitory. Guys like you are a dime a dozen. As soon as somebody takes you off the scene, somebody else will take your place. Mr. Krud will sell him houses. I’ll sell him these Suzuki Samurai hubba jeeps. [...] Every time they look at you they see a loser” (212). The fragility of power that Crackpot wields is entirely rooted in the imported packages of crack cocaine that his illicit empire is built on, and in turn, said power is consistently undermined by Reed as he reveals Crackpot to be a synthetic phantom of what Clive Chijioke Nwonka



calls a “Black spectacularism based primarily around the violent criminal activities” (2023: 258).

Reed’s satire chimes with Percival Everett’s novel-within-a-novel “*My Pafology* by Stagg R. Leigh” sitting at the core of *Erasure* (2001), a work that also undermines the violent ideals of Black masculinity that the systematically degraded and isolated chemospheres of ghettoized Blackness help engineer. Like Reed, Everett’s brief story pivots on a caricature of a young Black man from the ghetto, Van Go Jenkins. Just as Crackpot finds a peculiar kinship with DuPont, Van Go names his four children after different pharmaceutical products—“Aspireene” (Aspirin®), “Tylenola” (Tylenol®), “Dexatrina” (Dexedrine®), and “Rexall” (Rexall®) (Everett 2001: 117). Everett thus offers a comedically heavy-handed gesture toward the endemic drug addiction among the working classes in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century America. Furthermore, unlike the Harvard-educated middle-class Black man, Theolinus Monk—the author of *My Pafology* in *Erasure*—who grew up in “a bungalow near Annapolis” (2) and who travels frequently around the U.S.A. as a successful experimental novelist, Van Go Jenkins is very much imprisoned within the urban ghetto into which he is born. Indeed, the only time Van Go leaves the ghetto is when he visits the aptly named “Optic White Studios in Burbank”—“Optic White” being a reference to the brand of toxic white paint that Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) is briefly employed to produce—so as to go on TV as a guest on “that Snookie Cane Show” (109). Crucially, moments before being thrust onto the stage, Van Go is “shined up” with petroleum jelly. “I sit down and the nigger take to spread vaseline on my face,” he recalls, so as to make him “shine like a proper TV nigger” (112). At this point, as with Mueller’s description of Miss New Orleans 1983, Van Go Jenkins suddenly and involuntarily becomes “one” with a chemical sphere of middle-class whiteness in thrall to “petroleum products.” Literally enveloped in petroleum jelly, Van Go Jenkins is transformed into the slick and sleazy sock-puppet of a mainstream American pleasure industry that yearns to manipulate and control Black bodies.

Cartoonishly overwhelmed by the necromolecular chemospherics of ghettoized blackness, Crackpot and Van Go index the fragility of working-class Black life amidst the violent inequalities of the late twentieth century’s chemical infrastructures. Lost in the “laminated reality” of post-modernist fictions featuring violent Black urbanity and environmental toxicity, *Hubba City* and *My Pafology* alike present delirious images of the period’s power of molecules to demand who may live and who must die.



Coda: In the Toxic Folds of Multiple-Chemical-Sensitivity

“Did the health inspector declare this place a Bhopal or something?” exclaims Margaret, an aging middle-manager in Douglas Coupland’s sociological satire *Generation X* (1991). Dag, one of the novel’s main characters, it transpires, has just stood up to his sleazy—ex-hippy-cum-full-time-yuppie—boss over the so-called “toxic waste dump” of their remarkably unremarkable, middle-class, overwhelmingly white office space (Coupland 1996: 22-23). Cocooned in his “veal fattening pen” (i.e. his office cubicle), Dag explains how he was forced to confront his boss after getting progressively “sicker and more headachy by the minute as the airborne stew of office toxins and viruses recirculated—around and around—in the fans” (23). Dag is positive “these poison winds were eddying in [his] area in particular, aided by the hum of the white noise machine and the glow of the VDT screens” (23).¹⁴ Later, Dag’s concern about the “office toxins and viruses” circulating in his workplace is undercut when he flippantly insists that the radioactive “Trinitite” dust he accidentally spills in the home of his friend, Claire, is perfectly “harmless” (23). Coupland’s account of Dag’s ambivalent bout of Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) and his paranoia for Sick Building Syndrome (SBS) gestures toward the increasingly affective confusions that tend to punctuate our everyday sense of the latent toxicities of the post-modernist lifeworld. As Murphy outlines in *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty* (2006), the postindustrial post-1970s workplace is a realm of “plastics, solvents, adhesives, synthetic carpet, particle board, dry wall, acoustic tiles, and so on” wherein “conditions of relative privilege and luxury” come to mediate their own kind of “subtle and stealthy” toxic animacy. The Necromolecular Nineties is thus also a time when “health investigators who traditionally investigated factories or acute chemical spills” were called on to “inspect nonindustrial, seemingly comfortable office buildings” following swathes of contradicting medical complaints—“a messy litany of runny noses, scratchy rashes, endless fatigue, burning inhalations, and queasy stomachs”—from America’s increasingly exhausted postindustrial workforce (Murphy 2006: 2-4).

Dag’s ironic slacker-esque incapacity to commit either MCS or SBS stands in stark contrast to the experience of ultra-privileged suburban housewife, Carol White (Julianne Moore), in Todd Haynes’s film *Safe* (1995). *Safe* deftly depicts the inescapable polycentric toxicities that plague America’s upper-middle-class chemospheres in the Necromolecular Nineties. In turn—in a network of “rashes, tremors, convulsions, breathing difficulties, headaches, dizziness, nausea, joint pain, brain fog, and extreme fatigue” spurred by a

¹⁴ So too is Dag’s colleague, Karen, “spooked about the Sick Building business,” to the extent she’s “had her sister, who worked as an X-ray technician in Montreal, give her a lead apron, which she wore to protect her ovaries when she was doing her keyboarding work” (Coupland 1996: 24).



contingent network of everyday carcinogenic pesticides and synthetic perfumes, endocrine disrupting fabric softeners and MDF workspaces off-gassing formaldehyde—the medical condition of chemical sensitivity is simultaneously a kind of “trans-corporality” wherein the body becomes better attuned to the intra-acting necromolecular agents supersaturating the post-modernist lifeworld and that “merge person, domestic space, and environment” (Alaimo 2010: 114-115). A chemospheric reading of 1990s art and literature also suggests that the toxic animacies of MCS and SBS are more general than has been recognized: present not only as a narrative spur in *Safe* and as a quirky sociological category in *Generation X*, but also more obliquely in Mullen’s account of the “strychnine migraine[s]” caused by consumerist products that “leak” from “every orifice” in *S*PeRM**K*T* and in the multitude of “diseases induced by pesticides, exhaust fumes, cosmetics, charcoal-broiled and fatty foods” satirized throughout Mark Leyner’s *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* (1990). Much like the so-called “railway spine” that erupted in the late-nineteenth-century’s age of industrialism and came to quietly inform various cultures, MCS and SBS encapsulate a softer postindustrial period nevertheless enveloped in the violent chemospheres of the Necromolecular Nineties.

To conclude, in the metachemic playscapes of Butt’s *Familiars* and the demented consumerism of Rammellzee’s philosophical toys; in the cheap sovereignties of the pharmacopornographic worker documented in Mueller’s autofiction; in the funky toxicity of consumerist dreamworlds that unfurl throughout Mullen’s *S*PeRM**K*T*; and in the satirical visions of Reed’s and Everett’s hyperreal ghettos, we find a 1990s avant-garde intensely predisposed to multifarious and polythetic chemical regimes of living. In turn, the “chemical economy of control” (Bray 2009: 83) that is foregrounded in this intermedial network gestures repeatedly to the molecular as a vibrant and volatile medium of both political power and political resistance at the tail-end of a chemical century.

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