



# Toxic Bodies

## Ticks, Trans Bodies, and the Ethics of Response-Ability in Art and Activist Writing

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**Abstract** Tracing ticks in two different artworks and Leslie Feinberg's activist writing, Wibke Straube takes their lead in this article from philosopher Donna Haraway and her suggestion to think about engagement with the environment through an "ethics of response-ability." By deploying close readings, Straube discusses the affects represented in the video installation *Act on Instinct* (2013) by Elin Magnusson, a sequence of the film *Something Must Break* (2014) by Ester Martin Bergsmark, and blog entries from the "Lyme Series" by the late trans activist Leslie Feinberg. Through these works, Straube explores the meaning of this correlation between ticks and transing bodies for environmental ethics as well as for the forging of livable lives for trans people. Toxicity surfaces as a link in these works. The notion of feminist figuration, developed by philosopher Rosi Braidotti among others, allows Straube to discuss toxicity as a material-discursive figuration, which highlights how human societies in a Western context approach the body of the Other, in this case the transgender body as a human Other and the tick as animal Other. As a figuration, toxicity then becomes a shared meeting site that helps to problematize the Western pathologization of trans bodies and asks what ethics emerge in this proximity between ticks and trans bodies. Toxicity exists in the discussed works in particular as a complex material-discursive trajectory. Although some discourses on toxicity uphold social hierarchies and racist assumptions, as illustrated by Mel Y. Chen, for example, the works here seem to reappropriate the status of the toxic body as a strategy for adjustment and alliance and a site of ethical engagement with the world. The tick is Straube's guide in weaving together stories of different bodies and of what Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren call the "unloved other."

**Keywords** transgender, ticks, art, activism, ethics, affects.

Nature matters for transgender studies because of how we map  
(and are mapped) along boundaries of inside and out, natural and unnatural.

—Oliver Bendorf, *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1–2 (2014)

Nature held me close and seemed to find no fault with me.

—Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*

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## Toxic Bodies

By performing transecological close readings,<sup>1</sup> I investigate in this article the ethics as well as feelings that emerge in different artworks and activist writings. Each in their own way, the discussed works consider meetings between ticks and trans bodies and their shared existence in a Western context as toxic entities. As a trans scholar, who identifies as a non-binary gender studies researcher in the field of visual cultural studies, affect studies, and environmental humanities, the convergence of these two bodies in the artworks and in Leslie Feinberg's life, as well as in their writing, caught my attention and made me curious to explore further. I am intrigued here particularly by how the trans body encounters the contact with this animal and possibly links to it through a shared history of being read through a lens of animality and dehumanization.

The bodies that appear in the artworks are trans, or *transing*, in various ways, in terms of gender but also species embodiment. *Trans* here refers to an ongoing action, not the descriptive adjective. The *Women's Studies Quarterly* special issue "Trans-," edited by Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, suggests *trans* as a processual term, as *transing*, a verb that explains the "practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces."<sup>2</sup> *Trans* and *transing* in this article, then, refer, on the one hand, to transgender as a gendered movement away from birth-assigned sex toward various trans positions,<sup>3</sup> including non-binary and/or generally gender-non-conforming identities, as well as expressing, on the other hand, an understanding of trans beyond gender-transitioning bodies.<sup>4</sup> The trans community, sometimes (although not in this article) also written as trans\* to emphasize the inclusiveness of the term, is based on the notion of *trans* as an umbrella term for a range of gender positions. Consequently, when addressing the trans community in this article, I refer to a large diversity of gender variability including and exceeding transgender, transsexual, non-binary, genderfluid, agender, as well as—sometimes—queer, gay, and lesbian positionings.<sup>5</sup>

I will open my inquiry with a discussion of the video installation *Act on Instinct* by Swedish artist Elin Magnusson (13 min., Sweden, 2013). The video was first exhibited in Magnusson's solo exhibition in 2013 in Norrköping, Sweden, and then in 2014 as part of a group exhibition, *Bortom det bedrägligt säkra* (Beyond that which is deceptively safe), which featured four Swedish feminist artists in the regional museum in Karlstad, Sweden. In this exhibition all four artists engaged with the relationality between nature, animals, and female and/or queer human bodies. Magnusson's installation reflects on, among other themes, a tick bite through a discussion of her feelings of love for and

1. Bendorf, "Nature"; Seymour, "Trans Ecology and the Transgender Road Narrative"; Straube, "Posthuman Ecological Intimacy."

2. Stryker, Currah, and Moore, "Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?" 13.

3. Enke, "Introduction," 5.

4. Stryker, Currah, and Moore, "Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?" 13.

5. Bettcher, "Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues."

disappointment in this animal. In addressing these emotions she ponders questions of relating as well as of the killing of this animal. Magnusson's work presents a human dressed in a deer costume, a trans-species figure, wandering through nature accompanied by voice-overs. The second artwork explored here consists of a sequence from the award-winning feature-length fiction film *Something Must Break* (Swedish original *Nånting måste gå sönder*) by the Swedish non-binary director Ester Martin Bergsmark (2014). In an approximately three-minute sequence, the two main characters—one trans, one non-trans, or cis—seduce each other by inspecting each other's bodies for ticks. Human passion and desire are the feelings that materialize for the characters in this scene. These surprising feelings help me to further explore relating to the Other and to Haraway's term *response-ability* in the proximity between ticks and trans bodies.<sup>6</sup> Finally, I will discuss Leslie Feinberg's activist writing on Lyme disease in the "Lyme Series" and how anger emerges in and through Feinberg's writing, as well as the grief and belonging in the trans community's bereavement following Feinberg's untimely death, ostensibly caused by the bite of a tick infected with *Borrelia* bacteria.<sup>7</sup> Feinberg, a historian and trans activist, struggled for decades both with the illness and with the gender-biased medical system as a genderqueer, masculine-presenting lesbian and trans-masculine person.<sup>8</sup> The discussion of Feinberg's writing leads me to consider collective grief and the question of how far the ethics of response-ability can extend to queer world-making practices that invite the human and animal into a shared site of toxicity.

Ticks—arachnids of the larger group of arthropods (invertebrate animals)—are ectoparasites, or external parasites. According to a recently published popular science article in the *Guardian* by zoologist Mackenzie Kwak, research and scientific knowledge reflect how ticks are coming to be perceived as a dangerous if not deadly animal and possibly even a public health crisis.<sup>9</sup> Their small bodies are often occupied by a wide array of human pathogens, which threaten the health and possibly life of humans as well as other animals.<sup>10</sup> Ticks are distributed around the world, although they are more limited in areas with colder climates. High-risk areas in Europe are located in the warmer eastern and southern regions. Three large groups of ticks are identified in these regions: two types of hard ticks, *Ixodes* (249 species) and *Dermacentor* (36 species), and the soft-bodied ticks *Ornithodoros* (37 species).<sup>11</sup> The approximately 3mm *Ixodes*

6. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 71.

7. Leslie Feinberg started to use non-binary pronouns in addition to *she* in the last years of their life. Generally, non-binary pronouns such as *ze*, *hy*, *xe*, and particularly *they* have been more frequently used since roughly 2010.

8. For many trans and non-binary people, different identities and positionings surface at different stages of their lives. Sometimes these also exist parallel to one another, despite their seemingly divergent meanings, e.g., *lesbian* and *trans-masculine*.

9. Kwak, "Forget Ebola."

10. Kwak, "Forget Ebola."

11. Levin, "*Ixodes* spp"; Meghna, "Ticks."

*scapularis*, *I. ricinus* (also called the deer tick), and *I. persulcatus* are the vectors of Lyme disease. The illness is transmitted during a tick of the *Ixodes* family's blood feeding—in Europe mostly *I. ricinus*, and to a lesser extent *I. persulcatus*.<sup>12</sup> Lyme disease caused by the *Borrelia burgdorferi* bacteria and the viral infection tick-borne encephalitis (TBE) are the most commonly known ailments transmitted by ticks; other illnesses include ehrlichia, babesia, anaplasmosis, bartonella, rocky mountain spotted fever, borrelia ionestari, and several other recently emerging diseases caused by viruses, bacteria, protozoa, and nematodes.<sup>13</sup> All infections occur during the tick's feeding: the tick's retractable mouthparts, which the tick sinks into the body of its host, are adapted for piercing skin and sucking blood.<sup>14</sup> For one to three days, the tick stays strongly attached to feed on the host's blood, lymph, and digested tissue.<sup>15</sup> If the tick is infected—and here it is important to remember, it often also isn't—the multiple days of exchange between the pathogens in the tick's stomach and the host's blood flow can lead to infections.<sup>16</sup>

The artworks and activist writing that I discuss in this article all address trans and tick bodies through the emotions they incite as well as the ethical practices that are drawn from the meeting of these bodies. In this context, the material urges me to ponder the coming together of these two disparate bodies, ticks and human trans bodies, and the material-discursive framing of both as parasitic. According to cultural studies and critical race studies scholar Neel Ahuja, the homosexual body—and thus also the trans body—presents an “old metaphor for the parasite itself.”<sup>17</sup> In this metaphor, racist, homophobic, and transphobic logics intertwine. This historical association of the term *parasite* with queer and trans bodies links to race, sexuality, gender, class, health, and ability. In this clearly trans- and homophobic as well as racist analogy, the use of the term *parasite* requires even further explanation. Parasites are host-dependent organisms that can infect their host with diseases.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, in a Western context, trans and queer people, especially trans people of color, despite their hateful rendering as “parasitic,” are not the predator but all too often the victim of hate crimes and social marginalization. In the metaphorical use of parasite, “genocidal, fascistic, and xenophobic logics” resonate.<sup>19</sup>

Hence, the trans body, rendered as parasitic, is framed as a threat to cisheteronormative future generations via genetic contamination. Such a problematic interpretation

12. Lindgren and Jaenson, “Lyme borreliosis.”

13. Cameron, “Ticks Basics”; Lindgren and Jaenson, “Lyme borreliosis.”

14. Ruppert, Fox, and Barnes, *Invertebrate Zoology*, 590–95.

15. Anderson, “Natural History of Ticks.”

16. Lindgren and Jaenson, “Lyme borreliosis.”

17. Rohy, *Anachronism and Its Others. Sexuality, Race, Temporality*, quoted in Ahuja, “Intimate Atmospheres,” 269. Historian Susan Stryker explains how gender nonconformity and homosexuality have only been separated (and the terms literally invented) in the twentieth century. Stryker, *Transgender History*, 34.

18. Castro and Olson, “Introduction to Parasitology.”

19. Ahuja, “Intimate Atmospheres,” 369. Also Abe Weil, by discussing Black Lives Matter activism in his text through a Deleuzian framework, addresses particularly the intersecting of Black and trans bodies in discourses of dehumanization. Weil, “Trans\*versal Animacies and the Mattering of Black Trans\*political Life,” 191–202.

is reflected in the still-current practices of compulsory sterilization of trans people who wish to change their legal gender markers.<sup>20</sup> In the Europe-focused study by Transgender Europe (TGEU) in 2017, twenty-one countries were found to practice this violation of human rights, although a growing awareness of trans rights has moved many countries to alter their approach.<sup>21</sup> In March 2018, Sweden confirmed financial compensation for the approximately eight hundred trans people sterilized in Sweden between 1972 and 2013. Remarkably, to this day, Sweden is the only country to have taken such a step. Furthermore, the history of compulsory sterilization is closely linked to the abhorrent history of eugenics in the twentieth century under which trans people, among many other socially marginalized groups such as indigenous people and disabled people, were excluded from reproduction.<sup>22</sup> This historically based framing of the trans body as “contaminating” is bound to a Euro-American context in which trans embodiment has been medicalized and pathologized as a mental disorder throughout the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup>

Rendered as contaminating and parasitic, the trans body is historically left dehumanized; it becomes a less-than-human living being, a near-animal entity. To deploy the fitting concept coined by Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren, it becomes an “unloved other.” This concept is commonly applied to the animal world to identify those that are the “disliked and actively vilified others.”<sup>24</sup> I would like to propose also applying this concept to those humans who are often dehumanized and, as investigated here, specifically to trans bodies. I would argue that trans people are the unloved Other in their respective social surroundings and are met sometimes with indifference but often stronger feelings such as fear and disgust—resulting, for instance, in the painfully high suicide rates within the trans community and fatal acts of anti-trans violence against trans people.

I wish to utilize Donna Haraway’s notion of response-ability in order to consider the ethics that arise in the correlation that allows these two unloved Others—ticks and human trans bodies—to meet in the artworks and writing discussed in this article.<sup>25</sup> How do these ethics apply to the human who is dehumanized, murdered, or neglected and medically uncared for, as in Feinberg’s case, or to an animal that—in cases in which it is infected—can be lethal to humans and other animals? Who responds to whom? Beyond a dualism of victim and attacker, what is the meaning of this meeting in these works in the face of trans livability? Response-ability is as much a curious as a

20. WHO, “Eliminating Forced, Coercive, and Otherwise Involuntary Sterilization,” 5.

21. The Trans Rights Europe Map and Index 2017, May 18, 2017, available online at [tgeu.org/trans-rights-map-2017/](https://tgeu.org/trans-rights-map-2017/).

22. Honkasalo, “When Boys Will *Not* Be Boys,” 271.

23. For example, see Burke, “Resisting Pathology”; for further discussions of trans in a non-Western context, see, e.g., Binaohan, *Decolonizing Trans/gender 101*; and Aizura et al., “Decolonizing the Transgender Imaginary,” a *TSQ* special issue.

24. Rose and van Dooren, “Unloved Others,” 1.

25. For response-ability, see Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 71.

receptive mode in regard to the Other.<sup>26</sup> It entertains an ethics that regards subjectivity beyond the imaginary of the Cartesian subject as independent and autonomous. Instead, it features a subject of interdependence, co-relationality, and permeability—thus a posthuman subject that sees itself embedded within a multispecies world rather than as the emperor of unruly nature. As an ethical mode, it is something like a practice guide for an alternative form of relating. It asks how different animals—humans and other animals—meet, and how, what, and who they can become in this encounter. There is response, not just reaction, in the encounter between the animal and the human. How do ticks and trans bodies encounter each other here and how do they respond?

I would like to suggest in this article that this encounter between these two bodily entities, ticks and trans bodies, invites consideration of the unloved Other—the one that seems disposable, possibly even killable. I also contemplate a posthuman alliance that steps in where there is a lack of support and cooperation within the human context. In a society in which trans bodies are routinely dismissed, killed, and uncared for, the tick's response might be an invitation into a new, toxic sociality. This is not a cozy intimacy with a furry animal companion but a queer sociality between two unloved Others.<sup>27</sup> According to Haraway, response happens between kin.<sup>28</sup> The relationality between two toxic bodies draws attention to the lack of care for unloved Others and the potential to change this.

Discussing the human body in proximity to the animal is a tricky endeavour. The human has often been aligned with the animal in order to dehumanize it and to justify violence against human minority bodies. The need for rethinking the proximity of animal and human bodies has for instance been discussed in the special issue of *Angelaki*, edited by Eliza Steinbock, Marianna Szygielska, and Anthony Wagner.<sup>29</sup> The authors interrogate here the problematics of “animacy hierarchies” and question how humanness and animality are constructed through particular linkages with the non-human Other.<sup>30</sup> To follow trans studies scholar Abraham Weil's article in the same issue, the dehumanization of the human body opens up an explicit connection between blackness and transness.<sup>31</sup> Yet, it can also, as Weil insists, “serve to rearrange the human.”<sup>32</sup> Consequently, it is a central aim of this article to inquire how the animal in proximity to the

26. Lorimer and Davies, “Interdisciplinary Conversations on Interspecies Encounters.”

27. The terms *toxic* and *queer sociality* overlap as the relationality between the tick and the human trans body is queer in how it offers a non-normative, trans-species, almost uncategorizable sociality. A note on the side, “tick” (*Zecke*) is in the German context a slang word that punks, including queer punks, use as a self-description.

28. Haraway, “Anthropocene,” 161.

29. Steinbock et al., “Thinking Linking,” 1.

30. Steinbock et al., “Thinking Linking,” 1.

31. Weil, “Trans\*versal Animacies and the Mattering of Black Trans\*political Life,” 199.

32. Weil, “Trans\*versal Animacies and the Mattering of Black Trans\*political Life,” 199.

human body, joined in the toxic sociality of the unloved Others, contests racist and anti-Semitic logics instead of feeding them. In the concept of the unloved Other I suggest to see a potential for both human and animal bodies to create livable worlds beyond the world that has excluded and neglected them. I will return to the complexity of this discussion in my discussion of two artworks and Feinberg's activist writing.

Inspired by queer/feminist artist and art historian Renate Lorenz as well as philosopher Antke Engel, in this article I “quarrel about the toxic as a means of queering subjectivity and sociality,”<sup>33</sup> which also resonates with Mel Y. Chen's approach to the hurtful “antisocial” aspects of toxicity and the potential of finding new relations, “extant socialities,” in learning to live with the things and life forms that are toxic.<sup>34</sup> Coming back to quarreling, to *quarrel* also means to relate and to form a response. As a toxic material-discursive storyteller, the tick responds in my material by showing me different possible contact zones with other toxic bodies that connect in odd and unexpected ways. I engage here with the notion of toxicity as a feminist figuration. It thereby becomes more than the everyday discourse on toxicity. Conventionally understood, toxicity is a poison that harms organisms—humans, animals, and more broadly the environment. Parasites do the same, specifically to other organisms.<sup>35</sup> Their pathogens act as toxic substances to the host body.

According to Braidotti, a feminist figuration presents a “cartographic map of power-relations and thus can also help identify possible sites and strategies of resistance.”<sup>36</sup> It is, as Braidotti emphasizes, “a political fiction”<sup>37</sup> that carries its past and its present into a future of rethinking the formations of subjectivity, bodies, reason, and emotion. Toxicity as a feminist figuration, then, can be read as a phenomenon that delivers its history of contamination and impurity into the present and future practices of conceptual and material resistances, reappropriations, denormalizations, and reformulations. Toxicity as a feminist figuration is removed from its literal meaning. The notion of toxicity performs a tightrope walk between a reappropriated meaning of toxicity as a “near-metaphor”—different from Braidotti's definitions of figuration—but also as a material entity in how it has shaped certain bodies, and how these bodies have suffered and continue to experience violence against themselves, as they are bound by stigma. Toxicity is, in this article, metaphor as well as matter, in its historical meaning as well as in its potential to carve out future spaces for those bodies rendered toxic, unloved, polluting, and parasitic.

Finally, by exploring the connection between ticks and trans bodies, I build on previous work that has discussed the tick in the context of posthumanities. Central

33. Engel and Lorenz, “Toxic Assemblages, Queer Socialities,” 5.

34. Chen, “Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections,” 282.

35. Nordqvist, “What's to Know about Parasites?”

36. Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 3.

37. Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 7.



Figure 1. Elin Magnusson, *Act on Instinct* (2013). Courtesy the artist.

discussions include the engagement with kinship and faith in ticks by environmental philosopher James Hatley as well as cultural geographer Jacob Bull's consideration of ticks as noncharismatic animals beyond the "geographies of the nearby," as he calls the complex structures that tie certain animals to humans.<sup>38</sup> Although their work is vital to my understanding of ticks, I shift my emphasis by specifically discussing trans bodies in contact with ticks. I do this in order to consider the significance of the meeting between ticks and trans bodies and what this can entail for trans and/or queer bodies in a posthuman future, trans-livability, and queer world-making.

### Relating to the Other

The video installation *Act on Instinct* (2013) by artist Elin Magnusson covered a full wall in the large exhibition space where she exhibited her work in 2014, for the second time. The wall-filling projection was flanked by three enormous bird's nests woven from branches. In the fifteen minutes of the video, the artist takes up a range of topics, one of which is her reflections on the love of a tick for her body. The voice-over of the artist is accompanied by the film's visuality in which a human dressed in a deer costume made of soft, synthetic fur roams through the forest and meadows in a Swedish rural landscape (fig. 1). The deer lingers in mossy patches and watches grazing horses in the

38. Bull, "Between Ticks and People"; Hatley, "Blood Intimacies and Biodicy."

early morning fog in a damp forest clearing; it drags along a bundle of stuffed animals—six tiny deer the size of the deer’s hooves—from strings attached to its wrist. The heightened orchestration of environmental sounds complements the scenery: the gurgling of a stream, wind in the trees, accompanied by a soundtrack of calm acoustic guitar music.

While the accompanying synopsis of this video on Magnusson’s website describes the artist’s questions around parenthood, the film leaves space for a wider reading into the realm of queer kinship and response-ability for and within this formation.<sup>39</sup> In her voice-over, which is audible throughout most of the film, the artist discusses appropriate handling of the tick. She refers to the tick as an animal that seems to bite her out of love but that she doesn’t love back. Big animals should take care of smaller ones, she says. Someone has told her that. But she continues to wonder, must she really care for a small, bloodthirsty animal that hurts her? Long shots of the forest supplement these reflections; the trans-species deer/human drags the tiny deer along, meanders over rocks, meadows, and forested hills. In the voice-over, the artist reflects, “When the ticks bite me I feel tenderness for them at first. They love me, I can tell, so why not love them right back? But in the end I get angry however, and kill them. Why should I let something that bites me live? You say that larger animals should take care of smaller ones and this everyone knows. However if the small ones behave badly I think this ought to be up for discussion.”<sup>40</sup> These ethical considerations are closely connected to Magnusson’s feelings toward the ticks. Feelings such as love, but also anger, feed her concerns until the question arises about consequences for these potentially attacking small creatures. The big deer continues to play tenderly with the tiny deer, tying them to birch trees, dipping them in a cold stream, or stroking their fur. Kindness, tentative rejection, and playful aggression alternate with an ambivalent feeling about the fellowship of the tiny deer, seemingly echoing Magnusson’s conflicting feelings about the ticks. Just like the tiny deer, the ticks seem to need the big one, wanting to be close to it but also needing to take something from it that the big deer is not willing to give.

The big deer’s interaction with the tiny deer reflects on response and response-ability in relation to others—smaller animals—and how this is also always up for discussion, to the point of asking what is ethical when facing a contagious animal that “behaves badly,” as the artist argues in the voice-over. In Haraway’s discussion on response-ability, she explores the concept of killability.<sup>41</sup> She proposes killing as a “constitutive part of interspecies relationality”—one cannot avoid killing.<sup>42</sup> To follow Haraway further, “there is no way of living that is not also a way of someone, not just something, else dying differentially.”<sup>43</sup> Killability is not a unidirectional concept—the one who kills can

39. Parts of the video are accessible on the artist’s website: [www.elinmagnusson.com/act-on-instinct/](http://www.elinmagnusson.com/act-on-instinct/) (accessed January 16, 2019).

40. The voice-over language is Swedish. The English quote is based on the video’s embedded subtitles.

41. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 80.

42. Mehrabi, *Making Death Matter*, 152, in reference to Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 81.

43. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 80.

always also be killed. It is a matter of ethical reflection to consider this rather than to normalize it. The tick itself is one of the best illustrations of this fact.

In a recent study, feminist science and technology scholar Tara Mehrabi calls killability a story about “agential asymmetries.”<sup>44</sup> Her discussion focuses on the ethics of killing fruit flies in Alzheimer’s research laboratories; by investigating how different animals and organisms become killable differently, she argues for the fly as a material and discursive marker of boundaries.<sup>45</sup> The tick is a similar boundary-disrupting figure. Mehrabi’s explorations of fruit flies in the lab enable the question of what kind of ethics are involved when killing small yet tormenting animals. Ticks evoke fear and disgust and, apart from the artist’s brief affection, seldom compassion. The tick is an easily killed, unloved Other. According to Neel Ahuja in his research on mosquitos, the small body becomes a predator of the human, “forcing strange ecologies of attraction and feeling even as it poses risks of debility and death.”<sup>46</sup> Like mosquitos, ticks attack, out of love, hunger, or simply existential survival. However, while they might carry diseases, they also evoke a range of feelings: disgust, fear, and irritation in particular. Echoing Hatley, I wonder why these creatures can’t just be extinct.<sup>47</sup>

For my whole life I have been fairly afraid of tick bites. Our dog always carried ticks inside the house, yet I played unprotected by insect repellents in the garden, the forests, and surrounding fields throughout my childhood. Strangely, I was never bitten, not until I was in my early thirties and a very small tick in a friend’s garden on an early spring morning in Tuscany found its way into the space between my toes. It did not linger. Its sharp teeth broke the skin immediately. I felt its bite like a needle. Disgusted and full of fear of one of those unluckily infected ticks, I removed the small critter. The rest of our week there I spent in long pants snugly tucked into my socks. Though ticks never keep me out of the forest, they do keep me from inviting the neighbor’s cat into my kitchen. She always leaves a few small hungry ones crawling on the floor. I guess they know that the warmth inside the house is an indicator of an abundance of food—a much bigger and possibly tastier host body than the skinny cat.

I have a hard time feeling empathy for ticks, and mostly sense a strong aversion even when only writing about them. To follow my argument of toxic alliances between different human and nonhuman unloved Others, I want to emphasize here that, even though I consider ticks as toxic companions to my own genderqueer self, I feel no sympathy for them. Even though I am interested in the tick’s toxic rendering, I remain hostile toward the animal itself. Writing about ticks in this article is in itself a peculiarly affective experience infused by disgust—the act of doing research on this arthropod means looking at a range of images of ticks crawling on human skin (interestingly mostly white skin, which is a question in itself) or being held between tweezers for a

44. Mehrabi, *Making Death Matter*, 153.

45. Mehrabi, *Making Death Matter*, 153.

46. Freccero, quoted in Ahuja, “Intimate Atmospheres,” 371.

47. Hatley, “Blood Intimacies and Biodicy.”

close-up camera shot, altogether a challenge in dealing with my dislike of this creature. Bull explains that the affective reaction of disgust might be enhanced by the delay between the bite and its discovery, which also builds on the fact of proximity. It is the “horror of being brought into intimate contact with what is considered to be another category of being.”<sup>48</sup> Ticks certainly are “another category.” Humans are constantly trying to environmentally, ecologically, taxonomically, and bodily distance themselves from ticks.<sup>49</sup> The tick bites its way through human skin and clings to the surface without falling (or being easily wiped) off, causing irritation and disgust. Removing a tick is a complicated and risky task. They cling to the flesh as if it is a matter of life or death—and it is. And that is exactly what it can be to the human as well. When removing the ticks from our skin, we have to be careful not to upset them too much, or they threaten to eject their stomach contents into our bloodstream: free-floating *Borrelia* bacteria and other pathogens might infect our bodies and make us sick in unforeseeable ways,<sup>50</sup> sometimes irreversible and untreatable, depending on one’s financial means for long-term antibiotic treatment; access to experienced, unbiased medical doctors; and the antibiotic resistance of the bacteria.<sup>51</sup> Yet, of course, not all ticks are infected or, even if carrying human pathogens, able to transmit their pathogens to the host’s body. For the human or bitten animal the effects are a question of luck or of finding and removing the tick in time.

Coming back to ethics, it is in this moment when the tick becomes irritating that Elin Magnusson asks, “Why should I let something that bites me live?” In a commentary on Haraway’s *When Species Meet*, cultural geographers Jamie Lorimer and Gail Davies ask, how should “we live with others who are not at all like us, and might actively dislike us?” How to extend our ethics to “pesky, monstrous, or bacterial companions?”<sup>52</sup> The reflection of the artist on the need to relate or not means the acknowledgment of something—the life of something or someone—which requires relating as well as knowing how to respond to something that is Other. It is difficult to relate sympathetically to ticks. Yet, how they emerge in the material discussed here happens exactly through a kind of sympathy, namely, love. Additionally, the artist’s considerations draw a connection between these two contaminated, or possibly contaminating, bodies: the human trans body and the arthropod body of the tick. This connection is not always hateful or instilled with disgust, but possibly also involves a relation, or a *relating*, to the Other. I will investigate this connection further in the discussion of the next artwork.

### Contaminated Queer Transness

In the film *Something Must Break* (2014), the two main characters, Ellie and Andreas, luckily never encounter the tick they search for on each other’s bodies after a night outside.

48. Probyn, quoted in Bull, “Between Ticks and People,” 80.

49. Bull, “Between Ticks and People.”

50. Bull, “Between Ticks and People.”

51. Richter et al., “How Ticks Get under Your Skin.”

52. Lorimer and Davies, “Interdisciplinary Conversations on Interspecies Encounters.”



Figure 2. *Something Must Break* (2014). Ester Martin Bergsmark (director); Ester Martin Bergsmark/ Eli Levén (script). Copyright Garagefilm International AB.

The film tells the story of Ellie's emancipation from her love for Andreas, whose reactions to her trans-feminine and/or non-binary position are unaccepting and transphobic.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, neither of these characters fully fits into mainstream, cishetero norms—not Ellie as a white, working-class, trans-feminine or possibly also non-binary person, nor Andreas, with his anarchist, androgynous punk style, the mascara he wears, the earrings, and his gentle attitude that defies most forms of Western heteromascularity. Their budding romance and eventual difficult separation are set in Stockholm's suburban, semi-industrial wastelands, overgrown by weeds, scattered malls, highway ramps—a landscape far from the touristic image of Sweden's forests and lakes and the vigorous urbanity of the metropole.

*Something Must Break* is director Ester Martin Bergsmark's debut feature-length fiction film. It is the first European film by a trans and non-binary identifying filmmaking team and cast to be widely screened and recognized with film awards. Saga Becker, the main actress, is also the first trans actress in Sweden to have won the national award for Best Female Actress, the Guldbagge, in 2015. The script is written by Ester Martin Bergsmark and Eli Levén. Levén's semi-autobiographical book *Du är rötterna som sover vid mina fötter och håller jorden på plats* (*You Are the Roots that Sleep beneath My Feet and Keep the Earth in Its Place*) provides the foundation for the film's script.

The tick guides me in the first part of the film to a short sequence of tentative seduction (figs. 2 and 3). The two protagonists are resting on the bed, tired from a long night roaming the city. It was their first date. They had started the night by cruising older gay men to get free drinks. Later they had strolled through Stockholm's harbor, deserted construction sites, and quiet roads. They end up spending the dawn hours lying on a curved, overgrown slide in an unkept and long-forgotten amusement park somewhere in Stockholm, smoking cigarettes. Back home in the morning, while the

53. The character Ellie/Sebastian is coming out as Ellie in the film but is mostly addressed using male pronouns. However, Ellie's wish to become truly "Ellie," explicitly stated in the film, led to my decision to use "she" in order to do justice to this movement. In another article I might choose to do this differently.

Figure 3. *Something Must Break* (2014). Ester Martin Bergsmark (director); Ester Martin Bergsmark/ Eli Levén (script). Copyright Garagefilm International AB.



sun is flooding in through big windows, Andreas asks Ellie, “What if we have ticks?” She promptly challenges him to check. Ellie takes off her shirt and lies back on the bed, wearing only briefs, to let Andreas begin his search for the unwanted guests. He starts to investigate the place between her toes—“they like it there”—gliding his hands searchingly up her legs. He quietly asks if he can take off her underwear. She nods; her body naked, a flat chest, shaved pubic hair. Ellie’s genitals, limp on her belly, are tenderly moved by Andreas’s fingers in his search for the crawling arachnids. She doesn’t seem reluctant to be naked and only slight shyness flushes her cheeks. Both seem fully enthralled by the erotic charge of the situation. After a few minutes they swap positions. Andreas lies on his stomach. Ellie searches his back and slowly pulls down his boxer shorts. While she begins to lick the crack of his butt, the camera shows his face, which registers surprise at this new sensation, and his transformation through the feeling of her tongue in this intimate place. When she asks him to turn around, the search for ticks is forgotten. Ellie slowly starts to finger-fuck him. The scene ends with Andreas’s orgasm and Ellie moving up again to lie in his arms. In the scene that follows, they leave the house and scuffle through the city’s outskirts once more.

In opposition to Magnusson’s work, where the possible bite by a tick fosters a reflection on love and compassion for an animal usually considered unloveable, it here effects desire and further “impure” contact. The tick is associated with a range of feelings, and desire is rarely among them. Although the tick’s potentially contaminating invasion of another body is absent in this scene, it becomes symbolically enacted in the protagonist’s sexual contact. In this scene the trans character Ellie anally penetrates her lover with her finger. Their sexual encounter becomes a scene of metaphorical contamination regarding how anal sex is culturally framed and stigmatized.<sup>54</sup> The contaminating contact is shifted, though, from the dangerous and unpleasurable bite of the tick to

54. Aguilar, “Pegging and the Heterosexualization of Anal Sex”; Morrison, et al. “We’re Disgusted with Queers, Not Fearful of Them.”

a wanted and desired contact. Consequently, their practice is linked to sexual deviance and materializes these two bodies as impure and uncontained themselves.

Interestingly, these two visual works by Bergsmark and Magnusson place the female/feminine body in the space of nature, which could easily be problematic and even essentializing—yet neither female body is a normative one. In Magnusson's installation *Act on Instinct*, the female body of the artist has become an animal-transing body walking through nature and reflecting on it. In Bergsmark's film *Something Must Break*, the female body is a human, gender-transing body in an environment framed by impurity. Historically, feminist theory has often focused on detaching "women" from "nature" due to women's designated place as being associated with the "natural" rather than the "cultural" and thus outside of a place of true "human transcendence, rationality, subjectivity, and agency."<sup>55</sup> Nature as the space associated with "corporeality, mindlessness, and passivity"<sup>56</sup> and the gendered dualism of nature versus culture have been used to silence particular social groups such as women, people of color, and indigenous people.<sup>57</sup> And yet these two visual artworks show how nature in feminist art has already, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, become a reclaimed space, reimaged not on the basis of essentialism but "as a habitat for gender-minimizing, sometimes queer" forms of existence.<sup>58</sup>

To conclude, the body in these two works is not an innocent body; it is not "pure" in a Cartesian sense. It is a species-transing and gender-transing body. The latter is implied as an "unnatural" body in Western contexts, which do not permit crossing gender boundaries without pathologization. In this logic, the gender-transing body becomes understood as a "degenerate" body, too "deviant" to be "natural."<sup>59</sup> "Nature" and "natural" are then established as constant equivalents to cisgender, heterosexual bodies. This correlation also makes apparent the complex signification of nature as a nonrational, essentialized, feminine realm while being simultaneously coded as a cisheteronormative or even hypermasculine, heterosexual space of masculine wilderness.<sup>60</sup> Consequently, placing the gender-transing body into nature enacts a uniquely forceful (re)appropriation of this space, and in particular of the meaning of toxicity. Proximity to nature and toxic companion animals like the tick then become a different kind of nature, one that is always imbricated in toxic relations in which toxic bodies take this charge and build new socialities with and within the natural world.

55. Alaimo, "Trans-corporeal Feminisms," 239.

56. Alaimo, "Trans-corporeal Feminisms," 239.

57. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

58. Alaimo, "Trans-corporeal Feminisms," 240.

59. This links strongly to debates about toxin-related hormone imbalances resulting in the growing trans and intersex population. While this is usually problematized in cisheteronormative contexts, it could also be discussed from a trans scholarly perspective as a more complex issue of trans-becoming in toxic naturecultures, as, for example, Malin Ah-King and Eva Hayward have accomplished. See Ah-King and Hayward, "Toxic Sexes."

60. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, "Introduction."

To emphasize this even further, the two protagonists in this film sequence are embedded in an “impure,” polluted environment. Indoors and outdoors, garbage and contamination dominate the aesthetics—a dirty room littered with empty beer cans and full ashtrays; dirty lakes and highway ramps outside; even their own bodies “contaminated” in their queerness. This aesthetic allows me to consider that perhaps ticks are kin after all,<sup>61</sup> though not likeable or charismatic. Ticks, to follow Hatley, in their unnerving presence, “insist on our acknowledging in our very flesh the depth and uncanniness of our relatedness to them and, by implication, to all other living beings.”<sup>62</sup> For trans bodies, this could mean something specific—in “our very flesh” there is a relatedness to the other Other that is deemed disposable. What does this mean for our ethics of relationality, if we include the trans body, as well as other human unloved Others, within these ethics?

### Being Disposable

When trans activist and historian Leslie Feinberg died in 2014, at sixty-five years old, the trans community worldwide was struck with grief over their early death. They passed away after three and a half decades of battling the co-infections that riddled their body due to tick-borne Lyme disease.<sup>63</sup> Feinberg was a white, secular Jewish, working-class butch and trans activist who grew up in the dangerous trans- and homophobic climate of the US in the early 1960s. I was very saddened when I heard about their death. Leslie Feinberg’s achievements within and for the trans community had been enormous and substantially contributed to the formation of the field of intersectional and feminist transgender studies.<sup>64</sup>

The encounter between a Lyme bacteria-infected arachnid and Leslie Feinberg proved fatal for Feinberg. Their treatment was a tour de force through a medical establishment that is all too well known for its biases against those whose bodies defy norms.<sup>65</sup> Feinberg’s masculine gender expression, their butch lesbian and later also genderqueer trans position, was at odds with their “legal gender” and the normative, conventional perception of their anatomy. In consequence, when the first symptoms of Lyme appeared, their medical condition remained undiagnosed and untreated for three decades. Their disease became chronic, and only in the last six years of their life were

61. Hatley, “Blood Intimacies and Biodicy.”

62. Hatley, “Blood Intimacies and Biodicy,” 5.

63. I address Leslie Feinberg using non-binary pronouns (“they/them/theirs”) as in their later life this had been their preferred usage when among trans and queer people. I am using these pronouns myself at this point and hope they would have agreed with my choice.

64. Feinberg published numerous foundational books in the field of trans studies, including the study *Transgender Warriors* (1997), the essay/lecture collection *Trans Liberation* (1998), and the novel about coming of age as a butch lesbian in the US in the 1950s, *Stone Butch Blues* (1993). The novel was one of the first accounts of butch, non-binary, and trans lives in the Western, post-World War II context.

65. Hoffman, “Health Care Reform.”

they able to receive appropriate medical attention.<sup>66</sup> The illness, however, could never be fully cured due to limited health insurance that covered no more than two weeks of antibiotic treatment. In their online research blog “Lyme Series,”<sup>67</sup> Feinberg explains, “My treatment has been too little, too late. . . . Putting some of this research together in a readable form has taken a great toll on my health. I must turn now towards palliative approaches to my care. At this time I am so ill, I can’t answer questions, or discuss or debate this material.”<sup>68</sup> At the point of writing this entry, Feinberg’s health was poor. It was just a few years before their death. Their condition had repeatedly improved temporarily with short-term antibiotic treatment, but every time they stopped taking the medicine their health deteriorated again. Long-term treatment was unaffordable for them. In the “Lyme Series” they documented their struggle against a biased health-care system and in particular the apparently reluctant approach in parts of the US to diagnose a patient with Lyme disease. For many years Feinberg was often too ill to leave the house and approached this through their photo series *Screened-In*, explained by Sandi Bohle, a friend and Lyme activist, as “a disability-art class-conscious documentary” of their Hawley-Green neighborhood in Syracuse, New York, “photographed entirely from behind the windows” of their apartment.<sup>69</sup> This series consists of 119 photographs of the environment of the neighborhood—houses, gardens, the street, neighbors, and the visible sky.

According to historian and public health scholar Beatrix Hoffman, disease, treatment, and access to care are strongly affected by privilege, normativity, and/or acknowledgment as a proper body.<sup>70</sup> How seriously someone is taken in medical diagnostic procedures is unfortunately often linked to their appearance, their class background, and their gender, race, or ability.<sup>71</sup> Feinberg addresses this link by writing, “I had hoped to write much more about how ruling classes have historically used already existing prejudices to deny the scientific resources and individual aid that epidemics require. I had wanted in particular to write more about institutionalized racism, women’s oppression and other barriers to health care, about the infamous ‘Tuskegee experiment’ and the AIDS epidemic.”<sup>72</sup> Feinberg’s symptoms had not been taken seriously, rendered as non-existent and phantasmatic. This is true for many Lyme patients, who are diagnosed by inexperienced or uninformed medical staff. Lyme disease is a difficult illness; its

66. According to the *Advocate* obituary written by Feinberg’s partner Minnie Bruce Pratt, they were first infected in the early 1970s, and after “decades of suffering” were first diagnosed appropriately and then treated in 2008. They suffered from multiple tick-borne co-infections, including Lyme disease, babesiosis, and protozoa rheumatica. *Advocate.com* editors, “Transgender Pioneer.”

67. Feinberg, “Lyme Series.” This series is sometimes also referred to as “Casualty of an undeclared war series” according to the name of the first entry of the blog, while the URL says “Lyme Series.”

68. Feinberg, “Lyme Series.”

69. Bohle, “Touched by Lyme.”

70. Hoffman, “Health Care Reform.”

71. Feinberg, “Lyme Series.”

72. Feinberg, “Lyme Series.”

symptoms are broad and are all too often dismissed, underdiagnosed, or misdiagnosed, as the disease can mimic other conditions such as multiple sclerosis, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, and even Alzheimer's disease.<sup>73</sup>

The overriding feelings that the tick fosters in relation to Leslie Feinberg's life and the experience of their illness are anger, and more implicit in the quotes above, grief and vulnerability as Feinberg explains that they are in need of palliative care and are too weak to discuss the published material. What ethics of response-ability appear in these quotes? It is an ethics to respond to the Other, with Feinberg writing about the tick, the biased medical gatekeeper system, and its racism and transphobia. The ethics that emerge beyond that involve the question of how to deal with the Other—how does normative society approach the body that deviates? How do we as non-binary and trans people approach the other Other: the parasite, the insect, the arachnid, ourselves?

I do not mean to say that ticks have to be left living under all circumstances—as I said, I have a hard time feeling empathy for them. I just wonder whether we should not consider once more whose lives we render as worthy, who we protect, and who we consider killable.<sup>74</sup> This shift offers an experiment in thinking about what we as humans do with the ones we don't love. This applies in many contexts to the human trans body, which continues to experience its historical rendering as harmful in the violence and stigmatization of the present. In a very different form, the unloved Other includes a range of animals that are seen as too ugly, too dangerous, or too profitable to be protected by love. Clearly, the tick and the human trans body are unloved Others of different kinds. Whereas their bodies remind us of the importance of an ethics of response-ability toward such unloved Others, their difference reminds us that how we respond is always dependent on context and other kinds of relationalities and obligations.

Apart from the emotions in the meeting between Feinberg and the tick, the small creature also guides me to writings by others on ticks and about Feinberg. Feinberg's death was followed by a storm of blog posts in honor of their activism and work, creating an astonishing archive of collective mourning.<sup>75</sup> Unable to discuss the diversity of writing in the different posts, I want to briefly focus on one blog in particular: "Letters for Les. A genderqueer scamp's letters to the transgender warrior," published by the author Gritz, age twenty-three. In Gritz's blog posts, mourning emerges even more directly than in Feinberg's writing. In this blog, the author writes a series of letters to Feinberg postmortem. Here is a section of their first letter:

73. Cameron, "Consequences of Treatment Delay in Lyme Disease"; Cameron, "Misdiagnosing Lyme Disease."

74. I see very important links here between Judith Butler's discussion on grievability and norms of recognition that she has carried out with an exclusively human focus, e.g., in *Prearious Life*. I would have liked to transpose her work into a more-than-human context. Unfortunately, for now, the frame of this article on toxic embodiment exceeds such a complex transposition of her concept into the field of the posthumanities.

75. There are many entries, often written by activists and friends. To give a few examples, see Halberstam, "Leslie Feinberg"; Wilchins, "Leslie Feinberg's Gone"; and Bohle, "Touched by Lyme."

August 19, 2015

I am going to write you. You, of course, are already gone. I know that you are dead—claimed far too soon from the bite(s) of ticks and even greater bites sustained from an “undeclared war.” If there is an afterlife, I don’t know that my words will reach you; I will leave any express lanes to you for your family of friends. Because wildfires are sparking, leaping, and wilding across Oregon, I will not burn this so that ashes may dance upwards in heat before nestling into the soil you are now part of. Instead, I will transfer words letter by letter with a tiny trowel to a screen, releasing word fireflies into the web.

You will never know me, nor I you. But I will write you. A queer to a queer, a stone to a stone, one human to another human, I write you.<sup>76</sup>

This writer has not had the chance to fully read *Stone Butch Blues* or any other volume published by Feinberg at the start of their letter series. Yet their compassion for Feinberg’s death is tangible in every line they write, as is their search for advice on how to cope with this world, as a young stone non-binary person.

I don’t wish to put you on a pedestal as perfect, Leslie, but you give me someone to look up to. I thank you for that. I wish I had explored your work sooner.<sup>77</sup>

Gritz’s letters that follow are a conversation across class and age differences, as much as an exchange across different gendered markers, from butch to trans to genderqueer. Feinberg’s death is the starting point for this author to reflect on questions of fitting in and disidentifying with the conventional registers of the gender binary, as much as an encouragement to contest these norms.

I think I’m doing okay even if sometimes I’m left floating outside of everything as if I’m hungry and my head is light—too empty of gender roles and identities others use to remain grounded. But it’s starting to get to me.<sup>78</sup>

The letters are intimate, personal conversations that take up issues such as misgendering, coming of age, and body dysphoria, but also speak about less pressing issues like travel, university classes, and family gatherings. The tick in the activist writing by Feinberg and also by Gritz led me to encounter feelings that come after the potentiality of an infected tick crawling over one’s body and its possible bite; it’s the sadness of an approaching death, the mourning of a loss of a community member due to a failing and biased medical system, and also community formation in the assembling of a written archive that accounts for the legacy of Feinberg’s persona and trans activism.

76. Letters for Les, “Dear Leslie,” August 19, 2015, [lettersforleslie.com/2015/08/](http://lettersforleslie.com/2015/08/).

77. Letters for Les, “Why,” August 20, 2015, [lettersforleslie.com/2015/08/](http://lettersforleslie.com/2015/08/).

78. Letters for Les, “Explanations,” August 19, 2015, [lettersforleslie.com/2015/08/](http://lettersforleslie.com/2015/08/).

The tick in this material of activist writing emerges through grief, anger, and vulnerability. But it also brings readers to a place of mourning and community belonging. It is an unexpected response in the relationality of ticks and trans bodies. Furthermore, the tick highlights here literally how its contact has been fatal. Its toxicity exceeds by far its potential to transmit disease. In addition, it shows the lethal toxicity that is part of a larger system, which is material, discursive, infrastructural, social, medical, and generally discriminatory. The medical system and Western society, here showcased through Leslie Feinberg's limited access to appropriate treatment in the US American context, failed when asked to deal with a human body that did not accommodate the norms of "proper" embodiment—a system that mirrors how Western society renders the unloved human Other disposable and neglectable. The response-ability, when applied also to human-human relations, calls for an ethics of acknowledging the Other, being responsive as much as responsible.

In the three different materials discussed in this article, I intended to investigate how ticks and human trans bodies meet in a different way, one that frames them through a shared livability rather than devaluation. And I wanted to explore how this allows for the potential for a queer, toxic sociality, but furthermore gives space to a wider discussion of who is considered killable in which context. Both ticks and trans bodies are considered by different groups as threatening: ticks by most humans, trans bodies by transphobic perpetrators as much as the everyday life of cisnormativity, starting with gendered toilets or misgenderings. Then, how easily do human societies consider something killable depending on its social status? In considering the shared designation as unloved Others on these bodies, I wanted to look at what ethical claims open up in the material and what feelings are evoked in the meeting of these two bodily entities.

### **Queer World Making of Toxic Bodies**

In this article I have aimed to tell the story of different toxic bodies: the tick's body in different sites, the emotions it stirs, and the ethics it unfolds as well as the human trans and transing body that has looked for the tick, or has been bitten and suffered the consequences of infections and failed treatment. "Bodies tell stories," as eco-critical feminist materialist Serpil Oppermann remarks. And to echo Stryker's claim, they also are "vast archives of toxic substances and discourses, and political, social, and medical conflicts."<sup>79</sup> Stories also make bodies—the tick and the trans body have co-constituted one another in the discussed items. Both have literally come into being through the notion of being parasitic; both are related to the figuration of toxicity. Most importantly, the tick has brought up the question of livability, of who gets to respond, who gets to live, and who is considered neglectable within human societies. The ethics of response-ability, related to tick-trans human entities in this article, have allowed me to consider queer world making through toxic bodies. My objective was thinking toxicity through its potential for making

79. Oppermann, "Toxic Bodies and Alien Agencies," 416.

livable worlds and survivable futures and the acknowledgment of the queer affinities that sit in this place of the toxic as a material-discursive boundary figuration.

I hope that I was able to convey the thought that when writing about the joint sites of toxicity and the suggestion that both ticks and trans bodies are unloved Others in their respective contexts, I did not mean to advocate for the tick as a lovable creature or as equal to human trans bodies. Instead my intention was to unfold the figure of the toxic as a shared site, as I wrote earlier in reference to Braidotti, and to see how it carries its history into the future and creates a sociality between unlikely bodies.

Hence, the proximity of the tick and the trans body in the works under discussion here materialize an important link between trans and animal bodies and in general the “de-humanized” human body. This dehumanized body shares, as I have argued, with some animals, particularly the tick, the category of the unloved Other. So many different human bodies have been approached that way, as unloved Others—crip bodies, indigenous bodies, black and nonwhite bodies, poor and old bodies—and left out of the category of proper human embodiment, always facing the violence that comes with the absence of this status.

Instead of contesting the charge of the toxic, I wonder if this rendering of the toxic body can be appropriated. Accepting the dehumanizing charge of toxicity can then mean accepting and appropriating this position as toxic, contaminating, or maybe even monstrous (as Susan Stryker’s early manifesto has beautifully pointed out)<sup>80</sup> and instead facilitating new toxic—as well as queer—socialities. Such a suggestion means also finding oneself in unexpected new company. The tick, as much as other unloved other animal and human bodies, is then no longer the enemy but part of the multispecies formation creating a relation between different toxic bodies that need to be responded to and approached through reciprocity and relationality.

Considering trans bodies as part of the category of unloved Others allows for trans and non-binary people to possibly reexamine their allies and invite multispecies relations into the equation. For the general human social context, it can mean an ethical consideration of who is seen as “killable” and “disposable” and bring awareness to the fact that trans people are all too often the target as shown in hate crime statistics and numerous unregistered attacks. The category of unloved Other has been an experiment for me in this article, to consider the charge of the parasitic, toxic, dehumanized one and to depart from the failing recognition of the human context into the potentiality of joining into a toxic sociality with the unloved animal Other.

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80. Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein,” 244–56.

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