

Introduction

Animacy Matters

La facultad is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant “sensing,” a quick perception arrived at by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world.¹

—Gloria Anzaldúa

Why the pathology of race was so dominant a part of Western consciousness or what might be done to change that character was of less concern than how Black peoples might survive the encounter.²

—Cedric Robinson

At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality . . . We must strive every day so that this love of living humanity will be transformed into actual deeds, into acts that serve as examples, as a moving force.³

—Ernesto “Che” Guevara

Liberation Vibrations

Why are embodied Black and Brown subjects (operating as racialized matter for this discussion), too often the targets of irrational violence? In particular, why are alarming numbers of unarmed Black subjects met with lethal force while interacting with the State-sponsored security apparatus? Why is lethal violence against Black and Brown racialized matter insufficiently punished? Why don't Black and Brown lives matter?

On August 3, 2013, the aforementioned questions animated a lively forum at Vibrations, a Black-owned, grassroots cultural center in Inglewood, California.⁴ Housed in a storefront on busy Manchester Boulevard, Vibrations serves a working-class neighborhood with a primarily African-American and Latinx population. The cultural center regularly hosts poetry readings, sociopolitical study groups, book signings, musical performances, lectures, and community discussions. The August 3, 2013, forum was an intergenerational discussion and information-sharing session in response to challenges facing local and national African-American and Latinx communities, including, but not limited to (1) the February 26, 2012, Sanford, Florida, killing of unarmed Black 17-year-old Trayvon Martin by 28-year-old mixed-race Latino George Zimmerman, and the subsequent not guilty verdicts received by Zimmerman; (2) the "school-to-prison pipeline"⁵ in African American and Latinx neighborhoods; (3) intergenerational miscommunication in African-American and Latinx communities, and the delimiting effects on social justice organizing work resulting from this miscommunication.

Another type of lively forum occurred on November 24, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri. The outdoor rally addressed questions similar to the Vibrations forum. The intergenerational discussion and rally was a response to the forthcoming indictment decision regarding Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson who shot unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown. Michael Brown's mother, Lesley McSpadden, was a rally speaker. When a media-feed announced the non-indictment decision, a distraught McSpadden said to the crowd, "Everybody wants me to be calm. Do they know how those bullets hit my son? What they did to his body as they entered his body? Nobody had to live through what I had to live through . . . They still don't care. They're never gonna care."⁶

It is significant that McSpadden's comments focused on the impact of State violence on her son's Black body. The Black mother's interrogatives ("Do they know how those bullets hit my son? What they did to his body as they entered his body?") are an acknowledgment that the attack was an assault on an embodied Black subject, on Black matter. McSpadden recognized that the assault on her son's Black life was a "careless" assault, evidenced by her statements, "They still don't care. They're never gonna care." This perceived careless sentiment is echoed by other rally participants who can be heard shouting, "They don't care about us." "They don't care about us," can be read as the State does not value Black life: Black embodied matter does not matter.

Taken collectively, McSpadden's response, and those of rally members, echo concerns by some in the African-American community that the perceived, relatively low value of Black life is contributing to the startling phenomena of unarmed Black men being killed by the State's security apparatus. In 2014, State security forces killed the following unarmed Black men: Ezell Ford, Akai Gurley, Eric Garner, Mike Brown, Dontre Hamilton, Romain Brisbon, and Charly "Africa" Leundeu Keunang.⁷ The State's security apparatus's aggressive assault on unarmed Black male bodies has overshadowed its problematic relationship with Black female bodies. In July 2015 alone, five Black women (Raynette Turner, Joyce Curnell, Ralkina Jones, Kindra Chapman, and Sandra Bland) died in jail while under the supervision of United States jailers.⁸ It was only after the online #SayHerName hashtag campaign emerged that Sandra Bland's case began to garner nationwide media attention.⁹

In the sovereign power¹⁰ context, this study will analyze best practices, strategies, and challenges related to Black and Latinx subjects' sociopolitical and economic liberation, including gender's liberatory impact. The project will explore how the State's hegemonic efforts to push Black subjects toward bare life provides the framework for the State's efforts to push Latinx subjects and other marginalized populations toward bare life. Donald J. Trump's presidential campaign and post-victory rhetoric featured language that aggressively demonized African-American, Latinx, and other marginalized communities.¹¹ As the State's most powerful representative, Trump's rhetoric signaled an antagonistic attitude toward the aforementioned communities and suggested an openness to State policies that could push these subjects in the direction of bare life.

In conversation with Aristotle, Foucault, and Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben's bare life notion interrogates the space between biological existence (*zōē*)—or “mere life”—and life tethered to political agency and speech (*bios*)—or “good life.” Agamben argues, “The fundamental categorical pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, *zōē/bios*, exclusion/inclusion.”¹² In a more nuanced reading, Ewa Plonowska Ziarek asserts that “bare life, wounded, expendable, and endangered, is not the same as biological *zōē*, but rather the remains of the destroyed political *bios*.”¹³

Alexander Weheliye proffers a generative critique of influential bare life discourses, especially as they relate to theorizing about racialized subjects. Weheliye writes:

Bare life and biopolitics discourse not only misconstrues how profoundly race and racism shape the modern idea of the human, it also overlooks or perfunctorily writes off theorizations of race, subjection, and humanity found in black and ethnic studies, allowing bare life and biopolitics discourse to imagine an indivisible biological substance anterior to racialization.¹⁴

As an alternative to bare life discourses, Weheliye argues that a racial assemblage “construes race not as a biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and non-humans.”¹⁵ Weheliye's racial assemblages idea leans on the work of influential scholar Hortense Spillers's “flesh” notion, of which this project will also attend. While acknowledging Weheliye's cogent bare life critique, this study will employ bare life discourse in conjunction with discourses that explicitly theorize about racialized subjects—especially Black subjects whose *bios* is targeted.

Their political *bios* targeted and destroyed, Black subjects like Michael Brown and Eric Garner can have their bare life, Black bodies destroyed without accountability because they have been “[s]tripped from political significance and exposed to murderous violence, bare life is both the counterpart of the sovereign on the state of exception and the target of sovereign violence.”¹⁶ The State qua sovereign's lack of accountability for killing Black citizens coheres with Agamben's understanding of *homo sacer*.

Agamben makes a genealogical connection between bare life and the archaic Roman law concept *homo sacer*, sacred man. “The protagonist of this book is bare life, that is, the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man) who may be killed and yet not sacrificed.”¹⁷ “May be killed” is a referent to sacred man’s exclusion from the juridical order’s normal operations regarding a citizen and the “unpunishability of his killing.”¹⁸ Sacred and expendable, Black life aligns with Anzaldúa’s understanding of Coatlicue, the indigenous Aztec goddess. Coatlicue represents duality in life and “depicts the contradictory . . . she is the symbol of the fusion of opposites.”¹⁹ Black embodied matter is a fusion of opposites—desired and despised; the State seeks to mark Black bodies as spaces for violence and domination even while framing Black bodies as objects of difference and desire in the American imaginary. Katherine McKittrick avers:

What is it about space, place, and blackness—the uneven sites of physical and experiential ‘difference’—that derange the landscape and its inhabitants? . . . [R]acism and sexism produce attendant geographies that are bound up in human disempowerment and dispossession. This can be seen, most disturbingly, in locations of racial and sexual violence—dragged bodies, historical and contemporary lynchings, rape—wherein not only is the body marked as different, but this difference, precisely because it is entwined with domination, inscribes the multiple scales outside the body itself.²⁰

When State-sponsored violence against Black bodies goes unpunished, it deranges the American landscape, because homicide operates, not as a crime, but as a building block to institutional State power. State security apparatus representatives, these sovereign representatives who killed Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014, in 2016, Philando Castile,²¹ and in 2018, Stephon Clark,²² are operating in “the sovereign sphere . . . in which [they are] permitted to kill without committing homicide.”²³ Officer Jeronimo Yanez’s July 2017 acquittal in the Philando Castile killing is suggestive of this permission to kill without committing homicide. As in the Castile case, Black matter, the embodied Black subject, the sacred man, is *operated on* in this sovereign sphere where Black life has been reduced to bare life—or death. This study is necessary, because there is a need to explore, as

Ziarek writes, “whether bare life itself can be mobilized by emancipatory movements.”²⁴

Animating Black and Brown Liberation reframes Ziarek’s inquiry in the following ways. Among marginalized American communities (which the State often pushes toward bare life), what strategies can be effectively employed to animate emancipatory thought and mobilize emancipatory thought into emancipatory action? Can American literatures²⁵ function as a source of effective liberatory strategies for marginalized folk *operated on* in the sovereign sphere? What theoretical interventions, and practical applications, need to be animated in order that emancipatory strategies, found in literary-based cultural production, can positively influence marginalized communities material conditions, and mobilize their liberatory action? How can art-based counterpublics, and the people who inhabit them, animate liberatory thought and action? This study’s liberation-related nomenclature is purposeful. The historic and contemporary sociopolitical and juridical forces operating on marginalized communities in the United States have had the practical impact of delimiting the life courses of significant numbers in these respective communities.²⁶

Specifically, the process of mobilizing bare life Black and Brown subjects is confronted by a fundamental problem: When a subject is excluded from the good life, and is pushed to the societal order’s margins, the subject can focus on mere life survival rather than emancipatory action. The survival orientation involved in “trying to find a way out of no way” can tack a subject away from the port of collective action, the port of all hands on deck. *Animating Black and Brown Liberation* argues that American literatures are lighthouses that can show a way out of no way. American narratives can illuminate new liberatory possibilities.

Erica R. Edwards writes, “Literature is a repository for counter stories and alternative visions . . . narrative is a dialogic site for reimagining possibilities.” The counter stories of Cherríe Moraga, Toni Cade Bambara, Salvador Plascencia, Ishmael Reed, Gloria Anzaldúa, June Jordan, Wanda Coleman, Kamau Daáood, and others, are so rich in alternative imagination, and emancipatory vision, that they can help guide bare life subjects toward justice—even in the sovereign sphere.

Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* is a narrative that follows several community activists with ties to the Feminist, Civil Rights, Black Power, Chicana/o Power, and Anti-War Movements. The nar-

rative is propelled by community activist Velma Henry's story. Henry has recently attempted suicide by cutting her wrist and placing her head in a gas oven. Burned-out from living bare life, death becomes an option. At the start of the novel, Henry is under the care of community healer Minnie Ransom who accesses indigenous African religious healing modalities in her attempt to heal Velma. Velma resists the healing to such an extent that Minnie asks her, "Are you sure sweetheart that you want to be well?"²⁷ Minnie Ransom's question can be understood as, "Do you want to be more alive?"

Theorists Jane Bennett and Mel Y. Chen's work engage the intersection of cultural production, race, and "levels of aliveness"—while employing nomenclature that seeks to problematize life and its sociopolitical concerns.²⁸ Chen writes, "Using animacy as a central construct, rather than 'life' or 'liveliness'—though these remain a critical part of the conversation in this book—helps us theorize current anxieties around the production of humanness in contemporary times."²⁹ Understanding the production and contours of Black and Brown humanness, the contours of Black and Brown aliveness, is central to this project. In contradistinction to ontological definitions of Blackness and Black aliveness rooted in enumerating brutalities, McKittrick argues that, "the brutalities of racial encounter demand a form of human being and being human that newly iterates blackness as uncomfortably enumerating the unanticipated contours of black life."³⁰ Coterminous with McKittrick's argument, this American literatures study interrogates how emancipatory action, freedom fighting, functions as an ontological prism in which to articulate unanticipated contours of Black and Brown life. In the sovereign sphere context, the State's (and its representatives) inability to accept Black and Brown subjects' full humanity, its rich contours, lays the groundwork for other American subjects to devalue Black and Brown humanity—and, at times, for Black and Brown folk to devalue their own humanity, their own level of animacy.

There is no standard animacy definition, but it has been variously described as "a quality of agency, awareness, mobility, and liveness."³¹ Both Chen and Bennett couch their examination of animacy in a discussion of materiality. Chen imagines animacy "as a specific kind of affective and material construct that is not only non-neutral in relation to animals, humans, and living and dead things, but is shaped by race and sexuality, mapping various biopolitical realizations

of animacy in the contemporary culture of the United States.”³² Bennett’s goal “is to theorize materiality that is as much force as entity, as much energy as matter.”³³

Both Chen and Bennett explore the mapping of matter on animacy hierarchies. In this material hierarchy, as an example, a stone would be placed near the bottom of the animacy hierarchy, because it has relatively low levels of agency, awareness, mobility, and aliveness. Algae, dog, and human being matter would appear as we move up the animacy scale. At the human being level, Chen introduces race into the equation, offering human differentiation, and relative human value to the discussion, which is generative for this study. How and why is one human life deemed more valuable than another? Who determines the process of relative human value, how do value assessors assume this position of power, and what determinative technologies do they employ in the assigning of human value? Responding to Fanon’s important sociogenic notion (“the always socialized nature of our modes of being human, and thereby of our experiencing what it is like to be human”³⁴), polymath Black feminist scholar Sylvia Wynter, whose impressive scholarship and creative work have interrogated the intersection of ontology, race and culture for over 40 years, uses a sociohistorical and cultural frame to briefly outline the development of relative human value.

[T]he globalizing field of the new phenomenon of the Western world system, a field whose origins lay in specific historical events and processes of cultural transformation, that had taken place in Europe; processes of transformation, whose epochal secularization of what it is like to be/not be human, in effect of human identity, was, however, to be gradually imposed on the rest of the peoples of the world.³⁵

Wynter’s outline creates the space to color in how the aforementioned Western cultural transformation intersects with race and contributes to the gradation of human value, which Chen explores on the animacy scale. Wynter writes, “Western Humanism’s two secular sociogenic codes enacting of each form of *Man* (as the incarnation of symbolic *life*), and the Human Others (as the embodiment of symbolic *death*), as codes therefore, to which we give the ethno-taxonomic term of *race*, since they, and which, can be logically enacted only on the basis of

the West's negation of equal co-humanness."³⁶ The expanse between "symbolic life" and "symbolic death" (and their racial representatives) is imbricated with Chen's understanding of the animacy scale and its levels of aliveness. Wynter argues that, through sociohistorical and cultural processes, White male subjects (Man) made themselves signifiers of human life itself, and, as a result, the value of all other forms of life must be ascertained vis-à-vis their relative positioning to this symbolic life.

For Chen, language, in the form of defining, insulting, and shaming, is a technology employed to map racialized matter on the animacy scale. "[I]f animacy gradations have linguistic consequences and linguistic consequences are also always political ones, then animacy gradations are inextricably political."³⁷ Positioning Black and Brown subjects, Black and Brown racialized matter, at the bottom of the human animacy hierarchy is a political act. This political positioning has been, and is being, accomplished, in part, by subjects at the top of the hierarchy using political power to define Black and Brown subjects as less than human—as "approaching animality." Reading Marx's understanding of capitalism's impact on disenfranchised subjects, Chen writes, "[H]uman animality (barbarity) represents the simultaneous legitimation of enslavement, a relative lack of philosophical awareness other than recognition of one's need to be ruled, and a dispossession of right to self-determination (hence, justified enslavement)."³⁸

When subjects at the top the human hierarchy are able to define subjects at the bottom as less than human, as approaching animality, it allows less than human treatment toward bottom dwellers to be normalized; it allows State-sponsored violence against unarmed Black and Brown citizens to be normalized until it becomes unpunishable, as in the cases of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. A similarly troubling negative externality of State-sponsored violence against unarmed Black and Brown citizens is that it contributes to an environment where non-State-sponsored violence against these citizens can go unpunished, as in the case of Trayvon Martin. The State sets the sociopolitical and juridical mapping for moving Black and Brown subjects toward bare life; subjects of the State (including, at times, Black and Brown subjects) follow the road map to assist in moving Black and Brown subjects toward bare life.

The who, why, and how of bare life directional movement will be critical throughout this discussion. Both Chen and Bennett investigate

how movement intersects with power and matter, and how power and matter are mapped on animacy hierarchies. Bennett borrows Bruno Latour's term, actant, to activate her analysis. "An actant is a source of action that can be either human or non-human; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events. It is 'any entity that modifies another entity in a trial'; something whose 'competence is deduced from its performance' rather than posited in advance of the action."³⁹ As an action source, entity modifier, and effect producer, an actant literally moves matter.

With her vibrant matter discussion and "thing-power" concept, Bennett expands on Latour's actant notion by adding and highlighting affect: the movement of emotions. Bennett avers, "The notion of thing-power aims instead to attend to the it in actant . . . since things do in fact affect other bodies, enhancing and weakening their power."⁴⁰ Chen, too, highlights affect in her reading of Latour but accentuates affect's potential to move multiple bodies at once, a perspective that this argument will explore later. Chen writes, "I define affect without necessary restriction, that is, I include the notion that affect is not something necessarily corporeal and that it potentially engages many bodies at once, rather than (only) being contained as an emotion within a single body. Affect inheres in the capacity to affect and be affected. Yet I am also interested in the relatively subjective, individually held 'emotion' or 'feeling.'"⁴¹ Chen would likely be interested in Anzaldúa's relatively subjective and individually held affect, because it is rooted in animating personal and societal change. Anzaldúa writes about animating her creative process:

My 'awakened dreams' are about shifts. Thought shifts, reality shifts, gender shifts . . . I am playing with my Self, I am playing with the world's soul, I am in dialogue between my Self and *el espíritu del mundo*. I change myself, I change the world. Sometimes I put my imagination to a more rare use. I choose words, images, and body sensations and animate them on my consciousness, thereby making changes in my belief system.⁴²

Anzaldúa and Chen are concerned with the relationship between affect and animacy, especially as it relates to increasing agency in racialized embodied matter.

Bennett and Chen's interventions into the relationships between matter, animacy, actants, and affect allows us to return to the concern raised by Ziarek: whether bare life, itself, can be mobilized by emancipatory movements. White male subjects, as inhabitants at the top of the animacy hierarchy in the United States, have the most potential to operate as powerful actants. Historically and contemporaneously, White males in the United States have had the most power to effect and affect other American subjects along the animacy hierarchy—including other White male subjects.⁴³ Historically, White male subjects, as juridical agents and the primary creators of juridical structures, have powerfully effected how American racialized subjects interface with the legal system. White male subjects, for example, legally institutionalized a system of forced servitude, whereby Black subjects were sold as labor and had no legal claim over the rights of their bodies. The affect of chattel slavery on some Black subjects involved debilitating depression, severe shame and self-destructive self-loathing.⁴⁴ In the following chapter, Hortense Spillers argues that these slavery-tethered markings can be passed down through generations. However, the Black Radical Tradition documents a history of agentic, ontological defining resistance to anti-Black violence inclusive of New York City's 1712 slave revolt, Stono, South Carolina's slave uprising in 1739, the Nat Turner-led Southampton Insurrection in 1831, the 1890s crystallization of the Anti-Lynching Movement in which Ida B. Wells featured prominently, the Watts Uprising in 1965, and the formation of the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2013.⁴⁵

In the context of the aforementioned oppressive, sociopolitical and juridical history, animating Black and Brown subjects toward liberatory action is a challenge that necessitates effective organizing and an embrace of aesthetics, affect, and ethics. While acknowledging the unpredictable and indeterminate nature of the aesthetics-affect-ethical relationship, Bennett suggests that this relationship, when linked to exemplary stories, can fire subjects' imaginations and move bodies into action:

One can begin by acknowledging that there is no way to guarantee that an aesthetic disposition will produce or even incline toward goodness, generosity, or social justice. Affect can join narcissism, beauty can serve violence, and enchantment can foster cruelty . . . There are, however, some positive ways to respond to the ethical indeterminacy

of affect, though here, too, no cure exists. One can, for example, argue on behalf of a particular ethical use of affect or, in, what is perhaps, a more effective strategy, tell exemplary stories of such uses in the hope of enchanting bodies and inflecting imaginations towards them.”⁴⁶

Bennett is correct and prudent in addressing the unpredictable and indeterminate nature of the aesthetics-affect-ethical relationship. This study will acknowledge these affect-related concerns while reading “exemplary stories” in American literatures that illuminate liberatory technologies. *Animating Black and Brown Liberation* will argue that an embrace of aesthetics, in the form of exemplary narratives, can help move Black, Brown, and other marginalized subjects into emancipatory action by serving as a repository for liberatory strategies and best practices. The project avers that novels, plays, and poems qua matter are actants, which can affect human matter enough to move human matter into liberatory action. Discussing his Black spatial imaginary⁴⁷ notion, George Lipsitz’s analysis coheres with the art qua matter liberatory approach: “[E]xpressive culture contest[s] the oppressions of race by imagining strategic realignments of place, by presenting strategies for altering scale, scope, and stakes of space—for burrowing in building up, and branching out. They proceed from a philosophy that sees art as a vital part of life of a community.”⁴⁸

Animating Black and Brown Liberation will argue that Black and Brown socially-engaged cultural producers (liberatory novelists, playwrights, and poets) are also actants. These cultural producers’ subject positions as Black and Brown artists places pressure on the idea that subjects positioned at the bottom of the human animacy scale have relatively little power to effect and affect subjects on the animacy scale above them. While acknowledging the problematics involved in “romanticizing” the artist, this study will demonstrate that some activist-oriented artists have the ability to affect individuals and groups enough to animate them into ethical, social justice-related, emancipatory action. Socially-engaged artists have the affective power to move individuals and groups to think deeply about injustice’s moral underpinnings and help move these same individuals and groups from thought to action—from thought to “doing good.”

Reading Kant’s analysis of moral motivation, Bennett writes:

[M]oral motivation involves the power that [Kant] attributes to moral exemplars and archetypes. These ideal, true forms have a kind of centripetal force that draws humans in their vicinity into their orbit; they infect free beings and induce conduct resembling that of the exemplar or archetype.⁴⁹

Socially-engaged Black and Brown artists are not necessarily “moral exemplars” but their activist orientation, access to public platforms to express their art, and general commitment to social justice can signify a desire to “do good”⁵⁰ for their respective communities; these socially-engaged artists can “infect free beings” among the folk, while performing an inspirational, community healer role. *Animating Black and Brown Liberation* will examine American literatures, featuring socially-engaged Black and Brown artist-activist-healer-oriented characters, who are endeavoring to move community members toward emancipatory thought and action; the study will analyze how these characters draw Black and Brown subjects “in their vicinity into their orbit” and “infect” them with a desire to engage in conduct resembling that of an artist-activist-healer—which is to say, infect them with a desire to do good.

This project is also interested in understanding how an artist’s ability to move liberatory ideas into liberatory action can infect a critical mass of Black and Brown subjects, so that these subjects will be inspired to co-create a “movement” of people working to turn liberatory ideas into liberatory action. Aligning with Chen’s reading that affect “potentially engages many bodies at once,” *Animating Black and Brown Liberation* avers that individual socially-engaged Black and Brown artists, creating alone, or in concert with other artists, have the potential to affect many bodies at once, helping to animate a liberatory movement. Using African-American narratives, in particular, is a productive approach to study how Black and Brown socially-engaged artists perform leadership roles in emancipatory movements, because the State’s juridical and sociopolitical disenfranchisement of African Americans (including restrictive housing covenants, employment restrictions, mass incarceration, et al.) established a model for the State’s disenfranchisement of Latinx communities and other American marginalized communities. Erica R. Edwards argues, “[T]wentieth and early twenty-first-century African-American narrative has been a site

of discursive struggle whereby ideals of Black leadership have been both made and unmade, post-civil rights Black fiction and film have often forged political contestation through the formal achievement of *curiosity*: a politics and aesthetics of serious interrogation, playful questioning, thoughtful puzzling, and fantastic reinvention.”⁵¹

African-American author Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* and Latinx author Salvador Plascencia’s *The People of Paper* are both liberatory literary narratives marked by serious interrogation, playful questioning, and fantastic reinvention. *The Salt Eaters*, a novel published in 1980 at the dawning of American neoliberalism’s rise to pervasive influence, is cultural labor that chronicles Black (and people of color) community activists struggling to develop and implement discursive best practices to help their fracturing communities resist hegemonic State pressures. *The People of Paper*, published in 2005 near the apex of American neoliberalism’s rise, is a novel that examines the ways in which Latinx subjects seek liberation from the hegemonic gaze of a disciplining, mysterious, force in the sky. Aihwa Ong understands neoliberalism as a construct that introduces a market-based rationale to a brand of governance that is disciplinary and is rooted in the notion of optimization.⁵² Specifically, Ong asserts that the American form of neoliberalism (the most pervasive and most frequently exported model) is a “market rationality that promotes individualism and entrepreneurship that engenders debates about the norms of citizenship and the value of human life.”⁵³ For Timothy Brennan, along with the goal of dismantling the welfare state, “neoliberalism argues that an unrestrained market logic, freed from governmental restraints, will cure social ills and lead to general prosperity.”⁵⁴ David Harvey maintains, “Neoliberalism is, in the first instance, a theory of political and economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within a[n] institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.”⁵⁵

If neoliberalism can be understood as a vulgar embrace of human commodification masquerading as a liberatory economic technology, then Plascencia’s and Bambara’s novels can be understood as cultural labor that unmasks human commodification masquerading as a liberatory economic technology. In these novels, ankhing animates Black and Brown liberation within neoliberal-era artistic counterpublics, by employing Spirit as an actant to resist State-sponsored hegemony

towards Black and Brown subjects. Ankning can be defined as a process in sociopolitical and economic struggle, whereby individuals and groups organize themselves to resist hegemonic forces, which seek to delimit their subjectivity, their social, political and economic agency, and their power to determine their own life courses.⁵⁶

Ankning and the Spirit

In this study, the Egyptian ankh functions as an indigenous spiritual representation of animacy. In Kemetic (ancient Egyptian) traditional spiritual cosmology, the ankh represents “life, to live, living.”⁵⁷ The ankh has a generative relationship to this project’s understanding of animacy (a quality of agency, awareness, mobility, and aliveness). The understanding of the ankh as animacy is critical because it underscores the agency and mobility of this indigenous African spiritual technology. Ankh qua animacy is particularly productive in a study that examines Black and Brown liberatory agency, and is mindful of Ziarek’s concern: “Whether bare life itself can be mobilized by emancipatory movements.” The action, movement, and affect that the ankning gerund signifies, is the action, movement, and affect that animates sociopolitical movements. Ankning builds upon and reinvents action, movement, and affect in the context of liberatory communal labor: men and women meet in counterpublics to enhance life for themselves and others via animating emancipatory, Spirit-infused movements. During the aforementioned processes, ankning operates as an actant, a “source of action that can be either human or non-human; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events.”

Social justice is the goal of Bambara’s and Plascencia’s ankning-tethered, fictional, sociopolitical movements. Molefi Kete Asante links the ankh to the Kemetic notion “maat,” an ethics-related concept that values living a life rooted in justice,⁵⁸ and to the ancient Malian notion “nommo,” the animating power of the spoken word.⁵⁹ In *The Salt Eaters* and *The People of Paper*, nommo breathes life, breathes Spirit, into social justice work during the ankning process.

The etymological origin of the word “spirit” includes the Latin “spirare,” which translates as “to breathe.”⁶⁰ Spirit is breath, and speech, and song; Spirit’s expression signifies that life is indwelling and, with

each exhalation, the Spirit hails to all present: “recognize—I am.” This call for recognition is both power play and power trap. Spirit’s self-hailing is a power play, because it is a declaration of identity, an establishing of subjectivity in the world of phenomena; Spirit’s self-hailing is a power trap, because it is a call for recognition, in the context of unequal power relations, which leaves the relatively less powerful caller at the mercy of the relatively more powerful receiver—who may choose not to recognize a racialized caller. Franz Fanon argues:

Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose himself on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been recognized by the other, it is this other who remains the focus of his actions. His human work and reality depend on this other and on his recognition by the other. It is in this other that the meaning of life is condensed. There is no open conflict between White and Black. One day the White master recognized without struggle the black slave. But the former slave wants to have himself recognized . . . It is when I go beyond my immediate existential being that I apprehend the being of the other as a natural reality, and more than that. If I shut off the circuit, I make the two-way movement unachievable, I keep the other within himself. In an extreme degree, I deprive him even of this being-for-self.⁶¹

Resistance to this lack of recognition, resistance to this deprivation of being-for-self, necessitates a breath, a speech act, a song of resistance. Sometimes the song is a shout or a shriek because that is all that Spirit, all that breath, can produce when responding to dehumanizing forces. Dehumanizing forces are the hegemonic forces that seek to rob the body of life and Spirit—forces that try to give the Spirit the blues.

In *The Spirituals & the Blues*,⁶² James H. Cone, whose foundational work in liberation theology connects Black freedom possibilities to sociocultural institutions accessible to working-class Black folks, argues that African-American spirituals and their secular progeny, the blues, are critical liberatory cultural productions of the Black expressive culture tradition. Cone posits that “Black Spirit” is the power source of Black spirituals and the blues.⁶³ Cone sets the context for his definition of

Black Spirit by first sharing his spiritual hush harbor⁶⁴ experience of growing up in a Black church in Bearden, Arkansas.

At Macedonia A.M.E. Church, the Spirit of God was no abstract, no vague perception of philosophical speculation. The Spirit was the ‘power of God unto salvation,’ that ‘wheel in the middle of the wheel.’ The Spirit was God himself breaking into the lives of the people, ‘building them up where they were torn down and proppin’ them up on every leanin’ side.’ The Spirit was God’s presence with the people and his will to provide them the courage and strength to make it through.⁶⁵

Although Cone is, specifically, defining the “the Spirit of God” (and not the “Black Spirit”), he is suggesting that the two notions are imbricated. Cone is implying that the “Spirit that was God’s presence with the people” is the Black Spirit, and suggesting that the Black artists, the Black spirituals singers who helped to bring the Black Spirit to Macedonia A.M.E.’s parishioners, were able to do so because that same Black Spirit was *in* the Black spirituals singers. Cone argues that as a result of this Black Spirit presence, the singers were able to invoke the Black Spirit throughout the congregation, like a dialectical contagion that spreads the weary blues, while simultaneously serving as a liberatory blues vaccine. This blues vaccine, this collective spiritual healing as resistance, is an articulation of Clyde Woods’s blues epistemology notion that “involves the constant reestablishment of collective sensibility in the face of constant attacks.”⁶⁶

The Spirit resists constant attacks by the State’s biopower, the State’s ability to make live and let die;⁶⁷ Spirit rejects social death⁶⁸ as it embraces Black becoming. The holy shout, yell, and scream announce, “I’m alive.” This spiritual dialectic between artist and community creates a unity that can be placed in the service of collectivist emancipatory labor inside and outside hush harbor walls:

‘Have mercy, please.’ This cry is not a cry of passivity, but a faithful, free response to the movement of the Black Spirit. It is the movement of the Black Spirit. It is the black community accepting themselves as the people of the Black Spirit and knowing through his presence

that no chains can hold the Spirit of Black humanity in bondage . . . Black music is unity music. It unites the joy and the sorrow, the love and the hate, the hope and the despair of black people; and it moves the people toward the direction of total liberation.⁶⁹

“Have mercy, please,” the speech act operating as moan and lyric, is a public acknowledgment of immense discomfort. This moan/lyric is a blues lament inoculating fellow blues people. In the blues epistemology⁷⁰ context, Woods writes, “Born in an era of censorship, suppression, and persecution, the blues conveyed the sorrow of the individual and collective tragedy that had befallen African Americans.”⁷¹ Shared epistemic sorrows visited upon racialized Black subjects animates Black Spirit’s conductivity in the communal space. Experiential blues knowledge, blues epistemology, allows the Black Spirit to pass from person-to-person in a hush harbor Black church, or pass from person-to-person in a hush harbor Black cultural center. This transference can occur during artistic performance. The Spirit can pass from ancestor to person (when invoked by a speech act, operating as a moan/lyric) where, as Fred Moten asserts “shriek turns speech turns song.”⁷²

However, Cone makes access to this dialectic transference restrictive. Cone makes the essentialist argument that “it is not possible to render an authentic interpretation of Black music without having shared and participated in the black experience that created it. Black music must be *lived* before it can be understood . . . And that experience is available only to those who share the *Spirit* and participate in the *faith* of the people who created these songs.”⁷³ Certainly, the specific, racialized experience of a Black subject (whose ancestors began their sojourn in North America as Black objects, as property, as capital) is likely to have unique insight into the meaning and Spirit of spirituals and the blues. However, relatively low melanin levels do not occlude the Spirit from entering into a non-melaninized subject, especially when that non-Black subject has experienced their own specific type of blues. It is possible that a White, transgender whistle-blower, who had been imprisoned for revealing State secrets (that State citizens have a right to know), probably understands enough about the blues to moan her way through 16 bars until shriek turns speech turns song.

The blues’ powerful artistic beauty (and the Black Spirit’s powerful artistic beauty that animates the blues) has the potential to liberate

Black subjects; Black Spirit is informed by nature, by embodied experience, but it is not confined by nature, by racialized phenomena: the epidermis cannot prevent the blues from doing what the blues do. This cultural production has the potential to liberate a subject who has known significant subjugation and is willing to let the powerful, emancipatory Spirit of art have its way. While remaining aware of G. W. F. Hegel's aesthetic and philosophical racism,⁷⁴ his insight into the intersection of art, Spirit, and liberation is productive:

For the beauty of Art, is beauty that is born and born again of the Spirit; and as the Spirit and its productions stands higher than nature with her phenomena, so does also the beauty of Art stand higher than the beauty of nature . . . for in such a fancy there is involved both spirituality and freedom.⁷⁵

It is this spirituality and freedom, the spiritual and the political, that the ankhing process seeks to honor, cultivate, and use as liberatory technologies in artistic counterpublics. Ankhing technologies embrace the power of the sensorium. In the ankhing process, feeling and the rational are not strange bedfellows; they are embodied bedsisters. Audre Lorde argues:

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling . . . [I]t has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical. 'What do you mean, a poetic revolutionary, a meditating gunrunner?' In the same way, we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic . . . The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge.⁷⁶

Lorde is interrogating masculinist modalities of power and advocating for a more expansive, gendered subjectivity that is open to the use of "what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings."⁷⁷

Building upon Lorde, erotic power is erotic energy, erotic vibration. This vibration can be transformed into liberatory motion, liberatory movements. The aforementioned transformation was on display at *Vibrations* during that warm, August night in Inglewood, California, described in this chapter's opening. The social justice passions in a crowded room of articulate, committed activists exchanging ideas and exchanging energy, engendered a palpable eroticism to the proceedings. In physics, the Law of Conservation of Energy states that energy cannot be created or destroyed, instead, it only changes forms or is transferred from one object to another.⁷⁸ Yet, in this transference, a percentage of heat and energy is lost. Although not writing in scientific terms, when Lorde suggests transferring erotic energy to liberation energy, she does not reference the energy lost, the slippage, during the exhausting organizing work that is freedom work. This slippage is why artistic counterpublics like *Vibrations* are so critical; they are venues where like-minded activists can re-energize, regain lost energy and regenerate the life force necessary to maintain effective engagement in liberatory labor. Paradoxically, in the revivifying exchange of erotically-charged, liberation energy, some emancipatory passion is lost in the fire.

Coterminous with Lorde's understanding of erotic power, the power propelling ankhing technologies in *Vibrations*-like artistic counterpublics is often suspicious of rigid hierarchies, though not immune to them. Ankhing-tethered processes have an epistemological openness (though not replete) to non-patriarchal leadership modalities, a respect for generative, communal labor, and a battered weariness from what Erica R. Edwards calls the "violences of charisma,"⁷⁹ which emanates from "one of the central fictions of black American politics: that freedom is best achieved under the direction of a single charismatic leader."⁸⁰ Echoing Edwards, the ankhing process resists the Great Man approach to community liberation and embraces an emancipatory communal labor approach.

Although the ankh (and ankhing by association) is a productive technology to employ given the subject, direction, and scope of this project, it can be argued that the icon's use is problematic due to its connection to 1960s through 1990s-era Black Nationalism/Afrocentrism, which, at times, embraced misogyny, homophobia, and narrow, exclusionary Black essentialism. In the context of virulent