

# Who Vibrates?

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There are things you shake. You shake apple trees to ask for fruit. Climbing trees, to see how much they can hold. Presents, bags of treasure, boxes of cereal, jars of coins—you shake to know what is inside, how much is left, how much is there to go still.

You shake the hands of people you don't know, the shoulders of people you thought you knew, maybe also to find out what is inside them. You listen, carefully, to the sound of the person being shaken, try to hear—what is inside—how much is left—how much can they hold?

—Carolyn Chen, *Threads*

CAROLYN CHEN'S *THREADS*, "FOR AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER strung to wind chimes at a distance and a story on tape," is a performance piece lasting around a quarter of an hour in which we hear the composer speaking to us on a recorded track, while the performer on stage is instructed to interpret Chen's words for us in American Sign Language (ASL) (2014a;

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2014b). Chimes made from paper, leaves, wood, and glass tremble over the audience in response to the movements of the ASL interpreter on stage. At times, the narrator's voice trembles as it spins strands of folkloric simplicity and pop-cultural fantasy into a dream haze of tip-of-the-tongue allegory.

Chen's recorded voice evokes the telling of folktales or stories for children in its bold but simple language. Indeed, its opening address—"You told me a story once . . ."—evokes the archetypal "Once upon a time . . .," situating us in the past tense of the fairytale (2014a, 4). The naturalistic setting of fairytale or myth resonates in the text's sea, fish, birds, or "my body . . . pulled, into the body, of a tree" but is expanded upon by contemporary comic-book counterparts with "superpowers," legs that can stretch "like chewing gum," and the ability to "travel at super speed" (2014a, 4–7). To a certain extent, Chen's choice of language provides readymade syntax and pathos, which support cohesion even as the story itself swerves, fractures, and ultimately escapes any unified teleological reading. The bubble of safety provided by the fantastical, which expands physics and circumscribes the impact of even extreme violence, provides a space for images whose cumulative effect is a meditation on communication and the corporeality of language.

In a preface to the performance score, Chen notes:

Living abroad at the time of writing, issues around communication—who you are able to communicate with, what you have the ability to express, what is able to be heard or understood—were particularly foregrounded. The writing moves between different voices, sometimes matter-of-fact, sometimes wrapped-in-a-dream. The feeling is of coming at English from Chinese, or writing sentences as music. (2014a, 2)

*Threads* layers moments of communicative passage across a surprisingly wide range of linguistic, narrative, and material junctions. As Chen notes, the question of linguistic expression and comprehension was at the forefront of her mind during the work's conception. On the recorded track, the narrator describes how "voices became water, dissolved into points, and floated, flew out, and away." The stories the narrator tells and those the narrator tells us she is told continually return to "issues around communication," but the way

they do so suggests that the problem is not necessarily one of linguistics or semantics. Rather, in the universe Chen brings to life, these issues become fleshy: the narrator's "tongue was a fish, it swam away," while she addresses another storyteller whose "mouth was full of water, water you couldn't hold." It seems tongues themselves take on a life of their own, while voices are physically prevented from leaving their bodies. Joseph Jonghyun Jeon finds similar mouths—which are either recalcitrant or hyperactive depending on your perspective—in the poetry of Myung Mi Kim, some of whose attempts to find poetic expression for the experience of learning English he describes as requiring "an exercise of the mouth, a veritable workout of the tongue." For Jeon, Kim's poetry captures the physicality of a foreign language as it dissolves semantics and revolves around repeating sonic fragments, linking words by shared sounds and mouth shapes (2004, 137). To paraphrase Chen, this "coming at English from Korean" reveals that communicative passage is not a question of translation between equivalencies but rather of a productive act across multiple orders. The loss usually posited as inherent to translation and representation is shown instead to be an excess of new meaning. When we "can no longer see . . . the language for the mouths," we are discovering something new about both language and mouths (Jeon 2004, 147).

Chen's *Threads* orchestrates a similar excess of new meaning not just in addressing communicative difficulties in its text but also in its premise of having its performer interpret the spoken text as their primary task. While the protagonists in Chen's story find their attempts to communicate challenged by their own mouths, and these difficulties give rise to fantastical situations and solutions, the interpreter engages in a live translation of the text into ASL, in the process producing a new version of the protagonists' struggles. Just as Myung Mi Kim's approach to English casts new light on its sounds and physical demands from a culturally specific experience, this act of translation is not a question of one-to-one—or even lossy—transmission but instead a productive passage marked by cultural difference and relation. As Jessica Berson writes, the culture of "DEAF-WORLD"—an attempted translation of the ASL term for the deaf community—might best be understood as "a linguistic minority group more in line with groups defined by ethnicity, religion, or

sexual orientation,” and as such it brings with it its own cultural forms and expressive possibilities (2005, 44). The artist Christine Sun Kim describes being told by her cousin that she “behaved as if I had lived my whole life in another country with their customs and rules” but goes on to imagine a future in which her own relationship to sound is as valid as that of normative hearing culture, and where her “own language [ASL] would be good enough” (2015, 34–35).

Sun Kim’s work seeks to capture her personal relationship to sound both as physical phenomenon—movement, vibration—and cultural form—the reactions, responses, and expectations she observes in the behavior of hearing individuals. She characterizes part of this practice as “a loose translation of sound to another form” (Selby 2011), and this translation between sensory forms is found echoed in Chen’s protagonists, who constantly find hearing and sight mismatched: “You signaled, but I didn’t hear,” “I couldn’t see, what they were saying,” “I wanted to tell you, but you couldn’t hear” (Chen 2014a, 4–5, 7). While these intersensory junctures might at first seem like points of communicative failure, Chen hints at the productive quality of these sites of sensory translation when she describes the feeling of struggling to communicate across language barriers as akin to “writing sentences as music” (2014a, 2). Her interest in intermedia work provides a rich terrain for hybrid expression of this kind, a form of expression already present in her childhood piano studies, which she has described as “a kind of willed sensory hallucination, trying to inhabit the bodies of people and things I was not—channeling the energies of teachers, sumo wrestlers, bears—and projecting this onto the instrument” (2016).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, *Threads* stages just such a projection of feeling across participants and begins to reveal the materiality of these connections. While the bond between recorded voice and ASL interpreter is implicit—its physicality is one of sound waves and photons—the threads binding the interpreter to the chimes are far more obviously material and begin to raise questions of who is translating whom and where the origin of the agency in *Threads* lies. For a hearing audience, we might speculate that the obvious flow is from Chen’s digitized voice, to the signing interpreter’s body, along the threads, and into the chimes above the audience. At each step in this causal chain, we encounter something or someone whose agency is increasingly delegated

to the previous actor, until we arrive at quivering leaves, pulled around on the end of a string.

In a sound-normative society, the expectation is that the sounding voice precedes and dictates the possibilities of the signing body. However, Chen's compositional decisions shape the performance to trouble that hierarchy. In deciding to place her narrative voice on tape, she denies it the opportunities for bodily expression that the signing interpreter on stage has. One is never presented as the low-fidelity reproduction of the other, nor do they compete for superiority in a given register. Each is allowed to contribute its unique qualities, which form a hybrid multisensory register.

#### VIBRATING MATTER

If Chen's *Threads* stages a network of sensory translation and transmission of expressive vibration—if, perhaps, the transmission of expressive vibration might stand in as an abstracted description of music itself—the questions arise: who or what is vibrating and what is necessary for a translation to take place? If we take vibration as the starting point for an analysis, implying that in doing so we are able to bridge sensory registers and modes of being, what further implications are there?

In recent “New Materialist” thought, vibration seems to lurk not that far below the surface as a force animating the material world. In Elizabeth Grosz's understanding, “art unleashes and intensifies . . . the creative and destructive impact of vibratory force on bodies, on collectives, on the earth itself” (2008, 62). Her description of art as a question of force and energy, drawn from a Deleuzian chaos, captures succinctly the primordial qualities attributed to vibration, with music granted the power to render sonorous “forces . . . that are themselves nonsonorous” (57). Christoph Cox's call for a “sonic materialism” also takes up this language in proposing an analysis of the “complexes of forces materially inflected by other forces and force-complexes” he argues are present in sound art, also tracing this form of analysis back to Deleuze (2011, 157).

In the vital materialism Jane Bennett lays out in *Vibrant Matter*, vibration is an implicit presence throughout. Bennett chooses “vibrancy” as the primary

quality of matter “to induce in human bodies an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality” with the politico-philosophical aim of rescuing the material world from being perceived as so many inert, powerless objects (2010, x). Through both theory and examples, Bennett urges us to see matter as lively and capable of action, revisiting Spinozan *conatus* as the power invested in every “body,” human or not (2010, 2). In this context, vibrancy seems very close to its etymological roots, with vibrant matter not simply being full of life but *matière vibrante*, agitated and quivering to demonstrate its agentive capacities. As Bennett makes clear, her project is to work on “onto-theological binaries” but at the same time has an “aesthetic-affective” component that is of equal importance due to its potential for reshaping the political sphere (2010, 104–8). Similar to these ostensibly egalitarian goals, Cox believes that conceiving of sound as “anonymous flux” will help us escape a number of familiar binaries: “culture and nature, human and nonhuman, mind and matter, the symbolic and the real, the textual and the physical, the meaningful and the meaningless” (2011, 157). In other words, turning to sound’s materiality and force will allow us to access a broader, less anthropocentric perspective on artistic phenomena, just as Bennett’s attending to the vibratory quality of matter will bring the nonanthropic back into the political fold.

In all of these projects, there seems to be an appeal to vibration as natural or fundamental. Vibration is drawn from an elementary chaos for Grosz, is an animating property for all matter for Bennett, and precedes “cultural history” for Cox (Cox 2018, 234). Although ultimately all three theorists are interested in vibration’s impact on social questions, all three also locate the source of this vibration as preceding human perception, something Marie Thompson has termed an “origin myth” (Thompson 2017, 266; James 2018). To begin to trouble the question of vibration’s naturalness, we might take mridangam artist and composer Rajna Swaminathan’s definition of sound art as “an offering of resonance or vibration, in the context of a community that might find something familiar, of aesthetic value, or socially cohesive, in the gestures and sonorities presented.” Swaminathan describes how it has been hard for her to think in terms of “sound” with its implications of presocial vibration, recognizing instead through practices of intercultural performance and improvisation that these vibrations are always already “in the context of a

community” (Swaminathan 2018). If we return to the premise of our reading of *Threads*, namely, that ASL interpreter, recorded voice, and chimes interact across sensory registers, constituting a work particularly open to diverse forms of apprehension, we might also begin to suspect that the vibration operating through the eponymous threads is not a “pure intensity,” as Grosz might have it, but a social phenomenon as much as a material one (Grosz 2008, 31).

Alongside a conception of vibration as a natural phenomenon, vibration also receives an endorsement as the aesthetic-affective force of choice due its perceived friendliness. Key to Bennett’s work is her insistence on matter’s cooperative nature. Her depiction is of vibrant matter as an open and productive partner, filled with “creative activity,” which specifically resists comprehension “in terms of social structures” because its powers exceed a “conditioning recalcitrance or capacity to obstruct.” While framed in terms of an extension of a fuller agency to the nonhuman material world, it is also clear that the social modalities of resistance, recalcitrance, or obstruction belong to “stolid wholes,” not the vibrating actants of a happier world (Bennett 2010, 35). Robin James has observed similarly rose-tinted conceptions of vibration in its application in “social physics” and the theories of Hartmut Rosa. She describes Rosa as interested in vibration in that he “imagines resonance as connectedness, the capacity to affect and be affected by people and things that are different from you.”<sup>2</sup> As James points out, this vaguely resembles sympathetic resonance and posits a kind of universal acoustic sociality in which vibration passed between individuals is capable of resolving and harmonizing difference (James 2017b). James’s analysis of social physics reveals a similar conception of vibration as sympathetic and cooperative via resonance and ultimately harmony: “a harmonious society is one whose parts are arranged in accordance with the principles of social physics, namely, the ratios and probabilities that result from ‘having a mathematical, predictive science of society,’” and this science relies on a vibratory description of the force by which social interactions move through large groups of individuals. In both cases, vibration and the potential for harmony are abstracted to an apparently natural plane such that they appear “seemingly objective” (James 2017a).<sup>3</sup>

That vibration is portrayed as pliant and cooperative—a normalizing force that smooths over difference—raises the question of what being accorded vibration means for the vibrating thing. Bennett directly opposes her “creative” actants with those who only have the “capacity to obstruct” (2010, 35), and in this context, vibration’s invocation for its perceived affective politeness suggests the agency granted vibrant matter is tied to its perceived capacity to *con*-struct. This cooperative urge is ultimately what allows vibrant matter to act most powerfully “in or as a heterogeneous assemblage” (2010, 23), but one wonders what happens to these vibrations if they encounter such an arm as that found in Sara Ahmed’s account of willfulness. Ahmed takes up a horrifying story from the Brothers Grimm of a “willful” girl whose perceived disobedience is punished with death and whose arm continues to come up out of her grave until it is beaten down by the girl’s mother with a rod. As Ahmed notes, “willfulness is used as an explanation of disobedience,” willfulness is an excess of will, while the disciplining rod “is not deemed willful.” What is interesting about the story is how the arm posthumously receives the girl’s willfulness, which is “displaced . . . from a body to a body part” (2017, 67). Like vibrant matter, the arm is animated by an agentive force, operating independently of the rest of its body, driven by a will of its own. Unlike vibrant matter, however, the arm is seen as obstinate and recalcitrant. It will not cooperate, and because it is expected to be obedient, it is judged to be willful. Ahmed’s account provides a correctional to Bennett’s vibration in that it makes explicit that willfulness—or cooperativeness—is not an objective attribute of certain people or things. Rather, the girl’s willfulness is predicated on gendered ideas about her behavior, on what those adjudging her willful expect her to be: “willfulness is assigned to girls because girls are not supposed to have a will of their own” (2017, 68).

While warning against the risks of an anthropomorphic gaze, Bennett does not provide an equivalent account of how her aesthetic-affective project is impacted by what precedes a human encounter with vibrant matter (Bennett 2010, 99). Indeed, vibrancy can be read alongside willfulness in the sense that, despite its presentation as a positive and empowering attribute, vibrancy is granted specifically to matter that is not expected to have agency. Vibrancy, it would seem then, is not an affect of agency but of an agency’s being judged



to be excessive. Here we might return to Swaminathan's "vibration in the context of a community," a formulation that invokes "community" as that which precedes, as that which determines vibration's affect. This definition generalizes, for sound art, what Ahmed's analysis of willfulness shows: that properties attributed to a subject's object are in fact properties of the object-for-the-subject. In reading vibration alongside willfulness, the political implications of these New Materialist approaches begin to come into focus.

#### VIBRATION AND RACE

In unraveling liberal subjecthood's development hand-in-hand with European colonialism, Lisa Lowe cites British ordinances in occupied Hong Kong that grant police broad powers when dealing with "persons . . . who cannot give a satisfactory account of themselves." Lowe writes that:

The subject "who cannot give a satisfactory account" cannot be ethical because he cannot place himself in relation to a community from whose norms he is constitutively excluded, and in whose norms he would need to grammatically constitute himself. (Lowe 2015, 245)

Lowe presents in great detail the ways in which European liberalism takes care to place certain people outside of its definitions of subjecthood, making—among other things—their disenfranchisement, dehumanization, and enslavement possible, with race as the critical vector for the enactment of this exclusion. In this example, we encounter quite concretely what is at stake in the attribution of agency or willfulness. Those "who cannot give a satisfactory account of themselves" are deemed willful and, as a consequence, can be detained by police at will. As with Ahmed's example of the willful girl, it is not that the colonial subject does not have agency or that an account of him- or herself is not possible, but that these are foreclosed by a legislating *community* that renders the account illegible-for-the-community (Lowe 2015, 124).

While willfulness and unaccountability are figured as negative by their judges and vibrancy is presented as a positive attribute (with its judges elided), Lowe provides a telling example for understanding what is at stake in a

relation to vibrant matter, or in the judgment of a thing as vibrating. In her exploration of cuteness, Sianne Ngai catalogs ways in which a Western subject—that of the European avant-garde—adopts “cute” things as handy helpers in philosophy and poetry, citing “Stein’s cup and cheese, Williams’s plums, and Ashbery’s cocoa tins . . . Wittgenstein’s cooking pot, Heidegger’s jug and shoes” (Ngai 2005, 841). In her analysis, Ngai suggests that although the affect of cuteness is generally positively connotated, there is in fact a violence in the attribution of cuteness, because it “names an aesthetic encounter with an exaggerated difference in power” (2005, 828). If this is the case, then we might argue that the attribution of vibrancy may also arise not from an equalizing gesture but from a preceding inequality. Indeed, preempting Bennett, Ngai writes of “how easily the act of endowing a dumb object with expressive capabilities can become a dominating rather than benevolent gesture” (2005, 832).<sup>4</sup> In other words, by electing to deploy the affective shimmer of vibrancy as matter’s route to expression and agency, we may in fact be more interested in drawing matter into our own existing systems of knowledge, affect, and communication.

There is of course a significant difference between Lowe and Ngai’s examples: while Ngai presents a power difference between an object nominated as cute and its subject, Lowe addresses the power difference between a human excluded from sociality by the legislative impacts of a European liberal subject. The material circumstances and repercussions of these two dominations are not equivalent even if they bear a formal resemblance. Nevertheless, these formal resemblances come into sharper focus when one considers Ngai’s further work on affect and race. Similarly to how she understands cuteness as a product of a power imbalance between the apprehended and the apprehender, Ngai elaborates a concept of “animatedness” that

foregrounds the degree to which emotional qualities seem especially prone to sliding into *corporeal* qualities where the African American subject is concerned, reinforcing the notion of race as a truth located, quite naturally, in the always obvious, highly visible body. (Ngai 2007, 95)

Ngai’s animatedness can be juxtaposed with Ahmed’s willfulness in the sense that while willfulness names the subject who has too much will, animatedness

is attributed to those for whom will is foreclosed. Unlike the sovereign subject whose body is seen as acting under the subject's control, the animated body is seen as being unwilling and uncontrolled. The animated subject cannot give an account of itself because, like the colonized Chinese "vagrant" in Lowe's example, it is "constitutively excluded" from the community that constitutes it as animated. Because it is assumed to be incapable of will, its actions are attributed to animation. Ngai reads a scene from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in which Tom's preaching is rendered not as his speech or self-expression but rather as "a kind of ventriloquism: language from an outside source that 'drop[s] from his lips' without conscious volition" (Ngai 2007, 97). The affective force behind animation is so strong that even speech can be perceived as driven by automatism or puppetry, transforming from a sign of communication, rationality, and agency, to a sign of a body out of control, a body only capable of speech through an act of ventriloquism. In this there is a strong resonance between Stowe's Tom and the reception of performances by the enslaved musician Thomas "Blind Tom" Wiggins, who Willa Cather described as "a human phonograph, a sort of animated memory, with sound producing powers" (Brooks 2014, 398). Cather's description rests on the same assumption as Stowe's, that the expression of these enslaved men—one historical, one fictional—could only be explained by mechanical replication: Blind Tom is a machine for the passive reproduction of music but is not granted any creative capacity; Uncle Tom has absorbed scripture to such an extent that it can animate him without his intervention.<sup>5</sup> In both cases, vibration is granted the power to take hold of these men such that their music and speech shake them like rag dolls.

For a more recent example of how animatedness denies a subject's capacity for agency, we might turn to a 1999 Kentucky Supreme Court ruling, in which it was decided that a witness could "identify a voice as being that of a particular race or nationality" from its sound alone (Eidsheim 2015, 22). As Nina Sun Eidsheim notes, this judgment rests on "an assumption that the speaker in question did not completely control his body, and therefore could not help but sound in a way that identified him" (2015, 23). In this case, the possibilities for vibration in the vocal cords of the speaker are believed to be constrained by a preceding racial imaginary. His voice must necessarily be-

tray his racialized body, because his race is believed to be an objective and natural part of his corporeal being and therefore a defining constraint on his voice. In effect, vibration is attributed not to the subject's will but to a separate animating force, in this case some kind of force unavoidably present in the racialized body. In rendering voices as will-less, race is naturalized via vibration, and the subject falls prey to animatedness.

Eidsheim finds the same assumptions at play in approaches to classical vocal pedagogy during her own studies as a singer, writing that "all but two teachers told me that they can always tell the ethnicity of the singer by his or her vocal timbre" (Eidsheim 2015, 4). This racial logic is extended to a variety of bodies but significantly is withheld from "singers who appear to be European American," which is to say that in establishing this logic, the operative force is a whiteness that grants full subjecthood and thus protects the individual from being judged to have a recalcitrant, uncontrollable body (2015, 25). Following Eidsheim's analysis of the Kentucky Supreme Court ruling, it is clear that these teachers hold the belief that there are irreducible, racially determined characteristics in the voices of students who appear Asian American or African American, for example, that are not present in the voices of European American students, whose "inner essence" does not pose such corporeal resistance (Eidsheim 2015, 6). When Ngai describes Stowe's depiction of Tom as likening him "to an instrument, porous and pliable, for the vocalization of others," she also describes the circular logic that generates animatedness: a white gaze vocalizes itself through Tom's body by seeing it as animated, and in the process claims his body to be an instrument animated by others (Ngai 2007, 97). Eidsheim describes the same circular process, writing that "whatever we believe is projected onto the sound" (2015, 11). Through this projection, what we believe becomes considered a natural attribute of the sound, and the white gaze turns transparent, an objective lens or perfect resonant system through which the world is faithfully and truthfully transmitted.

Such a generative but unacknowledged whiteness as that observed by both Ngai and Eidsheim is what John Gillespie has critiqued as "a resurfacing of epistemic violence" through a denial of "the epistemic agency of the thing" with regard to the theory of vibrant matter. He argues that Bennett's approach is ultimately scuppered by the elision of her white gaze, linking her approach

to the “thing” with the white gaze’s forceful history in the legislation of black bodies as objects or things. Specifically, drawing on Frantz Fanon and Fred Moten, Gillespie suggests that a failure to engage with histories of racialization and radical black thought on objecthood dooms an analysis of the thing to reproduce historical violence. Reversing Bennett’s call for “not Flower Power, or Black Power, or Girl Power, but *Thing-Power*,” Gillespie counters that “to see the fact of blackness is to see that Black Power, is always already Thing Power” (Bennett 2010, 6; Gillespie 2017).<sup>6</sup> In his own critique of New Materialist thought, André Carrington also questions the reinscription of Enlightenment humanism onto objects, characterizing this epistemic projection as relying “for its stability on nonhuman objects fashioned out of human flesh.” Carrington describes his reluctance to engage with the fruits of post-humanism by acknowledging—unlike the theorists he is pushing back against—that he could only engage with such ideas as an object’s having agency from an “explicitly Black and human” perspective. Echoing Moten like Gillespie, Carrington knows “that objects can and do resist, but the reason I know this—my epistemological ground—is that my ancestors were objects” (2017, 281). These perspectives challenge New Materialist thinkers to tackle the racial and historical lacunae in their theories, arguing that a failure to do so risks reproducing many of the errors New Materialism claims to address.

For Lowe, Ngai, and Eidsheim, it is clear that historical and social subjects—European liberal humanist, white, and male—produce affective relationships to individuals who are excluded or understood as different, which naturalizes those differences, rendering them as objective givens. Ahmed’s theorization demonstrates the affect of willfulness to be the product of a similar generating subject: while the gender of the girl in Grimm’s story is generative of a judgment of willfulness, Ahmed writes that “the willful child is also the story of the subaltern,” the willfulness of the colonized subject who cannot speak to give an account of him- or herself (2017, 80). The implications are broad and carry varying weights, from furnishing “the economic, as well as political and humanitarian, rationales for British imperial governance in Asia” (Lowe 2015, 104) to shaping current classical vocal practice. To be clear, the ways in which things may be read as symptomatic of this line of thought are many, and the impact is anything but singular or monolithic. These

examples provide us with both a more generic understanding of the stake of power for the relational subject as well as specifically situated analyses that impact upon how we approach vibration and its affective relatives, including resonance, vibrancy, and animation.

Theories that would take vibration as a universal, underlying force capable of resolving both political and ontological questions need to deal with how they continue in the vein of unsituated, uncritically Eurocentric thought that universalizes its subjects and fails to take account of its own productive gaze. In response to Cox's sonic materialism, Marie Thompson formulates a corollary to the white gaze she dubs "white aurality," which succinctly summarizes the elision at the heart of Cox's and others' New Materialist thought. Thompson describes how whiteness is able to perform its vanishing act through the deployment of "a racialized perceptual schema that is at once situated and 'modest' insofar as its own, active presence is obscured" (2017, 278). The "active presence" of whiteness—whiteness's generative and productive impact on perception—is "obscured" by assuming what it generates to be objectively true. Cox's contention "that cultural history supplements a natural history that vastly preceded it" and therefore that a natural history—the objective real of material vibration—is valid ground for his sonic materialism to explore, repeats precisely the move that Thompson and others above have identified (Cox 2018, 234). This is not to argue that vibration does not exist or that all and any perception of the material world is only an illusory simulacrum; rather, that any account of vibration must acknowledge the relations that produce it. Cox dismisses Thompson's critique as "classic relativist," but as Robin James responds, this supposes a plane of equivalencies, where whiteness is "one option among fungible, interchangeable options" rather than an approach that acknowledges inequalities and imbalances in relations (Cox 2018, 238; James 2018). White aurality is not an equal but different counterpart to other auralitys, because it alone is granted the privilege of generating its own invisibility to listen in to a vastly preceding natural history.

The problem with Cox's sonic materialism, then, is not its engagement with the material world per se but its inability to deal with race and power imbalances by insisting on a universalizing epistemological frame. If we are to deploy theories of the material world, these need to account for the historical

and situated epistemologies they relate to. As James writes, “it is entirely possible to form abstractions that do not abstract those ongoing relations of domination and subordination away” (James 2018). Similarly, while exploring her concerns and suspicions of New Materialism, Kyla Wazana Tompkins writes of how, even if lacking at this point, “New Materialist thinking must necessarily engage radical interdisciplinarity,” which “in turn brings us back to the provocations of left, feminist, queer, and critical race theory” (2016). While Cox proposes a sonic ontology, Tompkins suggests that in fact materialist approaches should take on a reinvigorated engagement with their preceding but unacknowledged kin, whose diverging epistemologies give the lie to the scientific tendencies of such New Materialist strands as object-oriented ontology. For example, like Gillespie and Carrington, Tompkins identifies cross-pollination with work “that seeks to reorient western epistemologies from the point of view of those who have never been human”—such as that of Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, and Alexander Weheliye—as an approach that may save New Materialism from its tendency to claim a natural neutrality. She also argues that the seeds for an antirepresentational analysis “of the micro-workings of biopolitics in the contemporary mediatized political era” can be found in materialist approaches—an approach arguably represented by Eidsheim’s “micropolitics of timbre,” which identifies how racialized perceptual regimes operate through constant judgments about the materiality of the voice (Tompkins 2016; Eidsheim 2015, 14). In Tompkins’s view, these interdisciplinary efforts can address such exclusions as those identified by Thompson in “white aurality” by revivifying materialist analyses with approaches that explicitly tackle social differences rather than eliding and naturalizing them.

#### “AN AMBULANCE MADE OF FIREWORKS”

To return to Carolyn Chen’s *Threads*, we might reevaluate its narrator as describing the vibration ascribed by a productive subject when she speaks of how “you listen, carefully, to the sound of the person being shaken, try to hear—what is inside—how much is left—how much can they hold?” In *Threads*, shaking is a knowledge-producing practice in which vibration is the medium for the transmis-

sion of information about an object—“bags of treasure, boxes of cereal, jars of coins”—but this shaking makes explicit the intervention of the subject in the generating of affective vibration (Chen 2014a, 4). The “sound of the person” is as much the person being shaken as “what is inside”—an “inner essence” or natural vibration. Unlike the ventriloquizing vibratory affect of animatedness, the shake clearly implicates the shaker. By amplifying the shake in the staging of *Threads* through a series of suspended chimes, Chen renders material this relational practice, treating the vibration that her music offers not as a preceding flux that she taps into but as a messy product of the social bodies involved. For the onstage performer, ASL guides their movements as their gestures “shake” the chimes as well as conveying linguistic meaning. Chen’s staging draws attention to the multiple meanings and apprehensions of vibration by different individuals, emphasizing in her text a constant crossing of seeing and hearing, akin to the visual–social perception of sound described by Christine Sun Kim (Selby 2011). Instead of being presented as a singular vibratory truth, *Threads* demonstrates the social complexity of vibration.

Spurred on by Tompkins’s critique of New Materialism, Michelle N. Huang asks us to consider the potential of materialist approaches “to reconcile the divide between the representational and deconstructionist modes of feminist, critical race, queer, disability, and animal theory,” seeking to find ways in which materialist readings might in fact provide new inroads to talking about race. For example, Huang suggests that materialist readings may counter the assertion that a text is or isn’t “about” race by instead detecting race’s presence as it is folded into objects or aesthetic positions. In her view, such adoptions of New Materialist methodologies “are productive not because they move us ‘beyond’ race . . . but because they make visible how race is always embedded within the production of the cultural forms used to fabricate the human.” Huang reads poet John Yau’s “Confessions of a Recycled Shopping Bag” for just this kind of presence, suggesting that the poem’s repetitive focus on color in the bag’s “self”-description—“I used to be a purple polyethylene pony,” for example—is reflective of a broader social obsession with skin color—“I used to be a pleasant red colleague”—but that the multiple colors the bag “used to be” indicate that “the banal mechanism of racial identification is less an essential characteristic than one repeatedly transformed through



various different means of production.” Huang presents a convincing attempt at reading an object’s aesthetic presentation for situated and socially vectored qualities without the object itself having to represent or be “about” those qualities. In doing so, she does not argue that there is “a master molecule for race” inherent to the objects being read but that these objects’ qualities are coproduced in the context of a community (Huang 2017).

Carolyn Chen’s performance essay, *This Is a Scream*, provides us with an opportunity to try to take up Huang’s challenge and read materiality for traces of racialized perception (Chen 2017). A 20-minute work written to be performed by Chen herself, *This Is a Scream* has been compared by the composer to a podcast or TED Talk in which she discusses how difficult it is for her to scream while playing audio examples that blur the lines between scientific specimen, reportage, and acousmatic composition (Daniel 2017). As she unravels what a scream is, Chen tries to get closer and closer to its fleshy vibration, saying that she would like “to hold it in my hand and turn it this way and that, to prod it and spread it apart to see what’s inside, because it sounds to me like there are all these glistening little parts hiding in there” (Chen 2017). Like a hybrid radio producer–scientist, Chen tries slowing down Justin Vernon and Nicki Minaj’s screams on “Monster,” from Kanye West’s 2010 album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, to be able to probe deeper into the detail of these guttural roars. The slowed-down screams descend lower and lower in pitch, digital samples separating into a rumbling bass vibration, but Chen expresses regret that she is “also losing the scream by slowing it down.” Turning to language to try to capture what attracts her to Vernon and Minaj’s screams, Chen draws on a kaleidoscopic range of highly tactile imagery:

If the sound of the scream were a picture, it might be an ambulance made of fireworks. The color would be red and shiny and grainy and feathered because there’s something a little fancy about it. If it were a fish, maybe it’d be a giant shark, swarmed by all the little flashing fishes, the entourage, and the dentistry, swirling, sparkling around him like fairy godmother skirts. (Chen 2017)

Similarly to the language of *Threads*, this fantastical description of the scream attempts a kind of sensory translation, gathering a gallery of vivid objects to

stand in for the scream's affective power. Chen's vision of the scream is pervaded by danger via a giant shark with deadly teeth and an ambulance made of explosives—the glissandos of sirens and whistling rockets resonating with one another—but the grain of Vernon's and Minaj's voices are heard as also possessing a glittery and glamorous aspect, an "entourage" conjuring celebrity, perhaps the sparking of camera flashes glinting off the shark's teeth. Later Chen compares the scream to a "molten chandelier." This sensory translation is an attempt to get closer to a thing—the scream—that Chen can't seem to embody herself. Chen turns to a literalist analysis of "blood curdling"—an adjective often and almost exclusively used for screams—for a further material sense of what the scream does. Curdling milk thickens and clumps, so she asks, "what would be the sound of cottage cheese squishing its way through arteries?" This continuous mapping of affective qualities from the scream to other objects gradually accumulates to be a speculative material thesaurus for people who can't scream but might have visited a public aquarium, eaten cottage cheese, or have arteries. Like the sensory translation at work in *Threads*, this thesaurus attempts to render the affect of the scream for a range of apprehending bodies, exposing the wealth of different meanings within what at first appears to be a unitary vibration.

Key to Chen's attraction to the scream is her own inability to scream. There is a gently comic but also moving undertone to Chen's efforts: she enlists friends to scream for her, she asks for instructions, she rehearses screaming as one might singing, searching for the break in her voice. Nevertheless, a friend hears her and laughs, "that's not a scream" (Chen 2017). It appears that—like the voices analyzed by Nina Sun Eidsheim—her body is found to resist her efforts and her screams never fully scream (Eidsheim 2015, 23). Chen has described the piece as being "about the limitations of my body as opposed to this universalized body," and in this description we start to see how she acknowledges race to be operating beneath the surface of the glittering scream (Daniel 2017). In attempting to understand why she cannot scream, why she is coming up against this limit in her body, Chen recounts how she "grew up in suburban New Jersey, where I was one of two Asian kids in class and neither of us made much sound, talking or otherwise. I think we tried as much as possible to disappear." The scream, however, "lights up the world

around it,” calling attention to itself and the screamer in a way that she feels she has tried to avoid (Chen 2017). Chen identifies race as a factor in her own physical difficulty to produce sound. The very real, material resistance brought on by racialized expectations and socialization recalls Huang’s realization that “despite knowing that race is a mutable fiction that is socially and materially distributed through networks of power, I could never say, even for a moment, that I do not ‘believe in race’” (Huang 2017). Huang stresses that this is not to say that race can be located as originating from and naturally present in bodies perceived to be raced, rather that she is acutely aware of how forceful race is regardless of its fictionality. Chen’s restricted voice also resonates with Ngai’s reading of John Yau’s “Genghis Chan: Private Eye,” in which the speaker announces, “A foul lump started making promises in my voice” (Ngai 2007, 92). Ngai contends that the process through which this “lump” asserts itself in Genghis Chan’s throat “might be read as an allegory of how the Asian American becomes forced into the position of model minority,” that the lump, whose sensory presence is physical or material, in fact is an embodied experience of an enforced social role that suppresses the subject’s capacity for expression (2007, 93). Chen describes a desire to experience the scream for its power to release feelings caught in the body but finds herself denied this release by her inability to scream. Trying “as much as possible to disappear” leaves one holding feelings and unable to let them go by drawing attention to them. Like the investigatory shaking described in *Threads*, vibration appears to ask, “How much can they hold?” (Chen 2014a, 4). The scream is a mechanism for allowing what is being held to escape, but this escape can be blocked by a lump in the throat.

Ngai contrasts Chan’s animation by the lump, which generates a stereotypically “silent, inexpressive, . . . emotionally inscrutable” Asian subject, with other forms of animatedness, which produce “exaggeratedly emotional, hyperexpressive, . . . ‘overscrutable’” subjects, such as that of Uncle Tom discussed previously (2007, 93). This exaggeratedly emotional figure surfaces in *This Is a Scream* when we consider how Chen draws on Kanye West’s “Monster.” The track is a showcase for verses from West, Jay-Z, and Nicki Minaj, in which each lays claim to being a monster “in ways that reinforce fantasies of triumph and invincibility” (Winters 2017, 292). Of particular note is Minaj’s

contribution, in which she virtuosically veers between alter egos, tackling the titular monstrosity with what Joseph Winters describes as “a split subject who wears different masks and takes on different sexual and gender identities to navigate and trouble a male-dominated space and visual terrain” (2017, 296). The voice attributed to Minaj’s alter ego Roman Zalanski increasingly ends lines with a snarling delivery as the verse progresses, culminating in the closing scream—“I’m a motherfucking monster”—that Chen picks up for further examination (West 2010). As Winters highlights, Minaj’s use of alter egos allows her to trouble her gendered voice, contrasting the delivery style of Zalanski with the higher-pitched and relatively softer vocal style of the alter ego Barbie, while constantly asserting her artistic and financial worth. Chen tries to zoom into Minaj’s scream through digital processing but is confronted with the fact that:

As she slows down, I start to lose her voice, her gender, her language. She becomes indistinguishable from Bon Iver. By 85 percent [slower] she might not even be a person anymore or even an animal. She could be a glacier. What kind of feelings is that? (Chen 2017)

Chen is disappointed to find that Minaj’s skillful deployment of sonic masks is lost to abstract vibration as the speed of the recording slows and her voice becomes a low-frequency quaking. In this moment, we are shown that the scream is not simply a glittering cascade of vibration to be picked apart, but that this sound most forcefully resonates in its expression of the personal, as a release or sharing of pain or energy in the context of a community. The slow scream may in some sense consist of the same material as the original, but it dissolves the original’s affective force by loosening its contact with its social signifiers—it generates an abstraction that “abstracts away from ongoing relations of domination and subordination” (James 2018). As Minaj is slowed down, she appears first as an animal and then a glacier. If the monstrousness claimed by Minaj, Jay-Z, and West is presented as evidence of their exceptional skill and power, the technique of slowing completes the connection between the monster and the “pernicious legacy of associating Blackness with the ‘not quite human,’ with that proverbial space between the human and the

animal” (Winters 2017, 292). The slow scream is rendered animal or geological, but in important ways it is simply no longer a scream, because a scream is the vibration of someone screaming, because the vibrating subject is not a neutral resonant body.

Answering the question of who vibrates requires us to take into account such theories as those of white aurality or timbral micropolitics. These describe how vibration is not a natural or cosmic force detectable in the trembling of objects but an affective category that rests on subjects’ power relations within sociocultural contexts. Theorists of vibration can learn from feminist analyses of willfulness and readings of colonial archives that reveal subjecthood’s situated histories. Understanding sound art or music as vibration “in the context of a community” affirms the material impact of vibration, while acknowledging its continuous productive relation to generative subjects who are not equivalent or interchangeable. Mirroring Chen’s inability to scream, our inability to hear the scream, relies on our inability to see the screamer as human.



#### NOTES

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1. Arguably, it is precisely Chen’s intermedia work and interest in “sensory hallucination” that characterize her music, but it is also these properties that lead her to be “not infrequently . . . told that my music is not music” (Chen 2016). The insistence on categorical

boundaries exposed in this refusal to assign Chen's work to music demonstrates an enduring impulse toward purity, toward "the divisions, the splits, the displacements that make the possibility for the discovery of rationality" that Ashon Crawley criticizes with regard to Kantian epistemology (2017, 115). In this sense, Chen's work and similar work by others is not only a contribution to music but a musical contribution to anticategorical philosophical thought. For more on the impulse to insist on separating "music" from extraneous "non-musical" qualities, see James (2016).

2. We might hear in this description of Rosa's work an echo of Bennett's search for "an orientation organized around the power of bodies-in-encounter, using 'power' in Spinoza's sense of the capacity to affect (to make a difference upon other bodies) and to be affected (to be receptive to the affections of other bodies)" (Bennett 2015, 95–96).
3. Both James (2017a) and (2017b) are work-in-progress excerpts toward James's forthcoming book *The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance and Biopolitics* (Duke University Press). For more on the naturalization of harmony, see James (2010, 37–49). In her work on timbre, race, and the human voice, Nina Sun Eidsheim finds concepts with strong parallels to those in social physics critiqued by James. For example, voice teachers assume racialized properties of their students' bodies will determine what a healthy voice must sound like and work toward maximizing resonance and freeing "blockages" to access "what they understand as the singer's 'inner essence'" (Eidsheim 2015, 6).
4. To further understand the ways in which Bennett's vibrant matter might resonate with both Ngai's critique of cuteness and her concept of animatedness, see Bennett (2015). Bennett reads a television advertisement for GAP trousers, identifying the trousers as having what she terms "animacy," and asking "are the pants animated by the flesh of the dancers, or were the dancers animated by the clothing?" (2015, 98) This example shows how a theory of vibrant matter can begin to render human action as unwilled and driven by a preceding, material vibration (here attributed to the dancer's trousers), which as we have seen is presented as an implicitly universal or natural phenomenon, foreclosing analyses that take into account the observer and the observed's positionality.
5. George E. Lewis has noted the parallels between Karel Čapek's writing on the robot, chattel slavery in the United States, and such comments as Cather's on Thomas Wiggins, connecting conceptions of mechanistic or robotic labor with the withholding of subjecthood from those abducted and forced into slave labor (Lewis 2015).
6. I am grateful to Timothy McCormack for drawing my attention to Gillespie's intervention.

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