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## Special Forum | The Molecular Intimacies of Empire

### Introduction [\[pdf\]](#)

*Hsuan L. Hsu and David J. Vázquez, Editors*

#### Abstracts

##### **“The Making of the American Calorie and the Metabolic Metrics of Empire” | Athia N. Choudhury [\[pdf\]](#)**

This essay develops a critical genealogy of caloric biocitizenship that reframes personal experiences with calorie counting and fat-phobic discourses that stigmatize the bodies and pleasures of racialized, working-class people, especially female bodied and fem-identifying people. Tracing practices of energy management and bodily discipline from colonial military outposts, nineteenth-century domestic manuals, dietetic discourses in the Philippines, and Native American Boarding Schools to a range of reform projects that framed calories as a tool for inculcating responsible eating through the domestic practices of white, bourgeois women, I highlight the continuities between colonial subjection and modern biocitizenship, as well as the ways in which the putatively objective metric of the calorie positioned the New American Woman as a powerful catalyst for policing race in the intimate domain of the home.

##### **“Consider the Coconut: Scientific Agriculture and the Racialization of Risk in the American Colonial Philippines” | Theresa Ventura [\[pdf\]](#)**

This article invokes the “molecular intimacies of empire” to illuminate the links between the superfood status of coconut oil and plantation labor in the American colonial Philippines. Prior to the American occupation in 1898, coconuts were a local crop that offered small growers a degree of protection from capitalist agriculture. A mere two decades later, coconut plantations occupied more than two million acres of land, copra – the dried kernels from which oil is pressed – was the archipelago’s third major export industry, and the industry employed at least four million people along a commodity chain that included prisoners, landed planters, and oil refiners. Transimperial tropical research stations, economic botany, and penal farms propelled this change. US-run prison plantations in the southern Philippines served as living laboratories for the racial management of labor and the bioengineering of trees bearing fruit all year. Though the copra trade comprised production of modern extractive capitalism, American dairy farmers and vegetable oil producers racialized copra imports as a tropical threat to the white body politic during the global Great Depression. Yet this conflation of coconut oil and the imagined tropical primitive positioned coconut oil for its re-rendering as an unrefined natural health food. By connecting the colonial plantation to the coconut’s superfood status, the article shows how discourses of risk are racialized and consumed. Indeed, is not the body of the laborer that risks exposure to fertilizers and pesticides nor the loss of biodiversity that North American consumers consider when asked if coconuts are a health food.

##### **“Birdseye’s Frosted Possession: Processing, Storing, and Transmitting the Gift of Inuit Thermocultural Knowledge” | Marcel Brousseau [\[pdf\]](#)**

On August 12, 1930, Clarence Birdseye patented his “Method of Preparing Food Products,” a “quick” freezing machine that “for the first time produced...a compacted, quick frozen block of comestibles...which can be stored...transported...and...after being thawed, reassumes its original condition.” Birdseye’s innovation in the frozen food industry is typically historicized as a progress narrative, wherein the lone inventor masters the molecular forces of water, salts, metal, cardboard, flesh, and plant matter. This teleology is further contextualized within an exploration account, wherein Birdseye’s curiosity is piqued during his years as a fur-trader who observes the Labrador Inuit practice of quick-freezing fish. In this article, I use Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s concept of “white possessive logics” to interrogate how Birdseye’s racialized assumption of ownership dislocated Inuit epistemologies into industrial metanarratives. To trace the possession, but also the survivance, of Labrador Inuit thermoculture, I reconsider frozen food as a communication system, characterized by dynamics of processing, storage, and transmission. Within this system, food is thinkable as data—information and gift—and frozen food is understandable as an Inuit gift of knowledge and sustenance provided to, and unreciprocated by, Birdseye. Comparatively reading Birdseye’s papers and patents with ethnographical and autobiographical Labrador Inuit and Inuit-Metis narratives, I rethink the historic event of knowledge-sharing that gave Birdseye his thermocultural inspiration. Furthermore, I consider how Labrador Inuit communities reappropriate the mechanical freezer as a traditional technology, and I argue that the globalization of frozen food technology poses an ongoing challenge of reciprocity for Birdseye’s white possession.

##### **“From Radiation Effects to Consanguineous Marriages: American Geneticists and Colonial Science in the Atomic Age” | Aiko Takeuchi-**

**Demirci** [\[pdf\]](#)

In 1947, the US National Academy of Sciences established the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission (ABCC) and sent American scientists to Hiroshima and Nagasaki to investigate the delayed effects of the atomic bombs among survivors. James Neel, medical professor at the University of Michigan, headed the genetics team of ABCC whose mission was to measure the possible genetic mutations caused by radiation. After the conclusion of the ABCC studies, Neel and his scientific team continued to use the resources and subjects in southern Japan to conduct research on the genetics of consanguineous marriages in Japan. This article explores how both the ABCC genetic studies and consanguinity studies reflected American fears about rising mutations in an apocalyptic atomic age. Studies on inbreeding illuminated the nature and extent of mutations in a “pure” genetic population. Furthermore, the Japanese data were used for genetic counseling back in America, helping to address the American public’s concerns for increasing interracial marriages between whites and Asians. Despite Neel and other American geneticists’ attempt to disassociate their work from racist eugenics studies of the past, postwar genetic studies took on the same practices, institutions, and goals as their predecessors—to ensure the wellbeing of the white race. Neel’s ABCC and subsequent studies, all bankrolled by the US Atomic Energy Commission, exploited American military and financial power by taking advantage of their “intimate” relationships with nonwhite, “deviant” subjects.

**“Viruses, Vaccines, and the Erotics of Risk in Latinx HIV Stories and Covid-19” | Suzanne Bost**  
[\[pdf\]](#)

In 2019, I published *Shared Selves: Latinx Memoir and Ethical Alternatives to Humanism* (University of Illinois Press), in which I discuss contagion as a metaphor for embracing our shared materiality with others. Six months later, during the Covid-19 pandemic, neighbors were crossing streets to avoid each other. Social distancing is, counterintuitively, asking us to view separation and seclusion as forms of solidarity. But how can we be solid if we are oriented against each other? Isolation itself has become contagious: sharing repulsion and rejection, measuring six feet of “social” distance from others. These spaces are made up of a variety of immaterial entities—ideology, fear, caring, and faith—and material ones like invisible microbes. This essay revisits my writings about radical kinship and shared materiality in the works of Tim Dean and John Rechy in light of this emerging ethics of distance. This focus is particularly important today as contagion, following history, is realigned with racism and xenophobia. Latinx communities are disproportionately affected by inadequate healthcare and disproportionately labor in “Covid clusters” such as meat-packing plants and automobile facilities. To rethink my earlier insights about Rechy, I turn to Rafael Campo (whose queer perspective as both poet and physician during the AIDS epidemic has something to teach us about the erotics, aesthetics, and microbiotics of risk) and Julia Álvarez (whose novel *Saving the World* shows how care and risk might intersect).

**“TGI Fridays in Kandahar: Fast Food, Military Contracting, and the Intimacies of Force in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars” | Zaynab Quadri**  
[\[pdf\]](#)

During the height of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2004 to 2014, US military bases featured an amenity both familiar and unexpected: name-brand fast food (NBFF), such as TGI Friday’s, Burger King, Subway, and Pizza Hut. Drawing on firsthand accounts from soldiers, journalists, and bloggers, as well as academic literatures on critical food studies and cultures of imperialism, this article analyzes the circulation of NBFF in Iraq and Afghanistan as a mechanism by which to sustain US imperialism. It argues that NBFF generates the intimacy of “home” for US soldier-consumers and is deployed as enticing inducement for an all-volunteer military force to perform the necessary labor to maintain US empire across two war zones. NBFF simultaneously provided a profitable opportunity for the expansion of US corporations and capital, as contractors and subcontractors from across the global supply chain were mobilized to provide easy access to these comfort foods. Thus, the article traces the ways in which the chemosensory experience of consumption has served as a way of inducing some bodies to serve—to maim and kill other bodies—while requiring still other bodies to serve in mobilizing and facilitating the logistics of these encounters.

**“Visions of Consent: Nunavummiut Against the Exploitation of ‘Resource Frontiers’” | Amber Hickey** [\[pdf\]](#)

Despite a long history of colonial, military, and extractive industry imposition on the land, waters, and people of Inuit Nunangat, resistance to such efforts is thriving. Through highlighting the work of The Place Names Program and Arnait Video Productions, I show how *Nunavummiut* (the people living in Nunavut) employ visual media to publicly wage their place-based knowledge as a mode of creative intervention against military and extractive forces, and the ways in which such forces have permeated Inuit bodies, lands, and waters. So successful are these visual acts of resistance that they compel southerners to reevaluate their approaches to northern development so drastically that projects are abandoned or no longer seen as viable. In putting these strategies into practice, Inuit engage with state-

sanctioned systems of law and governance, but ultimately reshape these structures to better suit their own needs and the needs of the Arctic land and sea. The maps produced by the Place Names Program and films produced by Arnait Video Productions resist visions of the Arctic as a wasteland and of Inuit bodies as pollutable, instead putting forward visions of consent and reciprocity. Ultimately, I argue that seeing the Arctic in ways that challenge military and extractive representations and center Inuit epistemologies and voices, plays a significant role in halting the continued molecular and chemical colonization of Inuit lands and bodies. In other words, visual media is a tool for resisting unwanted extractive and military bodily intimacies, and insisting on consent before entry of these toxic presences.

**“Affective Chemistries of Care: Slow Activism and the Limits of the Molecular in Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*” |**

**Rachel C. Lee** [\[pdf\]](#)

This essay explores care work outlined and performed as emotional and erotic support labor in Ocean Vuong’s novel, *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). The illnesses around which Vuong stages salient scenes of care work are not those easily addressed by surgery or a course of antibiotics. Instead, the novel focalizes those who are “[sick] in the brains”<sup>1</sup>—diagnosed with a mood disorder like bipolar, observed for behaviors of PTSD, addicted to narcotics, or grieving the loss of a body part. The unique contribution of Vuong’s novel to those interested in health and environmental humanities, disability studies, refugee studies, and reproductive labor, I argue, requires noticing that its portraits of care work come interleaved with its depictions of atmospheric dangers. Those atmospheric dangers include weather effects as well as sequelae from military weapons deployment and the circulation of slowly violating chemicals. In relation to the theme of molecular intimacies, I introduce several heuristic terms: *molecular entreaty*, *affective chemistries of care*, *hypo-interventions* and *intimate* or *slow activism*, the latter two building on the work of science and technology scholars. Drawing out *On Earth’s* focalization of irruptions of care in atmospheres dense with chemistry, this essay both models a humanistic, decolonial and intersectional method that (re)values crip practical knowledge, and limns the novel’s provocation as to the political limits of queer interracial intimacy.

**“The Materials of Art and the Legacies of Colonization: A Conversation with Beatrice Glow and Sandy Rodriguez” |**

**Hsuan L. Hsu and David J. Vázquez** [\[pdf\]](#)

A conversation with the artists Beatrice Glow and Sandy Rodriguez, whose work reckons with the imperial and colonial histories that underlie conventional materials of art and aesthetic experience. Glow and Rodriguez share insights about their artistic processes, their experiments with pigment-making, scent production, field research, and collaboration, and how they have reflected on and enacted alternatives to the transnational sourcing of pigments, dyes, scents, and tastes.

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<sup>1</sup> Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), 122.