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Journal Title: Sick building syndrome and the
problem of uncertainty : environmental politics,
technoscience, and women workers

Volume: Issue:

Month/Year: 2006Pages: i-34

Article Author:

Article Title: Acknowledgements and Introduction

Imprint:

ILL Number: 173129253



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Acknowledgments

First a seminar paper, then a dissertation, and now finally a book, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty* has been brewing for a decade. It is thus not surprising that I have accrued many debts of gratitude along the way. The faculty and graduate students at the Department of History of Science at Harvard University provided a provoking environment in which to conceptualize, research, and write about twentieth-century science and the history of how things come to matter. In particular, I would like to thank Allan Brandt, Peter Galison, Barbara Rosenkrantz, Katherine Park, Everett Mendelsohn, Carl Pearson, Wendy Lynch, Conevery Bolton Valencius, Alex Cooper, Nick Weiss, Nick King, and Lisa Herschbach. From my time at Cambridge to the present, Evelyn Hammonds has been both an intellectual mentor and a guide in the struggle to remain politicized and grounded as an academic. During a postdoctoral fellowship at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, I met many excellent scholars to whom I am deeply grateful for helping me to sharpen this work, including Sabine Holer, Abigail Lustig, Jens Lachmund, Robert Proctor, and especially Lorraine Daston, who set a standard of scholarship that is truly inspirational. Gregg Mitman has profoundly enriched my understanding of the history of environmental health, and I am grateful for his example of how to be both an excellent scholar and a good person. I would like also to thank the colleagues and friends who have read various versions of chapters over the years or have extended a patient ear, in particular Joe Dumit, Mike Fortun, Kim Fortun, Luciana Parisi, Michael Fitzhenry, Kristen Bucholz, Anna Greenspan, Adele Clarke, Nelly Oodshourn, Lisa Cartwright, Natalie Jeremijenko, Hannah Landecker, Chris Kely, and Elspeth Brown. The participants in the Environmental Health in Global Perspective workshop at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, were instrumental in the refashioning of chapter 5, which I had wrestled over for many years. Also, thank you to my colleagues in the Department of History and the Women and Gender

Studies Institute at the University of Toronto for their support in helping me to finish this book.

During the researching, writing, and rewriting of this book, I was fortunate to receive a D. O. Robeson Graduate Scholarship for History at the University of Toronto; a Graduate Society Fellowship at Harvard University; a doctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; and an Eliot Dissertation Completion Grant from Harvard. I would like to thank the staff at the Schlesinger Archive, as well as Jeanne Stellman and 9to5 for granting me access to their collections there. I am deeply appreciative for the generous help extended to me by NFFE local 2050, particularly by William Hirzy. Thank you to the following people at the Environmental Protection Agency and elsewhere for granting me interviews and providing me with materials: Robert Axelrad, Kirby Biggs, Jeff Davidson, Claire Gilbert, Albert Donnay, Deborah Jaynes, James Repace, Cindy Richards, John Sprengler, Lance Wallace, and Susan Womble. Thank you to Reynolds Smith at Duke University Press for his editorial guidance.

Portions of chapter 3 were published previously by Taylor and Francis as "Toxicity in the Details: The History of the Women's Office Worker Movement and Occupational Health in the Late Capitalist Office" in *Labor History* 41, no. 2 (2000): 189–213; of chapter 5 by University of Chicago Press as "Uncertain Exposures and the Privilege of Imperception: Activist Scientists and Race at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency" in *Osiris* 19 (2004): 266–82; and of chapter 7 by Johns Hopkins University Press as "The 'Elsewhere within Here' and Environmental Illness; or, How to Build Yourself a Body in a Safe Space" in *Configurations* 8, no. 1 (2000): 87–120. Thank you to these presses for their permission to republish this material.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for all their support, love, and patience, especially my parents Ted and Claudette Murphy, as well as Richard and Ellen Price. I am thankful to my two kids for turning out so wonderfully despite the fact that I wrote and rewrote this book bouncing them in one hand and typing with the other. Matt Price has read every line of every chapter at least once if not a dozen times. He is my most incisive critic, greatest advocate, and best friend. I dedicate this book to him.

Take a deep breath and hold it. Do you know how many molecules of air you absorb billions upon billions of air molecules?

Breathe in. Along with air, each lungful you breathe in contains billions of our indoor environments: fibers, vapors, tiny particles, dust, pollen, insect, ment, viruses, bacteria, and fungi. Breathe out.

Breathe in. Do you realize that chemical fumes that you breathe in escape into the air, are drawn into your lungs, pass through your cell membranes and into your blood? Breathe out.

Breathe in. The air you just inhaled has already been contaminated with a grimy, gray, microbe-infested fuzz of organic matter released by decaying building materials. Breathe out. The Environmental Protection Agency designed this exercise as a paraphrase of Tchudi, "Lesson Plan on Indoor Air Quality."

Imagine an office building at the end of the twentieth century. One worker typing at a desk rubs his nose. In a cubicle, a second blows a congested nose. A copier, a third passes a lozenge to a fourth. A coworker's perfume wafts by. A sixth worker sneezes. A complaint begins to form.

Dispersed in far-flung corners of a large office building, information economy at the end of the twentieth century, we have thought twice about their irritation. Latent connections talking to each other. Latent connections. Maybe they were neighbors, or parishioners, or colleagues at the same table during lunch. Perhaps a common thread, an aspect of their work environment, and a common complaint. Three! Complaint comparison became a common thread.

Acknowledgments

to for their support in helping

rewriting of this book, I was
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ociety Fellowship at Harvard
Social Sciences and Human-
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nk the staff at the Schlesinger
to5 for granting me access to
ciative for the generous help
articularly by William Hirzy.
ne Environmental Protection
interviews and providing me
ggs, Jeff Davidson, Claire Gil-
mes Repace, Cindy Richards,
a Womble. Thank you to Rey-
his editorial guidance.

viously by Taylor and Francis
f the Women's Office Worker
the Late Capitalist Office" in
of chapter 5 by University of
nd the Privilege of Impercep-
S. Environmental Protection
d of chapter 7 by Johns Hop-
e within Here' and Environ-
f a Body in a Safe Space" in
hank you to these presses for
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for all their support, love, and
Claudette Murphy, as well as
ny two kids for turning out so
nd rewrote this book bouncing
ner. Matt Price has read every
dozen times. He is my most
friend. I dedicate this book to

Introduction

Take a deep breath and hold it. Do you know that when you breathe in your lungs absorb billions upon billions of air molecules? Now breathe out.

Breathe in. Along with air, each lungful you inhale contains the detritus from our indoor environments: fibers, vapors, tiny airborne insects and their excrement, viruses, bacteria, and fungi. Breathe out.

Breathe in. Do you realize that chemical fumes from the objects around you escape into the air, are drawn into your lungs, dissolve across your alveoli membranes and into your blood? Breathe out.

Breathe in. The air you just inhaled has already passed through ducts encrusted with a grimy, gray, microbe-infested fuzz of debris, hair, dust, and fiber particles released by decaying building materials. Breathe out.—Classroom exercise from the Environmental Protection Agency designed to teach children about indoor air; paraphrase of Tchudi, "Lesson Plan on Indoor Air Quality" (1993)

Imagine an office building at the end of the twentieth century. One worker typing at a desk rubs an eye. Working in a nearby cubicle, a second blows a congested nose. Standing at the photocopier, a third passes a lozenge to a fourth. A fifth begins to feel dizzy as a coworker's perfume wafts by. A sixth, a seventh—a crowd of complaints begins to form.

Dispersed in far-flung corners of a building, these workers in the information economy at the end of the twentieth century may never have thought twice about their irritations. But sometimes they began talking to each other. Latent connections may already have been in place: maybe they were neighbors, or parishioners in the same church, or ate at the same table during lunch. Perhaps a first worker complained about an aspect of their work environment, and others chimed in—Me too, me three! Complaint comparison became a conversational buzz at breaks—

Me four, me five! Repetitions accumulated, and someone began asking questions, gathering in others: Do you feel unwell, too? Perhaps repetitions were recorded in a notebook, turned into signs that together gained new weight. Irritations absorbed into the crowd became symptoms, a collective pattern. Compelled by the din of complaints, other workers might also ask themselves questions about their own bodies. One can easily imagine prying open a ventilation grate and peering inside.

Suddenly a threshold was passed, and now many noticed that they felt unwell. A threshold was passed, and what yesterday had gone by without remark was today intolerable. The multitude continued to grow, giving work in the office building a new rhythm. Workers, mostly women, staged meetings, collected signatures, filed grievances, conducted informal surveys. What had been unconnected, diverse bodily occurrences cohered into an event. Individual symptoms joined the crowd of similarities and became linked in a chain of repetition: in the building . . . in the building . . . in the building. At other buildings, in other cities, strangely similar chains of events occurred. Though many miles apart, they heard news of each other through short newspaper articles or on tv. Workers in one building pointed to workers in other buildings. The crowd, linked by symptoms, declared an occupational health problem. A name circulated, under which all these differences coalesced: *sick building syndrome*.

Becoming Sick Building Syndrome

Before 1980, sick building syndrome did not exist. In order to become "sick," a certain kind of office building had to come into existence. In the 1970s, office buildings became architecturally "airtight" for the sake of energy efficiency, while internally they were arranged in "open" floor plans. Work inside was governed according to novel, cybernetics-inspired techniques of design and administration. New kinds of materials—plastics, solvents, adhesives, synthetic carpet, particle board, dry wall, acoustic tiles, and so on—made up the surfaces that in turn housed computers, printers, and fax machines that were mechanically kept cool and dry. Air-conditioned and carpeted, office buildings stood in striking contrast to the treacherous factories, pitiless sweatshops, and deadly

mines of industrial work. Office buildings, the extension of information work in boom times, took on a middle-class ambiance to delimit themselves from other places, even if wages for many were cornered.

Sick building syndrome was a problem of the relative privilege and luxury that characterized the office class. At the same time, sick building syndrome captured those minor health complaints that were dangers receded. It expressed an experience of the conditions of daily life for the beneficiaries of the office class. At the same time, sick building syndrome was imperfect, even threatened. It could be cordoned off to out-of-the-way neighborhoods. On the contrary, they lurked nearby in the very materials and technologies of postwar modernity. The most innocuous products could be sources of subtle and serious danger on the ground of chemical stimuli.

At mid century, glass-box architecture was a sign of optimism. Yet during the 1970s, a rearticulated environmentalism spawned a new concern that made occupational health, and part of its concerns. Office workers gathered in places with simple photocopied questions to many ways relatively privileged people to question to possibly hidden chemical dangers. Bodies signaled the possible presence of minor ailments such as headaches and cancer. The new physical space of office buildings, society over the buildup of tiny toxic hazards, triggered government investigations of office buildings.

Occupational health investigators who dealt with fires or acute chemical spills—engineers, hygienists—were now called on to inspect comfortable office buildings. Once in office buildings almost never registered a chemical exposure, no errant fume, no physical cause could be more complicated, complaining office workers, a common disease, which could then be

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mines of industrial work. Office buildings, constructed to house the vast extension of information work in booming postwar America, relied on a middle-class ambiance to delimit them as different from industrial work-places, even if wages for many were comparable.

Sick building syndrome was a problem only possible in conditions of relative privilege and luxury that characterized Reagan-era America. It captured those minor health complaints only foregrounded when larger dangers receded. It expressed an expectation of comfort and safety as conditions of daily life for the beneficiaries of the privileges of race and class. At the same time, sick building syndrome expressed the sense that privilege was imperfect, even threatened. Chemical dangers could not be cordoned off to out-of-the-way neighborhoods or distant countries; on the contrary, they lurked nearby in the most unexpected places. The very materials and technologies of postwar comfort and success might themselves be sources of subtle and stealthy chemical exposure. Even the most innocuous products could contribute to the constant back-ground of chemical stimuli.

At mid century, glass-box architecture was accompanied by rhapsodic optimism. Yet during the 1970s, a resurgent feminism and a newly articulated environmentalism spawned an office-workers movement that made occupational health, and particularly chemical exposures, one of its concerns. Office workers gathered complaints about their work-place with simple photocopied questionnaires. Surveys collected the many ways relatively privileged people understood their health as a reaction to possibly hidden chemical dangers in their daily environment. Bodies signaled the possible presence of hazards through common, minor ailments such as headaches and rarer, serious diseases such as cancer. The new physical space of office buildings, combined with anxiety over the buildup of tiny toxic hazards, led to protests that in turn triggered government investigations of office buildings.

Occupational health investigators who traditionally investigated factories or acute chemical spills—engineers, toxicologists, and industrial hygienists—were now called on to inspect nonindustrial, seemingly comfortable office buildings. Once in office buildings, their equipment almost never registered a chemical exposure. No overpopulous molecule, no errant fume, no physical cause could be found. To make matters more complicated, complaining office workers did not even share a common disease, which could then be tracked to an offending germ.

Instead, investigators were confronted with a messy litany of runny noses, scratchy rashes, endless fatigue, burning inhalations, and queasy stomachs. In the early 1980s, these occupational health events acquired the name *sick building syndrome*.

What exactly the name referred to, or if it even referred to anything, was highly contested. In the absence of a definitive cause, some experts claimed that women, who made up the vast majority of office workers, were experiencing "mass hysteria" triggered by stress and facilitated by a feminine coping style or even by menstrual irregularities. Workers' compensation administrators and health insurance companies, in turn, balked at covering a health problem that could not be made to fit traditional explanations. Despite such hesitation, worker protests kept repeating and proliferating during the 1990s, making sick buildings one of the most common types of occupational health investigations in the United States during that decade. A new kind of chemical exposure—indoor pollution—had been identified, not from a discovery in a medical laboratory or clinic but from changes in the ways ordinary people created knowledge about and experienced their everyday environment.¹ Yet not everyone believed that indoor pollution was a real menace. Some scientists, environmentalists, and doctors, bolstered by representatives from chemical manufacturers, held that slight exposures emanating from the commodities of daily life were not a significant worry. In contrast, other scientists, doctors, and activists, joined by experts sponsored by the tobacco industry, held that indoor pollution was in fact a significant worry, perhaps even more so than industrial pollution. They argued that tiny exposures accumulated in otherwise unremarkable interiors and that these exposures, in their sheer multitude, were impossible to untangle from their specific sources. Thus no single product or company could be blamed. Vapors seeped from the abundant and ubiquitous accoutrements of comfortable postwar culture. Was it the new carpet at work? Or the particle board cabinets at home?

As a history of the inside of ordinary office buildings in the twentieth century written at the opening of the twenty-first, this book seeks to capture the ways relatively privileged twentieth-century Americans resided in a world filled with possible chemical exposure. Indoor exposures were possible because the material landscape of privilege had changed in the twentieth century. Yet, unlike the nineteenth century, indoor spaces were no longer filled with smoke and soot from heating,

lighting, and cooking flames; they were no longer filled with oil-based paints, no longer lacking in basic sanitation, and no longer producing organic waste. Of course, even before the twentieth century, there were toxic molecules. In fact, in many ways, the world was cleaner and improved. So why in the late twentieth century did indoor exposures become a serious environmental problem? Pollution became not just materially present but also a visible, knowable object that both experts and laypeople could see and alter.

Historians of medicine have paid little attention to how microbes have become objects of regulation since the advent of germ theory, the development of culture as well as the practice of medicine. We stand far less about how chemical exposures have shaped the twentieth-century world as cultural historians. Sick building syndrome exemplifies the ways in which everyday American life.

The historical scholarship concerning indoor pollution tends to concentrate on the production of indoor air and the uneven distribution of environmental hazards along class lines. The history of nonindustrial pollution is sparse; there is almost no scholarship, bringing together indoor exposures and environmental hazards were not in the twentieth century were deeply gendered. Indoor spaces sites for the articulation of a gendered hierarchy of privilege in which most menial office workers did "women's work." Unlike the experts who focused on the bulk of low-status office workers who were not benefiting from the privilege and safety of the office, during the 1970s and throughout the twentieth century, the building syndrome erupted—office workers used feminisms to challenge this gendered hierarchy and over the environmental conditions in the workplace. It opened contemporaneously with accusations and clashes over women's appropriate place in the workplace.

In debates between experts over the nature of indoor pollution, the fact that women made up the majority of office workers

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organic waste. Of course, even before the twentieth century the objects
and materials that formed and populated interiors could emit potentially
toxic molecules. In fact, in many ways the indoors had dramatically
improved. So why in the late twentieth century did indoor chemical
exposures become a serious environmental health concern? Indoor pol-
lution became not just materially present but also a perceptible, defin-
able, knowable object that both experts and laypeople sought to detect
and alter.

Historians of medicine have paid important and considerable atten-
tion to how microbes have become objects of fear, management, and
regulation since the advent of germ theory, shaping the habits of popular
culture as well as the practice of medicine for over a century.² We under-
stand far less about how chemical exposures similarly came to populate
the twentieth-century world as cultural objects of attention and practice.
Sick building syndrome exemplifies the ways exposures became part of
everyday American life.

The historical scholarship concerning chemical exposures has tended
to concentrate on the production of industrial pollution, tracking the
uneven distribution of environmental hazards across class and race
lines. The history of nonindustrial pollution in comparison, for which
there is almost no scholarship, brings into focus how chemical expo-
sures and environmental hazards were also gendered. Office buildings
in the twentieth century were deeply gendered spaces: they had become
sites for the articulation of a gendered division of labor and a landscape
of privilege in which most menial office work was designated a kind of
“women’s work.” Unlike the experts called to investigate their unrest,
the bulk of low-status office workers were women with aspirations of
benefiting from the privilege and safety of nonindustrial work. Begin-
ning in the 1970s and throughout the 1980s—the decades when sick
building syndrome erupted—office workers could draw on resurgent
feminisms to challenge this gendered division of labor. Thus, protests
over the environmental conditions in nonindustrial workplaces hap-
pened contemporaneously with accusations of gender oppression and
clashes over women’s appropriate place.

In debates between experts over the reality of sick building syndrome,
the fact that women made up the majority of complainants opened up the

possibility of using the diagnosis of hysteria to explain worker unrest. For complainants themselves, practices of feminist organizing, as well as gendered performances of health care and detailed empathetic attention, could be drawn on to produce counter-narratives that argued for the reality of oppressive and unsafe conditions. Whether in ventilation engineering, office management, or worker activism, gender was a generative ingredient in the physical arrangements of the built environment, in the kinds of authority marshaled in debates, and in the explanations used to argue for the existence or nonexistence of chemical injury. This book highlights the versatile and volatile work of gender in twentieth-century practices of rendering environmental health hazards perceptible and knowable. In the 1980s, gender and chemical exposures both generated controversy and uncertainty.

Sick building syndrome was a postmodern health problem, in form as well as time. Not only did it emerge in the information workplaces of the late twentieth century, its definitions encapsulated a conundrum that was postmodern in form: What are we to make of an object with no essence? As a syndrome, it was recognized only as a constellation of symptoms, not by an underlying mechanism.³ A typical definition of sick building syndrome depicted it as a *diversity* of ill health effects, mostly minor and associated with a building, for which *no specific cause* was found. Difference expressed itself in workers' health complaints and in each building's complex conditions. Though many investigators and labor activists hoped that a cause would someday be found, sick building syndrome came to be defined formally through its very lack of causal explanation. In fact, once a specific exposure was detected, an episode was no longer diagnosed as a sick building.

Sick building syndrome was thus a doubly troublesome phenomenon to affirm: it was found in spaces expected to be safe, even comfortable, and it was nonspecific and multiple both in its cause and expression. The words "sick building" signaled a confusion of boundaries between buildings and the bodies in them—how can a building be sick?—and an attempt to make sense of complexity by making buildings the unit of analysis. It was the mantra "in the building . . . in the building," repeated in cities across the country, that lent sick building syndrome its coherence.

Most discussions in the late twentieth century of sick buildings, and transient or low-level exposures more generally, were caught in a debate

about the very existence of these even toxic exposure occur or not? The contrast between sick buildings provided me, as a historian, with how laypeople and experts have struggled with an environmental health problem. In this book, I do not judge in favor of one side or the other. Sick building syndrome as the history of an illness can be interpreted as arguing that indoor chemical exposures are not "real." They can be too easily used to explain chemical injury, too easily plugged into antirealist theories of sick building syndrome was simply a phantom of the medicalization of labor problems by discrediting them. Writing about the historicity of chemical exposures is treacherous when one's arguments are framed as affirming the unreality of exposures.

In this book, then, I take a step back from the sick building syndrome as an entry point for a history by which chemical exposures were grasped. That is, I am concerned with how exposures were understood. In an empirical study of the past, this is not an account of the rise of sick building syndrome. A constellation of histories, each delineating how chemical exposures perceptible or imperceptible, is tent. Instead of resolving the factualness of a chemical exposure, I am concerned with historical questions about which "exposure," as an effect between a building and a phenomenon people could say, feel, and act on. I want to understand the history of how sick building syndrome only materialized but materialized as a constellation of exposures imbued with uncertainty? This is a history of the questions that necessitate thinking about sick building exposures.

Historical ontology is a term developed by the history of science to describe historical accounts of how things, immune systems, subatomic particles, and buildings being as recognizable objects via historical practices. Studies of historical ontology typically have been the result of historically specific practices.

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about the very existence of these events: Were they real or not? Did a toxic exposure occur or not? The controversies around the "reality" of sick buildings provided me, as a historian, with an opportunity to study how laypeople and experts have struggled to prove or disprove an environmental health problem. In this book, I do not employ history to judge in favor of one side or the other. Nor do I set out to explain sick building syndrome as the history of an idea. Such analyses can too easily be interpreted as arguing that indoor chemical exposures were and are not "real." They can be too easily used against current claims of chemical injury, too easily plugged into antilabor arguments that assert sick building syndrome was simply a phantasm of illness, that it was only the medicalization of labor problems by disgruntled and hysterical women. Writing about the historicity of chemical exposures in the recent past is treacherous when one's arguments are always in danger of being re-framed as affirming the unreality of exposures.

In this book, then, I take a step back from this controversy by using sick building syndrome as an entry point into historicizing the practices by which chemical exposures were granted or not granted existence. That is, I am concerned with how exposures were *materialized*.⁴ Though an empirical study of the past, this is not a straightforward chronological account of the rise of sick building syndrome; instead it is a juxtaposition of histories, each delineating how an expert or lay tradition made chemical exposures perceptible or imperceptible, existent or nonexistent. Instead of resolving the factualness or fallacy of any given case of exposure, I am concerned with historicizing the techniques through which "exposure," as an effect between buildings and bodies, became a phenomenon people could say, feel, and do something about. Moreover, I want to understand the history of how chemical exposures were not only materialized but materialized as *uncertain* events. How were exposures imbued with uncertainty? This book treats these as historical questions that necessitate thinking about the historical ontology of exposures.

Historical ontology is a term developed by historians and philosophers of science to describe historical accounts of how objects, such as germs, immune systems, subatomic particles, diseases, and so on, came into being as recognizable objects via historically specific circumstances.⁵ Studies of historical ontology typically hold that what counts as truth is the result of historically specific practices of truth-telling—laboratory

observing, modes of calculating, and, importantly, that the objects of knowledge are also historical.⁶ The fact that things came into being does not imply that they are in ways that humans can perceive. We often know when we know about them. This underlines that it was only in the past that we had ways to detect and manipulate molecules and assert that molecules had always been there. Now that we have molecules, we know them; they are things we cannot live without: bonds, polymers, and other proper ingredients for manufacture. At the same time, we know the possibility that in the future, things that do not exist for us now may come into being and even make the object "molecule" a thing. Thus, attending to the historical nature of things into the concreteness of things in the past, at the same time allowing for the future, ways of registering, slicing up, and knowing the world are, were, and will be. Techniques, social movements,

ways of knowing about the historical ontology of things, that exposures were brought into being under circumstances—the result of not just new arrangements of technologies but also of scientists, and corporate experts making findings on bodies.⁷ Second, I argue that chemical exposures as perceptible and imperceptible were not just that they were imperceptible and unreal. They came into being through multiple ways and terms by which an exposure could

be known, from carpet, ink, and adhesive to the case of sick building syndrome. Environmental scientists have often debated how to know things such as buildings or molecules—in

historical accounts.⁹ Environmental historians have included mosquitoes, prairie grass, weather, geological processes, and microbes as actors that have had important, often deadly, consequences for human history. To grant such actors specific agency in their narratives, environmental historians have tended to turn to contemporary scientific findings in order to characterize their actors' qualities, habits, and consequences. When it comes to chemical exposures, however, contemporary scientific findings, often originating in corporate laboratories, are contested by other communities of experts or by laypeople claiming to suffer chemical injury. The science on chemical exposures is simply unreliable by our contemporary standards of scientific truth. Moreover, no scientific studies exist for a vast number of chemicals used in industry. Thus there is a dual uncertainty when it comes to chemical exposures: first, any incidence of chemical exposure is difficult to pinpoint, even with scientific best efforts, because of the complexity of the phenomenon itself; second, contemporary experts disagree about the import and even the existence of widespread, low-level exposures. This dual uncertainty is thus an important problematic for environmental historians, prompting increased attention to questions of how "unknowing," ignorance, and imperception were not just accidentally but purposefully generated in the history of knowledge practices.¹⁰

Perceptibility and imperceptibility are this book's central concerns. Not only was the ability to register chemical exposures as existent the result of specific historical practices and technologies, but so too was the inability to register them. The history of how objects were rendered perceptible was in the same gesture intrinsically linked to a delineation of what was imperceptible.¹¹ The history of how things come to exist is intrinsically linked to the history of how things come not to exist, or come to exist only with uncertainty or partially. In other words, seeing things necessitates the designation of the unseeable, knowing the unknowable, and so on. *Domains of imperceptibility* were the inevitable results of the tangible ways scientists and laypeople came to render chemical exposures measurable, quantifiable, assessable, and knowable in some ways and not others.¹²

Domains of imperceptibility were produced by limits in the capacities of knowledge practices, limits that were inevitable—every discipline of knowledge studies some things and not others; every scientific instrument can detect some things and not others; every experiment includes

some variables and not others. These material limits in knowledge production were and still are at stake in debates over the existence of chemical exposures. By juxtaposing different, sometimes conflicting traditions of knowledge production—toxicology with popular epidemiology, for example—one can throw limits into relief. I have layered and contrasted a select, and by no means exhaustive, set of histories in which scientific disciplines and lay communities rendered chemical exposures as events that one could or could not do something about. I will call the way a discipline or epistemological tradition perceives and does not perceive the world its *regime of perceptibility*.¹³

Chemical exposures are contentious events. They involve litigation, blame, neglect, and suffering. Chemical corporations, tobacco companies, manufacturers, and employers, as well as government administrations with antiregulation ideologies, have been deeply invested in producing science that minimizes or denies exposures. Such actors have developed techniques that maintain chemical exposure and their health effects as uncertain, that is, as events that one cannot do something about. Over the course of the twentieth century imperceptibility itself became a quality that could be produced through the design of experiments or monitoring equipment in order to render claims of chemical exposures uncertain. Other groups of laypeople and experts have nonetheless developed their own practices and technologies to produce evidence for the reality of harmful chemical exposures. Through their efforts domains of imperceptibility have become populated with all sorts of qualities, such as multiplicity, nonspecificity, complexity, and so on.

It is possible to track the production of imperceptibility because what was generated as imperceptible in one place could be generated as perceptible elsewhere. It is precisely by tracing the confluence of different histories for apprehending office buildings that I have tried to throw domains of imperceptibility into relief. I show that imperceptibility was not only accidentally and inevitably produced, it was also at times purposefully generated and maintained, particularly, but not exclusively, by industry-sponsored science. In either case, this book suggests regimes of perceptibility actively participated in making chemical exposures the phenomena they are today. In order to throw imperceptibility into relief through juxtaposition, this book makes a second argument about the historical ontology of exposures: objects are many things at once.

Multiplicities and Assemblages

A useful way to begin thinking about exposures in ordinary buildings, like the one I work in now, is to see them as one of the ways bodies are related to bodies. We can then ask about the building as an office building? It is a real estate venture, a developer's profit. And at the same time it is a structure of physicality; it is a structure of steel and concrete that mechanically delivers an indoor environment for efficiently organizing the work of people. Its form to economy, and dividing people into departments, plants, logos, and design are symbols of corporate power. Buildings are repetitious, using the same materials and over, so that one becomes disoriented. They can be the same no matter what the particular use. The office building is launched into the world as a hive of activity, bringing people together, creating hierarchies, friendships, and sexual encounters. It is worn out in one area and neglected in another. I work in the building I work in, and the one I used to work in, and . . . and. . . In short, office buildings are multiplicities composed of many histories, of intended and unintended, drawing out spaces and thereby setting the conditions of possibility.

The multiplicitous building connects various ways: guiding movement through space, creating behaviors, demarcating privilege, segregating spaces. The refinement of my question, then, is how these concrete multiplicity, affect the health of bodies. The bodies of women office workers in the late nineteenth century were predominantly in the grunt labor of work. Which is not to say that they were not also gendered and raced bodies dressed in professional attire, differentiating themselves from factory workers. They were only social; they were also organic. They were organ systems, biochemical cycles, and they were organic body deciphered and anatomized.

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Multiplicities and Assemblages

A useful way to begin thinking about the historicity of chemical exposures in ordinary buildings, like the one you may be sitting in right now, is to see them as one of the ways buildings are physically connected to bodies. We can then ask about the buildings themselves. What is an office building? It is a real estate venture, built to maximize the developer's profit. And at the same time, a building has a mechanical physicality; it is a structure of steel and concrete, walls and ventilation ducts that mechanically delivers an indoor atmosphere. It is a structure for efficiently organizing the work of late capitalism, giving material form to economy, and dividing people into function and rank. Its potted plants, logos, and design are symbols of a company's prestige. Office buildings are repetitious, using the same mass-produced elements over and over, so that one becomes disoriented in a built space that seems to be the same no matter what the particularities of its location. Once an office building is launched into the world, it becomes its own unique hive of activity, bringing people together, spawning meetings, hierarchies, friendships, and sexual encounters both wanted and unwanted, worn out in one area and neglected in another. There is this office building I work in, and the one I used to work in, and the one next door, and . . . and. . . In short, office buildings, like all objects, are multiplicities composed of many histories, of "ands," that link in ways intended and unintended, drawing out some attributes and not others, thereby setting the conditions of possibility for buildings.¹⁴

The multiplicitous building connects with the bodies inside in myriad ways: guiding movement through space, indicating appropriate behaviors, demarcating privilege, segregating by race and gender. The first refinement of my question, then, is how did buildings, in all their concrete multiplicity, affect the health of bodies? Not just any bodies, but the bodies of women office workers in the late twentieth century, who numerically predominated in the grunt labor of American information work. Which is not to say that they were only laboring bodies; they were also gendered and raced bodies dressed in middle-class clothes, differentiating themselves from factory workers. Which is not to say bodies were only social; they were also organic, composed of flesh and bone, organ systems, biochemical cycles, and immunological reactions, an organic body deciphered and anatomized by the practice of biomedicine,

that in turn drew on instruments, laboratories, and clinical practices to apprehend and monitor sickness and health. All of this is to say that bodies, like buildings, can concretely be many things at once—they are also multiplicities. Instead of a simple *is*, they are made possible by *ands*: woman and worker and flesh and . . . and . . . and . . . Put simply, objects are constituted through their manifold material relationships, and these relationships have different histories.¹⁵ This is not to say that a sum total of *ands* can add up to a full understanding of a building. Multiplicities are not like the interlocking pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, which fit together to reveal a single picture. Histories may overlap and contradict each other, have varying intensities, durations, and stabilities. Instead of asking, What *is* a building? I will be asking, What are its *ands*? What did its historical relations make possible?

Buildings and bodies were often connected. A building was built with bodies in mind; it became a prosthesis of the body, extending its functions. The body, in turn, became a mobile part of the building; it was vulnerable without the shelter of the building, which supplied the milieu that organized its movements. Buildings and bodies were caught up in one another, sharing themselves in each other's conditions of possibilities, tracing each other's contours.¹⁶ They were in a relationship of mutual presupposition, a mutual capture in which they altered one another. Each was an integral element in the chains of "ands" that made up the other. A building is derelict without bodies inhabiting it. It is very difficult to be a body without the shelter of a building.

I use the term *assemblage* to describe the historically specific patterns through which buildings and bodies were connected, or assembled, to each other and to the objects and practices around them.¹⁷ I define "assemblage" as an arrangement of discourses, objects, practices, and subject positions that work together within a particular discipline or knowledge tradition. It is not the list of elements that make an assemblage consequential, it is what they made possible by the ways they articulated each other.¹⁸ In describing the assemblages within different traditions of knowledge production, I have tried to attend to how arrangements of words, things, practices and people drew out and made perceptible specific qualities, capacities, and possibilities for buildings and bodies. In other words, how an assemblage created a regime of perceptibility.

To get at a given assemblage, I have "cracked open" the archive of

technical guides, minutes of meetings, body parts that made up a scientific tradition. By cracking open, I am looking at way objects, subjects, practices, and work am trying to describe by writing about *ularities*.¹⁹ Regularities are not simply appear often in the historical record. W not hidden, though historical actors may Regularities are the pattern of arrangement and constitutive of a scientific discipline use the abstraction of the assemblage a congealed conditions of possibility for a sayable, perceivable, doable, natural, possible and chemical exposures in a particular history these regularities, I examined archives bearing, feminist labor activism, and toxicology sought to describe the assemblage of practices that governed what was historically possible.

I find the idea of the assemblage a very historically specific ways chemical exposures became events that one could or could not think about. When I used the concept of assemblage, I found that objects existed by virtue of their I tangible and material circumstances. Assemblages of organic and inorganic objects, technologies, bodies, and just of words. In this way, I wish to convey that the twentieth century were materialized as specific qualities—and not others—by virtue of their arrangements. I therefore use the concept of assemblage to describe the material and yet relational way things materializes an object by placing it in a constellation, making it perceptible, outlining possibilities and investing meanings by virtue of its relationships. Or conversely, by ordering a object could be disinvested of qualities, thereby becoming dematerialized, even de

Buildings and bodies were called into being by were assemblages that seized them. A bu

laboratories, and clinical practices to health. All of this is to say that many things at once—they are made possible by *ands*: and . . . and. . . Put simply, objects material relationships, and these. This is not to say that a sum total of a building. Multiplicities jigsaw puzzle, which fit together may overlap and contradict each other, and stabilities. Instead of asking, What are its *ands*? What did its

connected. A building was built with parts of the body, extending its mobile part of the building; it was a building, which supplied the buildings and bodies were caught up in each other's conditions of possibility.¹⁶ They were in a relationship of capture in which they altered one another in the chains of "ands" that made possible bodies inhabiting it. It is very much a part of a building.

the historically specific patterns were connected, or assembled, to the practices around them.¹⁷ I define discourses, objects, practices, and people within a particular discipline or set of elements that make an assemblage made possible by the ways they are assembled within different assemblages. I have tried to attend to how artists and people drew out and made possible, and possibilities for buildings as an assemblage created a regime of

we "cracked open" the archive of

technical guides, minutes of meetings, questionnaires, instruments, and body parts that made up a scientific discipline or lay epistemological tradition. By cracking open, I am looking for an abstract regularity to the way objects, subjects, practices, and words articulated each other. What I am trying to describe by writing about assemblages are historical *regularities*.¹⁹ Regularities are not simply a set of objects or phrases that appear often in the historical record. What I am calling regularities are not hidden, though historical actors may not necessarily recognize them. Regularities are the pattern of arrangement that is repeated, congealed, and constitutive of a scientific discipline or epistemological tradition. I use the abstraction of the assemblage as a means to investigate these congealed conditions of possibility for an archive, what was and was not sayable, perceivable, doable, natural, possible, and so on about buildings and chemical exposures in a particular historical circumstance. To get at these regularities, I examined archives belonging to ventilation engineering, feminist labor activism, and toxicology (to name a few examples) and sought to describe the assemblage of practices, technologies, and words that governed what was historically possible.

I find the idea of the assemblage a very useful concept to talk about the historically specific ways chemical exposures were apprehended, that is, became events that one could or could not say something and do something about. When I used the concept of assemblage, it became clearer to me that objects existed by virtue of their historically specific and yet very tangible and material circumstances. Assemblages are formed of organic and inorganic objects, technologies, bodies, and architecture, and not just of words. In this way, I wish to convey that chemical exposures in the twentieth century were materialized as events with particular kinds of qualities—and not others—by virtue of concrete technical and social arrangements. I therefore use the concept of the assemblage to describe the material and yet relational way things came to matter. An assemblage materializes an object by placing it in a specific social and technical constellation, making it perceptible, outlining form, drawing out possibilities and investing meanings by virtue of its linkages, effects, and relationships. Or conversely, by ordering an object in an assemblage, that object could be disinvested of qualities, capacities, and possibilities, thereby becoming dematerialized, even deemed nonexistent.

Buildings and bodies were called into being in as many ways as there were assemblages that seized them. A building could be part of both an

assemblage of ventilation systems, engineers, and standardization, *and* an assemblage of office work, workers, and occupational health problems. A body could be part of both an assemblage of doctors, insurance companies, and diseases, *and* an assemblage of feminism, consciousness-raising, and personal experience. This is what makes them multiplicities. When I traced any given assemblage by following its history and asking how it works, I found out that each element itself already had many other histories running through it. Our interior landscapes are embedded in a multitude of histories that do not necessarily sit well with each other. Objects or qualities vital in one assemblage may not be relevant in another. One assemblage may bring into being what another disavows or simply does not register. It is precisely by understanding sick buildings as materialized in the encounter of disciplinarily specific assemblages (from engineering, management, toxicology, feminism, popular epidemiology, cybernetics, etc.) that I hope to better understand not only how chemical exposures became part of everyday privileged American culture, but also how chemical exposures became quintessentially uncertain events.

Office workers, thus, did not magically make sick building syndrome out of thin air—poof, now there is an object where before there was nothing.²⁰ It is not so easy to materialize a new object. First, despite what we might wish, the world is not passive and cannot be made to work in whatever way we might hope. Objects were successfully materialized when they captured some of the potentialities and possibilities in our world. Moreover, once materialized, objects were not neutral. They resisted in the manner with which they had already become present. Thus, materializations are always *rematerializations*.²¹ Such rematerialization can sometimes be a form of resistance, not in the sense of liberation but in the sense of maintaining or producing possibilities counter to or cutting across dominant ways of apprehending reality.²² Or an encounter can result in a dematerialization, in which what is done in one assemblage is actively undone in another.

This book tries to show in empirical detail how sick buildings were formed by different, often conflicting, histories that remade and sometimes undid the “reality” of chemical exposures. Sick buildings existed in between office worker protests, feminism, ventilation engineering, toxicology, popular epidemiology, corporate science, and ecology. Many different ways of connecting buildings and bodies seized on seemingly

safe workplaces, and no two seized it in the same way. The intersection of making and unmaking thus became events about which little could be said. I have taken my stake in writing a history of the contested terrain of the historicity of what counts as real, of what is and is not. To do this, I have conveyed matter, not in terms of its essence, rather in terms of the processes of historical becoming, of its arrangements and the effects of power—its *materialize*. At the same time, and like most I have written, I have the importance of environmental chemicals, questionnaires, immune systems, and other physical actors in this process.

Sick building syndrome as a topic in the history of the relationship between history, materiality, and the environment. A materiality about sickness that is very difficult to deny. In debates about sick building syndrome, the voices of chemical and environmental experts were the most prominent. The sick building syndrome was not real, when I say it was. In order to understand the history of chemical exposures, then, I had to examine the history along with scientific ones. Chemical exposures were notoriously difficult events to prove. The subject of the history of materiality and imperceptibility and the history of the sick building syndrome.

The chapters that make up this book are not explanations of specific events. My narrative is a regularities I encountered in my empirical research. A tradition buried deep in my methods: I have tried to be clear. In trying to be clear, I fear my narrative is leaving out much of the messiness. In trying to write histories about buildings and chemicals, I have tried to find the structure over the confusion. Despite this, the reader will be able to imagine how these other histories could also be exploded into multiplicities and how they have been rematerialized.

The book nonetheless remains an attempt at an important subject—chemical exposures. It takes such lengths to think about materiality and the history of the very seriously the problem of writing a history of the

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safe workplaces, and no two seized it in quite the same way. It was at this intersection of making and unmaking that indoor chemical exposures became events about which little could be asserted with certainty. At stake in writing a history of the contested reality of chemical exposures is the historicity of what counts as real, of what did and did not matter. To do this, I have conveyed matter, not in terms of a prior thingness but rather in terms of the processes of history, concrete social and technical arrangements and the effects of power—hence my use of the verb *materialize*. At the same time, and like most historians of science, I insist on the importance of environmental chambers, building materials, molecules, questionnaires, immune systems, and other tangible agents as physical actors in this process.

Sick building syndrome as a topic necessitated thinking about the relationship between history, materiality, and uncertainty. There is a materiality about sickness that is very difficult, and indeed dangerous, to deny. In debates about sick building syndrome in the recent past, medical and environmental experts were the ones most often claiming that sick building syndrome was not real, while workers were more likely to say it was. In order to understand the coming into being of indoor chemical exposures, then, I had to examine lay knowledge practices along with scientific ones. Chemical exposures, moreover, remain notoriously difficult events to prove. The subject itself both provoked questions of materiality and imperceptibility and made them unavoidable.

The chapters that make up this book are about historical regularities, not explanations of specific events. My narratives are abstractions of the regularities I encountered in my empirical research. Yet there is a contradiction buried deep in my methods: I was trying to explain a tangle clearly. In trying to be clear, I fear my narratives are too rigid and simple, leaving out much of the messiness. In trying to diagram the overwhelming histories about buildings and chemical exposures, I have stressed the structure over the confusion. Despite this limitation, I hope that the reader will be able imagine how these other words, objects, and subjects could also be exploded into multiplicities and how they, too, are contentiously rematerialized.

The book nonetheless remains an empirical investigation into the past of an important subject—chemical exposures. I have only gone to such lengths to think about materiality and history because I have taken very seriously the problem of writing a history of the twentieth century's

polluted backdrop and its largely unregistered health effects.²³ It is in this spirit that I have used the terms *assemblages*, *materialization*, and *regimes of perceptibility*, not just as colorful speech but as means of interrogating a problem. I have used the terms as my toolbox, and I try to make them do useful intellectual work. I have no illusion that my methodological toolbox forms an architecture of propositions that finally solves the problem of the relationship between history and materiality or the uncertainty of chemical exposures. A book is also an assemblage, of words, paper, and reader, and I invite you to make use of it as you will.

Map

Though they can be read separately, together the chapters in this book operate as a single argument about the historicity, multiplicity, and imperceptibility of chemical exposures. Each chapter cracks open the practices through which a discipline or epistemological tradition connected buildings and bodies. Most chapters emphasize a disciplinary assemblage of objects, practices, and discourses and the way that assemblage materialized bodies and building and thus rendered chemical exposures perceptible and imperceptible. Some technologies and practices, such as environmental chambers and surveys, reappear in different chapters, so that in reading the book as a whole one might see how these technologies performed differently in various historical circumstances.

Chapter 1 cracks open ventilation engineering and the experiments that set the criteria for the construction of mid-century buildings as machines that provided indoor weather. By examining the assemblage by which ventilation standards were established in the interwar years, I argue that building-machines generated a standardized "comfort" that required a standardized body, while at the same time leaving chemical attributes of the indoor atmosphere as outside of mechanical control, irrelevant to comfort, and imperceptible. How work was organized in office buildings, from Taylorism to cybernetics, is the subject of chapter 2, which examines how distributions of desks, pathways of paper, and the exertion of equipment formed tightly knit material and social assemblages for choreographing the labor of office workers. This chapter outlines the history of the material organization of office work and the ways the exercise of power depended on not only gendered and classed

subjects but also machined subjects. By materialized as parts within a larger context, the 1970s the material organization of office work, the increasing tension between its comfortable and actual status of most office workers. Chapter 3 examines the women's office worker movement in the 1970s and how it rematerialized the comfortable and the actual, and then toxic exposure, that was a part of office work. This chapter argues that the movement used surveys to gather "experience" that in turn was used as dangerous locations, setting the stage for the movement. Moreover, the way the movement rematerialized specific causal narratives untenable.

In chapter 4, the book turns to the practices of toxicology and epidemiology, which had developed in the first half of the century. Chapter 5 examines the methods of the social survey movement and the practices of toxic waste activists. This chapter examines the drama in the clash between two different practices produced by toxicology and popular epidemiology.

The racialization of privilege and invisibility is the subject of chapter 5, which takes as its case study the environmental justice movement of the 1980s and their efforts to define the EPA. This chapter links the invisibility of racialized communities to environmental privilege to its benefactors with the materialization of chemical exposures in buildings. Chapter 6 examines the emergence of privately contracted building ecology and the practice of building ecology. Chapter 7 examines the emphasis on management, relationships, and the practice of taking a managerial approach to indoor air quality, assisting the antiregulatory politics of the 1990s. Chapter 8 examines how multiplicity was made a crucial quality of the time used to shore up imperceptibility. Chapter 9, for chemically injured, this chapter seeks to celebrate the celebration of multiplicity.

The book's seventh and final chapter examines the chemical sensitivity (MCS), a controversial

registered health effects.²³ It is in
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subjects but also machined subjects. By this I mean the way bodies were
 materialized as parts within a larger corporate apparatus. I argue that by
 the 1970s the material organization of office work encompassed a grow-
 ing tension between its comfortable and middle-class milieu and the
 actual status of most office workers. Chapter 3 traces the history of the
 women's office worker movement in the 1970s and 1980s, examining
 how it rematerialized the comfortable office as a site of gender oppres-
 sion, and then toxic exposure, that was dispersed in the minutiae of
 office work. This chapter argues that the office worker movement used
 surveys to gather "experience" that in turn materialized office buildings
 as dangerous locations, setting the stage for the sick building episodes.
 Moreover, the way the movement rematerialized toxicity rendered spe-
 cific causal narratives untenable.

In chapter 4, the book turns to the practices through which sick build-
 ings themselves were investigated. The methods of industrial hygienists
 and toxicologists, which had developed for the study of acute industrial
 exposures in the first half of the century, are contrasted with the meth-
 ods of the social survey movement and later popular epidemiological
 practices of toxic waste activists. This chapter situates sick building syn-
 drome in the clash between two different domains of imperceptibility
 produced by toxicology and popular epidemiology.

The racialization of privilege and imperceptibility is the subject of
 chapter 5, which takes as its case study activism by EPA scientists in the
 1980s and their efforts to define the EPA headquarters as a sick building.
 This chapter links the invisibility of racialized distributions of environ-
 mental privilege to its benefactors with ways of explaining the presence
 of chemical exposures in buildings. Chapter 6 turns our attention to the
 emergence of privately contracted building investigators in the 1990s
 and the practice of building ecology. It argues that system ecology's
 emphasis on management, relationships, and multiplicities facilitated
 taking a managerial approach to indoor chemical exposures as well as
 assisting the antiregulatory politics of the tobacco industry. By looking at
 how multiplicity was made a crucial quality of ecologies and at the same
 time used to shore up imperceptibility and unaccountability to the
 chemically injured, this chapter seeks to problematize any uncritical
 celebration of multiplicity.

The book's seventh and final chapter looks at the history of multiple
 chemical sensitivity (MCS), a controversial illness associated with indoor

pollution in the late twentieth century. This chapter examines the coping strategies of people whose bodies reacted to the indoor environment in ways unacceptable to dominant medicine. It argues that domains of imperceptibility, unintelligibility, and impossibility can nonetheless be densely populated. I trace how chemically injured people practiced experimental divestments and reinvestments in order to bring intelligibility to their bodies and create safe spaces in which to live. I argue that this experimentation was necessary to materialize MCS from below and at the same time dangerous in its reification of unintelligibility to others.

This book sets out to show that sick building syndrome and chemical exposures cannot be adequately understood by answering the question, "Is it real or not?" The chapters' narratives accumulate to argue that the very terms of this question can be understood as an effect of historical processes. Exposures are made to matter.



Crack open an office building con
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aluminum ducts worming through den
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Office buildings were not just luxur
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