Protection and Reflection: The Ambiguities of Trans-Corporeality in Thilde Jensen’s *The Canaries* (2013)

Introduction

One of the most influential concepts that has shaped the field of the environmental humanities over the past decade is Stacy Alaimo’s notion of trans-corporeality. Trans-corporeality refers to an understanding of the body wherein “the substance of one’s self” is understood as “interconnected with the wider environment” on a deeply material level (Alaimo 20). In *Bodily Natures* (2010) Alaimo demonstrates how global flows of toxins challenge the fantasy of the “bounded human subject,” revealing instead how the “substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the ‘environment’” as all of our bodies’ flesh and blood have come to carry a wide variety of chemical and toxic substances in the twenty-first century (2, 4).

In this article, I take a closer look at an artistic project that addresses bodily porosity: Thilde Jensen’s *The Canaries* (2013), a photo book about people living with environmental illness (EI), sometimes also described as multiple chemical sensitivity. People who suffer from EI describe a wide range of physical reactions in response to low-level chemical exposure, ranging from headaches and nausea to respiratory problems, fatigue, and seizures. These symptoms can be brought on by anything encountered in modern everyday life—new clothes, carpets, cleaning products, shampoo, fragrances, car exhaust, furniture, and so
on. Many of us may have experienced a headache or a bout of nausea when confronted with a certain perfume or scent, but for people with EI such encounters are much more frequent and much more intense. Patients find themselves continually having to navigate the environments they inhabit and to track how they respond to certain chemicals. It is not surprising, then, that Alaimo suggests in *Bodily Natures* that EI “may well be the quintessential example of . . . trans-corporeality” (116). But these same aspects make EI suspect since, as Steve Kroll-Smith and H. Hugh Floyd write, “these bodies no longer behave in a manner that modern medicine can predict and control” (4). As an illness that confounds biomedical and toxicological models of understanding body-environment relations, the burden of navigating this deeply trans-corporeal experience falls mostly on EI’ers themselves.

Jennifer Peeples and Jill Gatlin’s articles on the toxic sublime have articulated toxicity’s complicated relation with the visual arts, and EI has regularly been explored in visual media. The best-known example is probably Todd Haynes’ 1995 film *Safe*, starring Julianne Moore as Carol White, a housewife who increasingly begins to display symptomatic reactions to chemicals. Artist Rhonda Zwillinger became chemically sensitive from the work on her installations in the 1980s. Zwillinger began to photograph other people suffering from similar symptoms, a series that has been collected in the book *The Dispossessed* (1998). Drew Xanthopoulos’s documentary feature *The Sensitives* (2018) addresses the impact EI has on patients and their close family and friends. Although the work of Haynes in particular has been analyzed at length (Hosey; Seymour), to my knowledge *The Canaries* has not received sustained critical attention, even if it has been featured in publications such as *The New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *Wired*, and *Slate*. My analysis of *The Canaries* thus aims to contribute to and to slightly expand the small archive of research on art about EI, while it also seeks to consider what insights trans-corporeality as an analytical concept can yield when considered from the perspective of living with chronic chemical illness.

In *Bodily Natures*, Alaimo defines trans-corporeality in several complementary ways. Firstly, she uses the concept to analyze a variety of experiences or models of embodied porosity (3). Trans-corporeality entails a confrontation not only with the permeability of the human body, and the vulnerability such openness entails, but also with the economic, socio-political, and cultural structures that distribute environmental and toxic violence unevenly. Secondly, Alaimo argues that trans-corporeality stands for an interdisciplinary approach to theory that draws from a wide range of sources, including cultural studies, philosophy science and technology studies, scientific and medical
research, as well as popular scientific texts (3). Finally, Alaimo argues that a trans-corporeal ethics can emerge from a trans-corporeal understanding of the world. If we accept that the human body is always already more than human and actively shaped by non-human forces such as toxins and bacteria, it becomes clear that the concept decenters the human in its “sovereign, central position” (Alaimo 16). According to Alaimo, such an “epistemological shift can become an ethical matter; trans-corporeal subjects must also relinquish mastery as they find themselves inextricably part of the flux and flow of the worlds that others would presume to master” (17). To understand that one’s body is deeply shaped by and bound to the world it inhabits makes it possible to see that to care for one’s own health is to care for the health of the world—with all the non-human creatures it inhabits. In other words, a rigorous distinction between world and body cannot really be made in the first place. Environmental health and environmentalism then become two sides of the same coin.

By emphasizing the ethical potential of trans-corporeality in addition to its analytical strengths, Alaimo’s work is exemplary of a larger trend of feminist new materialism and critical posthumanism, which similarly conjoin the material, the semiotic, and the ethical, as showcased in the work of scholars such as Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Sylvia Wynter, and Nancy Tuana. This scholarship is characterized by a commitment to critique the “nature/culture split and the connection between modern individualistic humanism and the derogation of nature” as well as “an understanding of oppression through feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonial, queer and bio- and earth-centric frameworks” (Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hedren 72). Although an in-depth discussion of the field goes beyond the scope of this article, a final aspect that unites much of this thought is that it offers affirmative pathways for “living on a damaged planet” (Tsing et al.) as it aims to be both “critical and creative” and to think of new possibilities (Ulmer 838). Trans-corporeal ethics can be situated within this context, as it is an invitation to redefine human relations to the world.

When trans-corporeality is taken up in the context of the study of artistic, literary, and other cultural responses to the ongoing ecological crisis in which we find ourselves, this ethical and affirmative quality often gets stressed. The focus on the affirmative needs to be understood as part of a pronounced commitment in the environmental humanities to move beyond critique and apocalyptic doom scenarios (Rose et al.; Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hedren; Heise). If the arts can help us to think through the complexities of living in a radically changing world, as is often suggested (Turpin and Davis; Morton), then approaching
artworks that articulate new visions of living with the more-than-human is a crucial step.

But what if the experience of trans-corporeality (or the articulation of such an experience in a work of art) does not turn into an ethical stance? This is a possibility, as Alaimo admits: “there are no guarantees that emerging models of materiality will cultivate environmentalisms” (9). Nevertheless, if a trans-corporeal understanding of the self holds the possibility for ethical commitment, then the inability to arrive there may easily be construed as a form of failure. Alaimo suggests as much in *Bodily Natures*, where she writes that Mariel Rukeyser’s *The Book of The Dead* (1938) “fails to reconcile the competing aims of environmental justice and environmentalism” (58, emphasis added). Alaimo notes that Rukeyser should of course not be blamed for the absence of reconciliation in a text written in the 1930s, and allows that in certain cases the setting of boundaries may still be necessary and preferable, but what ultimately appears to be at stake in *Bodily Natures* is the emergence of a trans-corporeal ethics.4 Within the context of the environmental humanities’ commitment to be critical and creative, this emphasis raises an urgent question about the cultural objects of our analyses: why would we focus on the art and literature that fails to deliver on this promise, especially when we are so desperately in need of alternative, non-anthropocentric imaginings?

Through a reading of *The Canaries*, I want to suggest there is critical value in works where representations of trans-corporeality do not coalesce into an ethics, as the visualization of the ambiguities of experiencing trans-corporeality can deepen our understanding of the multitude of experiences that emerge in a chronically toxic age. In this article I will therefore argue that the book’s emphasis on living with a chronic illness produced by toxicity instead foregrounds the practices that are necessary to make the experience of trans-corporeality liveable. *The Canaries*, I propose, visualizes such a practice through its focus on the usage of aluminum foil as a means to keep chemical toxins out. In what follows, I will take up three different ways in which foil is used in *The Canaries* by analyzing the book’s foil wrap, a photograph, and one of the inserts. I propose that in each of these instances, the foil has a double function: its material qualities are used to protect people with EI from chemicals, and it has an aesthetic function that induces reflection of the experience of trans-corporeality. Through a close reading of the objects, I show that in each case the aluminum foil points both inwards, towards the depicted people who are living with EI, and outwards, to the viewer interacting with the book. In doing so, I will demonstrate not only the role of foil as a material capable of inducing reflection in *The Canaries*, but also reflect on how the work invites us to consider the
experience of trans-corporeality as one in need of making life liveable for people with EI. But first I will begin by contextualizing the work and defining my approach to EI in relation to it.

**Environmental Illness in The Canaries**

*The Canaries* consists of 71 photographs, four loose inserts, and a foil wrap. Photographer Thilde Jensen began to suffer from EI when she moved from Denmark to New York. *The Canaries* was born as Jensen began to document her own experiences with the illness. The project developed as she met other patients in the US while searching for a way to manage her illness. *The Canaries* particularly focuses on a community of people who identify as chemically sensitive and whose symptoms have debilitating effects, forcing them into isolation. Many of the photographs were taken in isolated areas in Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico, which have favorable climates and allow people to live far removed from society. Jensen’s subjects are exclusively white (a point to which I return below). Many of them are unable to work due to their illness and are forced to live in old trailers or cars, as they have become too sensitive for housing. The fact that Jensen suffers from EI herself was crucial to the production of the book and the story it seeks to tell, as it enabled her to tell the story from within the community that she got to know.

The title of the book refers to the tendency within the EI community to think of themselves as canaries, “the warning bird for the rest of the world so to speak” as Jensen has put it (“There Is No Romance”). The phrase comes from a mining practice, as coal miners used to take birds down into the mines as warning signals for the release of carbon monoxide. If the canaries died, the miners knew the air had become toxic, and they would have to go up again. Similarly, the canaries in the book speak of a world that has become too toxic for everyone; they are simply the first to respond to this new state. The book thus presents itself as a warning signal.

The framing of *The Canaries* as a warning signal is expressive of a desire to be taken seriously and to be believed, as EI is rarely recognized in medical or toxicological contexts. As Michelle Murphy writes: “Because such [physical] reactions are difficult, if not impossible, to objectify within conventional biomedical techniques and, further, because they are elicited by extremely low, subtoxic, supposedly “safe” levels of common chemicals, the very existence of MCS [EI] is highly controversial” (“The ‘Elsewhere’” 88). Environmental illness sits uneasily within the traditional toxicological paradigm, which claims that the poison is in the dose. Research has shown that low-level
exposure and chemical interaction may have more complex effects on
the body than was previously believed (Krimsky; Vogel), but there is
no conclusive evidence that this is what happens for people with EI.
Joseph Dumit therefore calls EI an “emergent illness . . . in the sense
that [it] is researched, discussed, and reported on, but not one aspect of
[it] is settled medically, legally, or popularly” (578). The uncertain sta-
tus of the illness contributes to further suffering, as it affects the
patient’s access to health care, their ability to find a job in a safe work-
ing environment, and their relation to the people around them (Murphy, “The ‘Elsewhere’” 89).

The “indeterminate body” that suffers from EI does not fit existing
social, scientific, and medical paradigms, but it is not my purpose here
to resolve that indeterminacy (Waterton and Yusoff). Instead, my ap-
proach to EI and thus to The Canaries is deeply informed by attention
not to the direct representation of the illness or of toxicity itself, but to
how aluminum foil is used in and around The Canaries to materialize
the experience of living with a “trans-corporeal illness” in all its com-
plexities. In doing so, I follow Murphy’s approach to writing about EI.
It is worth quoting her approach at length here:

I will set aside the question ‘Is it real?’ – which has led
too many accounts astray already – and instead start
with the assumption that there is no singular, unaccultu-
rated body to unearth, but instead bodies that are al-
ways multiply materialized. Further, though this paper
is itself an intervention in the discursive field surround-
ing MCS, I try . . . to move my discussion of the
“construction” of MCS out of the domain of representa-
tion and into the domain of material practices for man-
aging bodies in space. (“The ‘Elsewhere’” 92–3)

Because I am analyzing a book of photographs, and not an ethno-
graphic study, my analysis here of course does remain within the realm
of representations. Still, by focusing on the usage of aluminum foil as a
“material practice for managing bodies in space,” as I will elaborate on
in the next section, I aim to shed light on how The Canaries mediates the
ambiguities inherent in experiencing one’s body as trans-corporeal,
rather than on the ambiguities of the illness itself.

Aluminum Foil: Protection and Reflection

My first encounter with The Canaries was an encounter with alumi-
num foil: when I opened the cardboard box in which my copy was de-
livered, I did not see the book’s cover but instead encountered a large,
rectangular shape, completely wrapped in shiny aluminum foil. It reflected my face back at me in a distorted form (see fig. 1). If I wanted to look at the book, I realized, I would have to remove the foil. The blurb for *The Canaries* on Jensen’s website had mentioned that the book would arrive “hand-wrapped with aluminum foil with a handwritten label,” so I knew the foil was integral to *The Canaries*. At the same time, I wanted to see what it covered up. Although I had torn open the cardboard box, taking off the foil was a slow and careful process, as I did not want to rip the material. Positioned in between packaging and artwork, the foil fully demanded my attention.

This anecdote demonstrates that engagement with *The Canaries* starts with a reflection on foil. The material solicited a concrete, hands-on encounter on an intimate level, from the visual reflection of my face to the tactile experience of the foil’s fragility and its rippling sounds that filled the room. The foil provoked questions: why was it there,
how should I handle it, what was its function? It engendered an active and critical mode of looking that was attentive to the contents of the book. As I began to look through the book, it became clear that the foil features prominently in several of the photographs. I saw not only small objects wrapped in foil, but also living spaces that had their entire walls covered with it. Foil was also the pattern of two of the inserts in the book. From all of these observations, it was evident that foil played a significant role not only in *The Canaries* but also in the everyday lives of the people depicted in the book.

Aluminum foil is indeed an everyday life material, evoking associations with the domestic, where it is used as packaging (although usually for food, rather than art). It is produced through a process of casting and rolling molten aluminum so that it eventually acquires thinness below 0.2 mm. This process makes the material highly pliable, light-weighted, and smooth, but also very quick to wrinkle and rip. In general, foil is used to keep something in or to keep something out. When wrapped around food, for example, heat escapes more slowly, while oxygen, light, and moisture are kept out, protecting the food from deterioration.5

In *The Canaries*, foil retains its insulating function. In an interview, Jensen explains why she decided to present the book in this way and why the foil features so dominantly in *The Canaries*:

Actually it is meant to make the book authentic. People that are sensitive often use aluminum foil; I have used it myself to wrap things that smell. Some people use foil on the walls to keep out toxics, but also to encase books. The inks and papers are toxic to some extent ... This is the way people in the world of Environmental Illness (E.I.) deal with books. So it needed to be the way that my book was presented, too. And the wrapping would give the outsider the experience of dealing with this whole world in the most tangible way. (“There Is No Romance”)

The foil wrap thus aims to reproduce—not just represent—the experience of people who suffer from EI, as it enables patients to retain the book even though they are sensitive to the chemicals it contains. The materials function as a barrier to control the interactions between bodies and the objects that make up everyday living environments, and aid in the creation of a space in which fewer sensitivities are triggered (Gibson et al. 1499). As long as the foil stays in place around the book, the chemicals are to some extent contained and the chemically sensitive body is protected from exposure.
Paradoxically, this insight is produced through the unwrapping of the book so that the viewer can see that the photographs include foil as well. In that moment, the double function of the foil comes into focus. Firstly, it has an artistic function, in relation to The Canaries as a whole, as it activates the spectator and invites reflection: the foil functions as a material inviting critical thought, producing meaning and insight. Secondly, the unwrapping allows the viewer to see the photographs in which foil performs its second function of protection; a level of meaning that then extends to the foil wrapper as well. The foil is allowed to be just foil: a material capable of protecting people through its specific affordances. I use the term “reflection” to encompass this meaning-producing process that the viewer experiences, drawing on Ernst van Alphen’s usage of the word. He writes in Art in Mind (2005) that art can manifest itself as “a reflection—not in the sense of the passive definition of the word, as a mirror image, but in the sense of the active definition, as an act of thought” (van Alphen 2). Aluminum foil functions as a significant part of The Canaries, as a material to think with and to think through. At the same time, the book emphasizes that the foil needs to be taken seriously on its own terms. The foil’s ability to produce reflection never supersedes its ability to offer a form of protection, as a “material practice for managing bodies in space” as Murphy puts it (“The ‘Elsewhere’” 93). Foil emerges as a semiotic-material construction, mediating both between sick bodies and the environment and between the visually represented experience of EI and the viewer. I will unpack three examples in the following sections.

The Foil Wrap: Looking Beyond a “Point of View of Mythic Health”

Let me first stay with the dual function of the foil wrap. Where for EI patients, the wrap offers protection, for me, as the viewer, it functions as an obstacle that keeps me from seeing the photographs. Although encountering The Canaries wrapped in foil may indeed be a “tangible” experience as Jensen states, describing said experience as “authentic” may not be quite right. After all, the very fact that I am able to remove the foil without even thinking of any physical repercussions demonstrates that my own body is less sensitive to chemicals. The foil thus draws attention to different nuances people experience in relation to trans-corporeality and makes clear that for some awareness of it is impressed forcefully on their bodies, whereas for others it can be a form of second-hand knowledge. As the foil reflects me, I am moved to reflect on myself as a viewer—not only on how I am looking but also on the fact that I am able to look at all. The dual meaning of the foil renders...
visible that some people are affected more by synthetic chemicals than others.

My point is not simply that the foil represents the unevenly distributed experience of learning to see “human corporeality as trans-corporeality” (Alaimo 2), but rather that it actively attunes the viewer to this insight. The foil poses a challenge to approaching *The Canaries* from “a point of view of mythic health,” as critical theorist Mel Chen phrases it (197), as I am invited to reflect on my own physical (non-)response to low-level chemicals. Chen first introduces the phrase as a methodological consideration. Chen refuses to write from a point of disembodied abstraction as has traditionally been an implicit convention in Western philosophy and theory and instead brings their own experiences with MCS to the argument. A “point of view of mythic health” is not only used when illness or disability are left out of the argument, but also when health itself is taken as a commonality. With the aid of the foil, *The Canaries* rejects such unreflective modes of looking, for the viewer is made to consider their physical response to the unwrapping.

In *Animacies* (2012), Chen addresses the fact that an encounter with toxicity does not necessarily take one negative or harmful form:

> So how is it that so much of this toxic world, in the form of perfumes, cleaning products, body products, plastics, all laden with chemicals that damage us so sincerely, is encountered by so many of us as benign or only pleasurable? How is it, even more, that we are doing this, doing all this, to ourselves? And yet, even as the toxins themselves spread far and wide, such a ‘we’ is a false unity. (207, emphasis added)

Chen underscores that we do not all experience toxins in the same way and highlights how many forms of what are effectively chemical encounters (a whiff of perfume, for example) are associated with pleasure rather than pain. Similarly, for me, the opening of *The Canaries* harbors excitement, rather than the threat of an attack on my body. Functioning as “a sign of the mediations that we must now make between environmental ‘givens’ (that toxins surround us) and self (that toxins are in us)” (Chen 204), the foil reveals that such mediations between body and environment are not evenly experienced.

The intensified awareness of trans-corporeality, health, and body-environment relations that emerges in *The Canaries* needs to be understood in and pushes against the Western context of the modern, discrete body that came up in the early twentieth century (Alaimo 91). In this newly emerging biomedical understanding of the body, “disease-causing pathogens were situated in human bodies, not environments,”
as Linda Nash writes in *Inescapable Ecologies* (6). This development allowed the environment to be framed as oppositional and background to the body, rather than entangled with it. The foil wrap speaks to the struggle for people with EI of navigating what happens when the environment suddenly does foreground itself, asserting its material agency.

Although the foil in *The Canaries* entices the viewer to think beyond a universalized, ableist perspective on health, body–environment relations, and chemical sensitivity, it is important to note that the book reiterates other universalizing tendencies by representing only white people. Limited research by Caress et al. has suggested, however, that symptoms of EI are in fact evenly distributed across categories of race and ethnicity (429). There is not enough research to be certain as to why predominantly white people are diagnosed or self-diagnose with EI (although unequal access to resources likely contributes). But what has become clear is that “[t]hough whiteness is not explicitly a part of the MCS identity, ‘race’ seems to be doing cultural work, shaping who participates in the movement” as Michelle Murphy writes (*Sick Building Syndrome* 211, n.66).

*The Canaries* both confirms and reiterates this image by constructing a visual story about EI that only has white protagonists. Whiteness is a central factor, for that matter, in most of the cultural archive on EI. For example, in an essay on *Safe*, Rebecca Scherr reads the film as a narrative on “the horror of whiteness . . . when it is challenged by its environment” (62). What is interesting about Scherr’s remark is that it reveals how whiteness depends on finding itself accommodated by its environment, both metaphorically and materially. The unwrapping of *The Canaries* becomes an encounter with white bodies whose protective layers similarly have been removed. While the foil of *The Canaries* invites us to look beyond a perspective of medical health, the work simultaneously limits the parameters of the EI experience to those of white people by emphasizing the subversion of expectations of being supported by the environment, as I will argue in the next section.

Photographing Foil: Capturing Blurry Boundaries

In this section I want to zoom in on the foil regarding its function to mediate that relation between body and environment by looking at the foil in the photograph entitled “Bedroom With a Foil Barrier” (see fig. 2). Drawing further on insights from disability studies, I argue that the foil in this photograph highlights an ambiguous perception of the border between the body and the environment. Alaimo writes in *Bodily Natures*: “Medical models of bounded human bodies make no sense for
MCS [EI], since the body is not separable from the environment, but disability models of accessibility, which focus on space and mobility, may provide a productive avenue of approach” (123–4). I agree with Alaimo, but I also want to complicate some of the implications of her suggestion here.

In “Bedroom With a Foil Barrier,” the viewer sees a white male figure in shorts and a long-sleeved shirt, standing barefoot in a room covered with foil. His back is toward the viewer, but we are able to see the side of his face. The part of the room that is visible in the photograph is sparsely furnished. There is only a single bed with blankets draped over the end. The man’s gaze is directed toward the walls, which are all covered in foil, with the exception of a plug-socket. The ceiling is covered, too. The man’s figure is blurrily reflected in the foil on both walls, producing a colorful shadow of his presence in the room.

The angle of the picture in combination with the pose of the man directs the viewer’s focus to the foil covering the room. If walls are often perceived as the background against which action is shaped, here they are the very focus of the photograph—again the environment refuses to stay in the background. In this photograph, the scale is increased and the order reversed. Instead of surrounding an object in order to separate it from the body (as with the foil wrap), here the foil surrounds and shelters a body as the room is wrapped on the inside.

**Figure 2.** “Bedroom with foil barrier. Snowflake, Arizona, 2011” from Jensen, Thilde. The Canaries. LENA Publications, 2013. Courtesy of Thilde Jensen.
Indeed, the title of the photograph highlights the protective function of the foil by describing it as a barrier, an entity to keep the world at bay and to render the chemically sensitive body less noticeably porous.

Ideas of environmental adaptation are central to critical disability studies, which underlines that many experiences of disability can be understood through a social constructionist model. Tony Siebers explains this model lucidly: “[s]ocial constructionism makes it possible to see disability as an effect of an environment hostile to some bodies and not to others, requiring advances in social justice rather than in medicine” (15). The problem, as the common example goes, is not the wheelchair, but the buildings that have no ramps and elevators. Rather than putting the focus on the curing of bodies, the social constructionist model advocates the adaption of built environments to accommodate a much wider variety of bodies. The foil in “Bedroom With a Foil Barrier” can be seen as such a form of environmental adaptation, at least in a personal space, foregrounding the significant changes that people with EI have to make to their environments. The motif of the barrier features extensively throughout The Canaries, which includes several photographs of people wearing respirators and gloves as forms of protection, as well as many photographs with walls, fences, and windows. Together these photographs underscore how the theme of containment (and also often the impossibility thereof) is integral to the project.

Looking at “Bedroom with a Foil Barrier,” distinctions between inside and outside, body and environment simultaneously begin to blur—and it is exactly the foil, as a visual aspect of the photograph, that creates this effect. The foil reflects several sources of light, for example. The stroke of light that runs from the right side of the photograph toward the middle suggests the presence of windows on the opposite side of the room, opening up awareness of a space beyond the room itself, complicating on a visual level its own premise as a protective barrier. The white male figure in the photograph is another example. He can be seen three times, once with his back toward the camera and twice reflected in the foil. Those last two times his body is partially facing the viewer, but it is distorted, unclear, and unfocused—reminiscent of my own face as it was reflected in the foil wrap. The foil here, too, reflects a body without clear contours: it is not the separate, or bounded entity in the foreground, but rather a figure that literally spills over into the environment around it. The blurry reflected figure can be understood not only as a visual articulation of the experience of transcorporeality, but, because of the mirror-like reflection, also as the white male figure’s confrontation with a new understanding of the embodied self and his relation to the environment.
In that sense, within the photograph (which I am distinguishing here from the room it indexically refers to) the foil begins to demand reflection on the very possibility of it fulfilling a protective function. For people with EI, the photograph suggests, the boundaries between inside and outside are already messy. This highlights how toxicity, and EI more specifically, poses challenges for the basic presumptions of the social constructionist mode: is it even possible, here, to make a distinction between healing the body and adapting the environment? For when Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes that “[o]ne of the fundamental premises of disability politics is that social justice and equal access should be achieved by changing the shape of the world, not changing the shape of our bodies” (597), this does not quite capture the trans-corporeal experience of EI. To change the environment is to change the body and vice versa: chemicals are always both an environmental and a bodily concern.

The production of exactly this insight is key for trans-corporeal ethics to take shape, Alaimo argues throughout Bodily Natures. But at the same time that the photograph speaks of the entanglement between bodies and environments, the depiction of the man alone in his room appears predominantly concerned with the demonstrating of the complexity of surviving when you have become allergic to the world. Indeed, The Canaries as a whole essentially seeks to communicate how deeply volatile the experience of living with toxicity can be rather than to offer a direction for an ethics. (For what would a solution be? The implications of EI are so radical that to take them seriously would upend the world as we know it.) There are several photographs that depict intense suffering, especially a series of a young woman named Jen, who is photographed in various stages of unconsciousness. Throughout, Jensen regularly employs a visual grammar of suffering that is familiar from documentary photography addressing pain (Sontag). David Hevey has highlighted how such photography of illness and disability often contributes to the “enfreakment” of disabled communities (435). Some of Jensen’s photographs might be accused of such a problematic aesthetics, too. At the same time, it is important to remember that Jensen is part of the community that she is photographing. She is aware of the stigmatization of EI and the way it is already impacting the community. The radical emphasis on vulnerability that many of the photographs underscore, then, renders them legible as photographs of illness, which matters when that illness is not recognized in the first place.

It is against the background of these photographs that “Bedroom with a Foil Barrier” underscores not entanglement but rather the necessity for some form of barrier. Going against the popularity of
entanglement as a key concept, anthropologist Elizabeth Roberts points out that “entanglement is not always welcome, even in highly relational worlds. It depends on the how and the what and the when” (596). Where Roberts focuses on the pollution in a working-class neighborhood in Mexico City, her observation holds for the context of The Canaries and chronic illness. EI is the result of undeniable, ongoing entanglement between humans and chemicals in everyday life. Exposure is way beyond the realm of control for people with EI, as every walk can mean a confrontation with a whiff of perfume or cigarette smoke (Chen 198). Exactly in this hyper-relational world of EI, in which entanglement is both chronically felt and has immediate consequences, the insistence on borders becomes key.

The Foil Insert: Bodily Knowing and Toxicity

The need for boundaries is reiterated once more when the viewer turns to the inserts. The Canaries contains four inserts, with short texts printed on them, in which people describe their experiences with chemical sensitivity, two of which are printed on foil-patterned paper. In this section, I want to focus on the foil insert that speaks most directly to the issue of trans-corporeality and EI. (The other foil insert focuses especially on dealing with the fatigue that EI can produce and is less relevant for my argument here.) The text on the insert is a first-person narrative, written by a woman named Mary Calcey. She writes an urgent cry for help: “Help!!!! I am desperate for any info or whatever you can give me. How did you survive???” In what turns out to be a hastily typed email, Calcey describes how she is becoming aware of the relation between her body and the environment, how she responds to chemicals, and how she is looking for a kind of solution.

The text is printed on regular paper with a foil print on the back and the front (it appears to be a true-to-size photograph of foil covering a wall). We can read the decision as a visual metaphor for the narrative described upon it: the foil creates an environment for Calcey that metaphorically sustains her body. While the reflective dimension of this artistic decision is relatively intuitive, its more semiotic rather than material dimension makes this instance of the foil perhaps the most difficult to interpret in terms of protection. Why would there be a need for the protection of a disembodied voice? But voices are of course never really disembodied, even if we cannot see the body that they belong to. The foil here makes clear that for certain voices to be heard, space needs to accommodate their bodies. For people with EI, such spaces are few and far between, but the foil insert visually establishes a safe space for Calcey.8
The urgent message at first functions to interpellate me, with its cry for help, but it quickly becomes clear that I, the person who was able to remove the foil, am not really the intended audience. Calcey’s questions address someone with similar experiences and similar symptoms. Someone who knows where to find a gas mask, for example, or how to make life bearable when everything appears toxic. In addition to the interchange between the viewer and Calcey, the foil, as an alternative practice to protect her health, can therefore also be read as a metaphor for the ways in which Calcey is trying to learn about navigating the border between her body and the environment. For Calcey, every object within her living environment has become a potential threat. She writes: “Everything I touch bothers me polyesters material you name it [sic]. I cannot even tolerate 100% cotton futon very well.” The letter suggests a process during which Calcey is becoming aware of the materials that make up her living environment and the ways in which her body responds to those different materials. Through trial and error, she becomes aware of the things in the environment that make her sick, by reading the symptoms that her body describes.

In “Attuning to the Chemosphere” (2015), Nicholas Shapiro defines the process of learning to read the body as a kind of literacy or an alternative sign system. Shapiro writes how allergic reactions to the domestically pervasive chemical formaldehyde can create a “deeper literacy of the chemical world by way of a deeper literacy of [one’s] own body” (383). By learning how to interpret the body’s signals, people can become attuned to the chemicals in the environment. Taking up Shapiro’s notion of literacy, it appears then that there is a form of knowledge production happening at the intersection of the body and the chemicals in the environment. To learn how to read it is to learn how to navigate it. Calcey’s letter describes a knowledge born out of the experience of her body as trans-corporeal.

There is an intimacy that emerges between Calcey’s body and the toxins that affect it, as she gets to know them. For some authors, such intimacy has given rise to fruitful new reflections on the generative dimensions of toxic entanglement (Chen; Ahuja). For Calcey, and throughout The Canaries, the emphasis is put on survival. Learning to read the effects of toxins becomes a way to retain some bodily boundaries. The trans-corporeal subjectivity that these practices reveal emerges as a necessary tool for navigating living with EI in the absence of institutionalized medical support. Importantly, this is not a simple position of victimhood. As literary scholar Yu-Chen Tai notes, “experiences of being injured by toxins never constitute the totality of MCS’ers’ toxic subjectivities” (28). The insert instead represents the
process through which Calcey takes charge of her life by learning how to navigate the porous intersection between her body and the world.

**Conclusion**

In this article I have argued that in *The Canaries* the experience of trans-corporeality never really transforms into a directly recognizable, ethical stance with regard to the intersection between environmentalism and environmental health. Instead the book reveals a more ambiguous stance to the deeply trans-corporeal experience of living with EI: through the usage of foil, the book reveals a painstaking search for ways to navigate EI and to transform it into a liveable condition. These may not necessarily be the public, activist practices that are also necessary as we fight against environmental pollution and unregulated usage of chemicals. Yet I hope to have shown that even when trans-corporeality does not take the form of such actions, the study of how to manage living trans-corporeally, and living with what is essentially a trans-corporeal illness, in itself still has something to tell us about living with toxicity today. In the face of such ongoing violence against the body, the thing is to find a way to keep on living, especially when there is no medical support system to aid you, *The Canaries* suggests. The foil, as an ambiguous indicator of the body’s porosity in its reflective form and make-shift protection in its protective form, speaks to this and draws attention to the fact that trans-corporeality also always implies deep physical vulnerability. In its depiction of chronic illness engendered by widespread toxicity, *The Canaries* invites us to think the contradictory notions of entanglement and boundaries together.

**NOTES**

1. My thanks to Vera Alexander, Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou, Noa Roei, Kim Smeenk, Pablo Valdivia, and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable input on earlier drafts of this article.

2. I have chosen to use the term “Environmental Illness” in this article, because this is the term used by Jensen in *The Canaries*. As Alaimo has pointed out, this illness goes by many names, including multiple chemical sensitivity and chemical injury (2010, 113).

3. Relevant recent publications include Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007); Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble* (2016); Braidotti’s *The Posthuman* (2013); Wynter’s “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom” (2003), and Tuana’s “Viscous Porosity” (2008).

4. In *Exposed* (2016), Alaimo notably does embrace art and activism that “fail” in that “they hardly halt the carbon economy, the clear-cutting of
forests, the devastation of oceanic environments, or the proliferation of plastics” (6) These small revolutions, which Alaimo reads through the lens of queer theory, nevertheless already “resist the urge to externalize the ‘environment’ and instead participate within the immediate, layered worlds they inhabit” and thus already depart from a trans-corporeal understanding (6).

5. Over the past years there have been several news reports stating that aluminum itself is toxic. This pertains to the ingestion of aluminum, through its contact with food. There is a certain irony, then, in the protective function of aluminum against toxicity. It is also worth noting, however, that the production of aluminum—although not necessarily the foil itself, which is known for being highly recyclable—does generate toxic by-products, which also can cause both health and environmental damage.

6. The history of conceptualizing body-environment relations is of greater complexity than I have the space to outline here, for more holistic understandings of the relation between the body and the environment existed before the rise of the biomedical model and never fully disappeared. For more on this history, see Nash.

7. One important exception here is the We Are Canaries collective, which gives visibility to a wide range of experiences with EI and other autoimmune sickness that is much more diverse and inclusive than the dominant image of the white middle-class woman as captured in Safe (1995). Also relevant in this context are the writings of Latina author Aurora Levins Morales Kindling (2013), as discussed by Yu-Chen Tai.

8. But see Dumit’s “Illness You Have to Fight to Get” and Murphy’s Sick Building Syndrome on the role of the internet in facilitating spaces of communication for people with EI.

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