

## Book Review | *Intoxicated: Race, Disability, and Chemical Intimacy Across Empire*, by Mel Y. Chen (Duke University Press, 2023)

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Mel Y. Chen's most recent book, *Intoxicated: Race, Disability, and Chemical Intimacy Across Empire* (2023) is as richly interdisciplinary as their previous book, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (2012). Both texts traverse a wide range of methods and sites of inquiry, seeking political affinities between seemingly disparate forms of oppression by tracing the circulation of materials. In *Intoxicated*, Chen extends their exploration to "the fibrillations of what we might call an affective nexus between race and disability" (1), where "chemical intimacy" is a framework for thinking intoxication, race, and disability together (2). Chen transgresses disciplinary boundaries, bringing a range of critical scholars into conversation, including Jasbir Puar's (2017) articulation of debility, Nirmala Eruvelles and Andrea Minear's (2010) work on disability and race, Jack Halberstam's (2020) concept of queer failure, along with many others. Weaving between theoretical lineages including queer, Black, disability, East Asian, decolonial, and posthumanist studies, *Intoxicated* makes important contributions to these fields while also carving its own space between and beyond them.

The depth and breadth of Chen's multi-sited analysis is rooted in the neurodiversity of the author's own mind where "there was *so much going on*" (15). The book moves through mixed scenes of affect and intoxication, including the archives of John Langdon Down, the politics of opium in China and in London's Chinatown, the Opium Wars, letters by Lin Tse Hsu to Queen Victoria, the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act in Australia, artist Fiona Foley's artworks

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*Black Opium* and *Witnessing to Silence*, scenes of police violence against Black people in the United States, the January 6 occupation of the United States Capitol in 2021, the global COVID-19 pandemic, “What Could Go Wrong?” videos on Reddit, and zombies. Employing a range of methods, from archival research, linguistics, art criticism, media analysis, to autoethnography, the book zooms between micro and macro analyses of historical and contemporary moments across geographies, wielding high theory and low culture to punctuate the interpretive frame. Chen’s discussion of intoxication acts as a binding agent, providing a flexible framework for understanding the material- affective underpinnings of social culture and governance systems.

*Intoxicated* is notable for Chen’s candid meta-commentary on their complex positional relationship to academia. Readers become aware of some of the hidden tensions of academic research when Chen writes about tense interactions with one of the John Down archivists (21–22), and the back and forth with their editors over including the story of William Hung (31–32). This challenge to academic rigidity is also reflected in their writing style: non-linear, occasionally opaque, leaving space for others to interpret and join in. Readers can engage with the book in a chronology that appeals to them, although Chen’s problematization of conventional structure and pace may equally become a barrier to access for other readers. I’m taking liberty of the flexibility in this review by presenting the chapters in reverse sequence, a (dis)order that I found conceptually generative for my own understanding.

Undisciplinarity is an integral part of Chen’s “intoxicated method” as elaborated in Chapter 3, which attends to the practices of unlearning and challenging the politics of knowledge in the academy, rejecting control, and the desire for coherence (100). They deploy the notion of a “differential being” that undoes, unlearns, and unmakes contemporary university environments through its subjectively different way of being in space, time, and sociality (101). This subjectivity interpolates categories of difference (like race and disability) while tensely navigating normative educational processes. Chen draws on Nathan Snaza and Julietta Signh’s (2021) concepts of undergrowth alongside Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s (2013) undercommons to elaborate the possibilities of critical pedagogies occurring beyond, between, and below the thresholds of educational categorization. Something is always leaking from institutional grasp.

This undisciplinarity is elaborated further in Chen’s discussion of “brain fog” and other cognitive states of difference that are excluded from methodological and epistemological legitimacy in academia. The denial of an epistemological position in academia is a point of entanglement between disability and race in Chen’s work from which cripistemology is articulated as a way of knowing through disablement/debility/intoxication. An intoxicated method simultaneously

acknowledges the realities of intellectual engagement and asks questions about how we chose to do research and come to knowledge (139).

Chapter 2 attends to agitation in a range of degrees and settings, primarily political but also pharmacological, educational, and developmental. For Chen, the imposition or allegation of compromised capacity through agitation cannot be separated from the material harms that toxicity engenders (80). Chen explores agitation's association with excess emotion and gestural repetition, tying it closely to scenes of revolution, drama, and drug use (67). In one case study of white masculinity, intoxication justifies the "evacuation of responsibility" (75) for sexualized violence. In another, a Black woman's experience of environmental contamination "functioned as aggressive debility" that resulted in her death at the hand of the police (76). Moving further into the United States political context, white supremacist agitation in the form of violence and frenzy is entangled in the settler right to occupy space (88), while simultaneously agitation justifies the arrest of Black communities (78). Here, race, disability, and performance work together in what Chen describes as a "troublingly generative way" as bodies are exposed to destruction "in conjunction with" their relationship with disability, disablement, debility, impairment, and chemicals (74). Slowness and agitation are not only metaphors but are also linked to forms of management, securitization, policing, and discipline.

In Chapter 1, Chen maps the affective function of slowness in the diagnosis and treatment of so-called "mongoloid idiocy" (now known as Down syndrome) by John Langdon Down in conjunction with East Asian racial characterizations and opium consumption. Chen draws transnational and transhistorical lines through the legacies of medicalization, governance, trade, imperialism, colonization, immigration, and labor across Australia, England, China, and the United States, in which chemicals shape social and political relations. The "twinned stories of white and Black agitation" are countered by the stereotyped slowness of East Asian American racial stereotypes, bearing the mark of opiate allegations (76). Tracing slowness as a historical character unveils the ways that race and disability are both imbued with meaning and contribute to its making (28).

Chen further weaves together intoxication, race, and disability by exploring how chemical intoxication is part of chronicity, a method of governance through temporalized modes of control. They argue that the use of opium locally to sedate patients in Down's clinic and other chemical restraint in asylums constitute a "controlled synchronizing of an institutionalized population, or a temporal calibration of developmentally delayed patients understood to be in some sense outside of time" (24). Incorporating the global frame of the Opium Wars between China and England makes visible chronicity's reach and effect as a suppressant in both places. The two populations that are suppressed here through opium are "radically geographically separate but also, perhaps, constitutionally congenial,

metonymically congealing like with like” (41). Decentering this normative temporality through a critical disability perspective and considering chemical affects, Chen posits that intoxication, rather than its absence, should be reconceptualized as the normative or default (35). Drawing on M Murphy’s (2017) concept of alterlife, Chen’s call to presuppose intoxication instead of non-toxicity moves into an environmentalist position in which the division between body and mind is blurred, categories of purity are rejected, and questions about what is known about the condition of living with/by contaminants can be explored.

In the final chapter, “Afterwards: Telling the End Not to Wait,” Chen takes us into living in the world attentive to chemical affect. They chart how smoke and viruses intermingle with and modify bodies, becoming nodal points in the continuous flow of intoxicated experience. They find potential in thinking about what’s “on/off/over the edge” or “boiling over” to describe a lived moment that feels like the “end times,” namely California during the simultaneous COVID-19 pandemic and wildfires in 2020 (155). Their work seeks kinships among and within chemical intimacies emerging from the historically situated, contemporarily multipopulated trouble that “we” are in together (155). Chen speaks from a politically embodied sense of themselves as a spatiotemporal shifting ensemble, recounting their “complex shared wish of...interlaced, intimate, and transindividual embodiment” (163). In doing so they invite us to work alongside them, identifying the ways our own subjectivities and social histories are constituting and constituted by intoxication with a hopeful opening to unexpected solidarities.

*Intoxicated* challenges the academic preference of cognitive clarity and the assumption that cognitive imprecision of thinking marks incapacity. Chen argues that practices marked by intellectual slowness, such as categorical blurring or a sensorial study through different experiences of time, give way to different paths beyond/below educationally cultivated agencies. Overall, I expect Chen’s writing to be generative for academics across disciplines—but it also opens out to those of different intellectual and artistic pathways who have interests in thinking bodies and chemicals together.

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