

Introduction

IS THERE ROOM in the dehumanizing history of race to talk about a figure whose survival is secured through crushing objecthood?

This study argues there is a distinct kind of human figure whose endurance and enchantment entail a fusion between synthetic objecthood and organic personhood in ways that demand a fundamental reconceptualization of what Frantz Fanon has named the “racial epidermal schema.”¹ Our principal, though not exclusive, case study for this human formation—ornamental, at once abstract and material, embodied and disembodied—will be the yellow woman. This designation is not meant to essentialize but to name the processes of racialization, with all their historic and living force, that adhere to the Asian/Asian American woman in American culture. The term *yellow woman* denotes a person but connotes a style, promising yet supplanting skin and flesh, an insistently aesthetic presence that is prized and despoiled. The particularity of this kind of object-person who is radically undone yet luminously constructed—that is, meticulously and aesthetically composed yet degraded and disposable—troubles some of our deeply held, politically cherished notions of agency, racial embodiment, subjecthood, and ontology.

While widely acknowledged as one of the oldest and most commonplace figures of sexist and racist denigration, the yellow woman remains largely absent from critical theory. As Maitreye Chaudhuri laments, when it comes to Asian American feminist scholarship, there is “a rich body of writing on women’s activism on the one hand and a sparseness of *theoretical* writing on the other.”² This is not to say that

there has not been vibrant, if not widely recognized, Asian American feminist activism, a social and political movement accompanied by groundbreaking works from writers, scholars, and artists, especially in the 1980s and 90s. But Asian American critical feminism remains hampered by the divide between practice and theory. If Asian American feminist theory feels stuck in the first wave, and if the mere mention of the Asian woman these days invokes critical fatigue, it is partially due to this stubborn gulf, not to mention the ongoing suspicion of so-called Western, universalizing theory, even though, when it comes to an other who has been deeply woven into and out of the history of Western aesthetic history, it is misleading and unproductive to continue to think in terms of Western abstraction versus Eastern reality. Indeed, decades of symptomatic and redemptive readings have reproduced this figure as always and only a subject of *ressentiment* with all the limits of this critique, as Wendy Brown has diagnosed for women's studies in general over two decades ago.³ Unlike the shattered "fact of blackness," which has been recomposed for the mournful black subject through a rich body of theoretical gambits (Fanon, Spillers, Weheliye, Musser, and more), the "fact of yellowness" remains an active myth that enjoys no critical stature and whose cultural capital, if we can call it that, remains the source of its dismissal.⁴

We have yet to look closely at the strange figuration of the yellow woman because she/it stirs up a set of embattled issues that have always haunted feminism: the distressing affinity that can exist between agency and complicity, antiessentialism and authenticity, and affirmation and reification.⁵ Exemplifying a symptom that is neglected by being all-too-known, she stands to the side of a prevalent contemporary feminist and racial discourse centered on the "injured flesh," which has not been as attentive to a racial and gendered figure whose fleshliness survives through abstract and synthetic rather than organic means, and whose personhood is animated through, rather than eviscerated by, aesthetic congealment.

Simultaneously consecrated and desecrated as an inherently aesthetic object, the yellow woman calls for a theorization of persons and things that considers a human ontology inextricable from synthetic extensions, art, and commodity. Instead of being pure capture or representing fugitive flight from the nominative biological or anatomical raced body, the yellow woman emerges as a "body ornament" whose perihumanity demands that we approach ontology, fleshliness, and aliveness differently. By perihumanity, I mean to identify the peculiar in-and-out position, the peripherality and the proximity of the Asiatic woman to the ideals of the human and the feminine. At once closely linked to ideas of ancient civilizational values and yet far removed from the core of Western humanist considerations, she circles but is excluded from humanity. She represents feminine values but is often not considered a

woman at all. In *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics*, Monique Allewaert offers us an evocative account of another kind of interstitial being, what she calls the “parahumanity” of Africans and Afro-Americans, who were also not considered human beings while not being precisely inhuman. Allewaert explains, “I put animals, parahumans, and humans in horizontal relation (that is to say, *para* or beside each other) without conflating them. . . . Afro-Americans drew on the brutal colonial circumstance of dismemberment and bodily disaggregation to produce models of personhood that developed from the experience of parahumanity and in relation to animal bodies.”⁶ I am interested in thinking about the yellow woman as a comparable form of interstitial life, but in intimate relation more to objects than to animal life, and with a body that is not so much disaggregated as thickly encrusted. If black parahumanity by way of Allewaert offers us a way to consider the potential of “a condition of fragmentation between the human and the animal,” then seeing the perihumanity of yellow womanhood enables us to theorize an ontological condition produced out of synthetic accretions that challenge the very division between the living and the nonliving.⁷

If we are willing to confront the life of a subject who lives as an object, then we will arrive not at an easy politics, but rather at an alternative track within the making of modern Western personhood, one that is not traceable to the ideal of a biological, organized, and masculine body bequeathed from a long line of Enlightenment thinkers, but is instead peculiarly synthetic, aggregated, feminine, and non-European. I trace this alternative figure and its spectral archaeology across a wide range of domains: law, politics, art, theater, literature, and popular culture. And I offer a theoretical frame that I call *ornamentalism* in order to turn our focus to the peripheral and the supplemental and to explore the transitive properties of persons and things. I want to track the incarnations of Asiatic femininity in Western modernity and its expansive embroilment with the ornamental and the Oriental. This figure embodies what Achille Mbembe calls the “aesthetics of superfluity”: that fragile mediation between indispensability and expendability that informs labor and life, especially at the height of imperialism and the subsequent global movements of bodies and things.⁸ This book is a story about what I am calling *ornamental personhood* and how it brings into view a much broader, often unseen, genealogy within the making of modern Western personhood. This is also a story about a different kind of flesh in the history of race making.

In order to lay out this alternative lineage, I braid two discursive histories: on the one hand, the vast material and representational history that is the “yellow woman”; on the other, the long, expansive Western philosophic debate about moral and social value engendered by the ornament.

THE YELLOW WOMAN

She goes by many names: Celestial Lady, Lotus Blossom, Dragon Lady, Yellow Fever, Slave Girl, Geisha, Concubine, Butterfly, China Doll, Prostitute. She is carnal and delicate, hot and cold, corporeal and abstract, a full and empty signifier. Here I echo and depart from Hortense Spillers's memorable opening to "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" in order to suggest that, in addition to black female flesh, we should also attend to yellow objecthood as alternative American racial logic.⁹ Instead of seeing the overnaming of the yellow woman as confounding identity or authenticity, I offer a different grammar as a provocation about the hybrid that is ornamental Asiatic femininity. What if we were to take the collusion between abstraction and racial embodiment as the given condition of Asiatic femininity? And what if, instead of seeing this amalgamation as eccentric to the conceptualization of a modern personhood, we were to see this peculiar figure as its constitutive double? That is, philosophically speaking, Western modern personhood as inherited from the Enlightenment is generally understood to be organic, individualistic, masculine, and white. Yet in the everyday practice of the courtroom, the boardroom, the bedroom, and the cutting room, that ideal has always been deeply embroiled with, not just opposed to, a history of nonpersons. Scholars of American slavery have long pointed out the legal and philosophic challenges posed by the enslaved person, for instance. Here I suggest that synthetic Asiatic femininity is another such constitutive strand in the making of modern personhood and that, alongside the black enslaved body, we must also consider the synthetic Asiatic woman as a ghost in the machine.

What happens when we consider ornamental forms and fungible surfaces, rather than organic flesh, as foundational terms in the process of race making? For a long time now, there have been two primary frameworks through which many of us conceptualize racial embodiment: Frantz Fanon's "epidermal racial schema" and Spillers's "hieroglyphics of the flesh."¹⁰ The former denaturalizes black skin as the product of a shattering white gaze; the latter has been particularly powerful in training our gaze on the black female body and the ineluctable matter of ungendered, jeopardized flesh. Yet in the years since its revolutionary impact, has the "epidermal racial schema" hardened for us into a thing of untroubled legibility? To what extent have the "hieroglyphics of the flesh" prevented us from seeing an alternative materialism of the body?

Saidean Orientalism and the Foucauldian critique that it entails have not been able to focus on the peculiar materiality of Asiatic, female flesh, its impossibilities and possibilities. Encrusted by representations, abstracted and reified, the yellow woman is persistently sexualized yet barred from sexuality, simultaneously made and

unmade by the aesthetic project. Like the proverbial Ming vase, she is at once ethereal and base, an object of value and a hackneyed trope. Like the black woman, she has suffered a long history of painful denigration; she, too, has been enslaved, abused, mummified, spectacularized, and sold. Yet her discursive construct is qualitatively different. Consider the two iconic nineteenth-century images of racialized femininity in plates 1 and 2. On the one hand, Sarah “Saartjie” Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus (plate 1),¹¹ was reduced to bare flesh, what Spillers calls “the zero degree of social conceptualization”; on the other hand, Afong Moy, a young Chinese woman imported by the Carne Brothers and later taken over by P. T. Barnum to tour major U.S. cities in the 1830s–1850s as a living museum tableau and known simply as the Chinese Lady (plate 2), offered a scopic pleasure that centered on her textual thickness: her material, synthetic affinities.¹² The latter’s appeal does not derive from her naked flesh but from her decorative (and projected ontological) sameness to the silk, damask, mahogany, and ceramics alongside which she sits. While primitivism rehearses the rhetoric of ineluctable flesh, Orientalism, by contrast, relies on a decorative grammar, a phantasmic corporeal syntax that is artificial



PLATE 1: *Love and Beauty—Sartjee the Venus Hottentot* (1811). Hand-colored etching. Christopher Crupper Rumford, Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

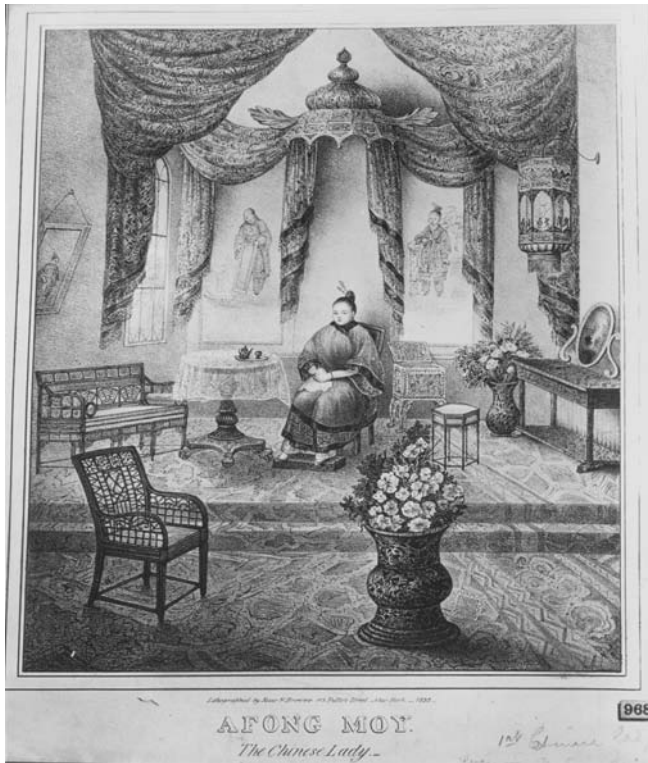


PLATE 2: Afong Moy, *The Chinese Lady* (1835). The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs. Courtesy of New York Public Library Digital Collection.

and layered. If black femininity has been viciously erased by a cultural logic that has reduced it to, in Spillers's words, "transitional mere flesh," then yellow femininity has been persistently presented as something more like portable supraflesh.¹³ Spillers famously observed that, since the black female is barred from crossing the symbolic threshold into personification, she is stuck on the threshold dividing the human and the not human, rendering her "vestibular to culture."¹⁴ Where black femininity is *vestibular*, Asiatic femininity is *ornamental*.

To put it crudely, our models for understanding racialized gender have been predominantly influenced by a particular view of bodies of African origins that has led us to think in a certain way about raced female bodies, when there has been in fact something of a bifurcation within the racial imaginary between bare flesh and artificial ornament. These two aesthetic vocabularies are clearly both racialized, but they do *not* necessarily or even primarily index racial identities. In fact, the predominant trope of "black female flesh" has at times kept us from seeing those black female bodies that have thrived through *unfleshliness*. (Josephine Baker, a figure I have studied elsewhere, in *Second Skin*, provides an example of how the dominant trope of black female flesh

has prevented us from seeing the complex fabrication that is her “skin.”) Thus while critical race theory and black feminism have done the vital work of reminding us that the black woman has been reduced to bare flesh, those insights have not been as helpful in theorizing the figure of the racialized woman who is assiduously assembled.

The point here is not to posit a naturalized difference between Africanist and Asiatic femininities. Indeed, my argument will insist on the promiscuousness of these modes of racialized representations, as well as ultimately suggesting that both Orientalism and primitivism draw from technologies of ornamentalism. But in order to follow these intricate turns, however, we must first specify a racial imaginary that has been at once pervasive and taken for granted. The tying of ornamental artifice to Asiatic femininity in Euro-American visual and literary cultures is ancient and persistent, reaching as far back as Plato, through the writings of Marco Polo in the thirteenth century, the novels of Joris-Karl Huysmans and Oscar Wilde, the visual expressions of art nouveau, French symbolism, American rococo, and all the way up to wide-ranging iterations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (plates 3–15). Throughout this study, we will continue to revisit, revise, and extend this visual repertoire, but for now let us allow this vast archive to sink in.



PLATE 3: Gustav Klimt, *Woman with Fan* (1917–1918). Wikimedia Commons.



PLATE 4: Aubrey Beardsley, *The Peacock Skirt, or John the Baptizer and Salomé* (1894). Created for Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* by the artist. Line black print on Japanese vellum, the Victoria and Albert Museum.



PLATE 5: Henri Privat-Livemont, *Bitter Oriental* (1897). Public domain.



PLATE 6: Claude Monet, *La Japonaise/Camille Monet in Japanese Costume* (1876). Public domain.



PLATE 7: Georges Barbier, *Chez la Marchande de Pavots/At the Poppy Merchants* (1921). Courtesy of British Library.



PLATE 8: James McNeill Whistler, *Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks* (detail, 1864). Courtesy of the John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art.



PLATE 9: Arnold Genthe, *Little Tea Rose* (1896–1906). Arnold Genthe Collection. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



PLATE 10: Arnold Genthe, *A Slave Girl in Holiday Attire* (1896–1906). Arnold Genthe Collection. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



PLATE 11: Anna May Wong in *Limehouse Blues* (1934, dir. Alexander Hall). Courtesy of Paramount Pictures.



PLATE 12: Photograph of Anna May Wong taken by Otto Dyer (1921). Courtesy of Kobal/Rex/Shutterstock.



PLATE 13: Li Gong in *The Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006, dir. Zhang Yimou). Beijing New Picture Film Co./Sony Pictures Classics. Screenshot capture by author.



PLATE 14: Maggie Cheung in *In the Mood for Love* (2000, dir. Wong Kar-wai). Universal Pictures, Paradise Film. Screenshot capture by author.



PLATE 15: Yves Saint Laurent and Tom Ford. Evening dress, autumn–winter 2004–2005. Yellow silk satin embroidered with polychrome plastic sequins. *China: Through the Looking Glass*, 2015, Metropolitan Museum of New York. Courtesy of Platon Images.

This extensive, racial-aesthetic, and ornamental project is both world-creating and world-erasing, making persons and undoing them. Most of all, it suggests that Asiatic femininity in the Western racial imagination does not need to pass through the biological or the natural in order to acquire its most palpable, fully sensorial, supple, and vibrant presence. It is astounding that so little has been done to consider the production of this particular form of synthetic personhood. Oppositional concepts such as authenticity versus illusion, interiority versus surface, and real person versus synthetic construct cannot adequately address this kind of figure. We have marshalled this vast and tenacious history under a broad heuristic that we might roughly label “Oriental female objectification,” refracted through the lenses of commodity and sexual fetishism. Yet we barely know how to process the political, racial, and ontic complications of confronting a human figure that emerges *as* and *through* ornament.

To speak of Asiatic femininity, then, is to speak of a style, which claims specificity but lends itself to promiscuous transferability. It designates a specific racial category but can be applied to different racial subjects. It can be enlisted by those wielding power and, more disturbing, by those deprived of it. *It is an abstraction that materializes.* To recognize racial difference and ontology as style does not trivialize either but instead acknowledges that formalist abstraction can be a precondition for, not just a side effect or obfuscation of, the perception of embodiment. Race is a dream of embodiment that speaks, paradoxically, through abstract forms. As Galen Johnson, speaking of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the insights of phenomenology, elegantly sums up, “all perception stylizes because embodiment is a style of the world.”¹⁵ And one consequence of this insight for our understanding of racial embodiment is that we must reconceive the ontological terms of human fleshliness.

Neither mere flesh nor mere thing, the yellow woman, straddling the person-thing divide, applies tremendous pressures on politically treasured notions of agency, feminist enfleshment, and human ontology. What we need, then, is not just an account of how Asiatic people have been used as things, or how Oriental things have influenced our uses of them, but instead a conceptual paradigm that can accommodate the deeper, stranger, more intricate, and more ineffable (con)fusion between thingness and personness instantiated by Asiatic femininity and its unpredictable object life.

THE ORNAMENT

The history and discourse of racialized femininity are deeply embroiled with the larger philosophic history of the ornament, its complicated relation to modernity, and its enduring entanglement with the Asiatic. Like the yellow woman, the

ornament is a category that, for all its glamour, has suffered a long history of denigration. In everyday usage, *ornament* refers to the insignificant, the superfluous, the merely decorative, the shallow, and the excessive. In aesthetic-philosophic history, the ornament triggers heated debates about the differences between excrescence and essence, surface and interiority, the peripheral and the central, femininity and masculinity. From Plato's critique of bad mimesis to Immanuel Kant's Third Critique and beyond, the ornament in Western philosophy, while signaling material worth, has for the most part been seen as a distraction, leading us astray from true moral value and genuine beauty. Kant famously claimed that ornamentation/adornment/*parerga* is a form of inessential augmentation that "takes away from the genuine beauty." E. H. Gombrich warned against the ornament's dazzling effects to persuade "the mind to submit without reflection." Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin worried over the disenchantment produced by the mass ornament. Walt Whitman argued that "[m]ost works are most beautiful without ornament." And who could forget modernism's most terse denouncement, Adolf Loos's dictum that ornament is crime?¹⁶ In this light, modernism's minimalist revolution, with its ardent de-ornamentation, is but a continuation of this ancient apprehension about the seduction of the ornament.

At the same time, this famous modernist rejection of the ornament is also something of a myth. As Theo Davis, Alina Payne, and I in different contexts have argued, the ornament and especially its spectral, racial demarcations, far from being exiled, continue to thrive in modern aesthetic practices even, or especially, for those most seemingly allergic to it.¹⁷ In *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*, I traced the ways in which the so-called naked modern surface, instead of being an erasure of regressive racial markings, in fact actively recalls and re-materializes some of the most profound racial fantasies of the twentieth century, in particular, the fantasy of black skin. It was while researching that project that I first gleaned the much bigger picture triggered by the history of the ornament: its articulation of not only the "primitive" but also the "Oriental," and how it informs the way we think about the denuded modern surface and modern personhood itself.

While scholars (Naomi Schor, Mark Wigley) have observed how gendered the discourse of the ornament is from Plato to Kracauer, less attention has been paid to how deeply racialized and specifically Orientalized this history has been as well.¹⁸ Since antiquity, the ornament has almost always been associated, even downright identified, with the Oriental and the Asiatic. In both *The Republic* and *The Laws*, Plato labeled excessive ornamentation as Oriental and despotic.¹⁹ In the eighteenth century, William Warburton, bishop of Gloucester, in speaking of theatrical gestures, describes Oriental character as unduly dramatic.²⁰ And one can find musings about the monstrous ornamentality of the Chinese from eighteenth-century aesthetic debates about Protestant purity to Friedrich Schiller and Gottfried Semper. It

is hardly surprising that by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, men as diverse as Henry David Thoreau, Adolf Loos, and William Morris will come to predicate modern, masculinist, and nationalist Euro-American aesthetic character on the very rejection of the Oriental and the ornamental.

Thus even as pronouncements from J. C. Flügel's *Great Masculine Renunciation* to Le Corbusier's *Law of Ripolin* celebrate de-ornamentation, the ornament and especially the ornamentality of the Asiatic continue to provide a charged site for the modernists, precisely because the ornament triggers the fluctuation between essence and supplement, depth and surface, utility and decoration, interiority and exteriority, organicity and the inorganic, femininity and masculinity, and finally, Western discipline and Oriental excess. Far from dismissed, the Asiatic ornament and its impulse blossomed in the early twentieth century in the realms of culture, art, literature, law, philosophy, and even economic theory (think of Thorstein Veblen's notions of excess). In each realm, the glimmering appeal of the ornament encompasses an expansive discourse of racial difference that animates major strains of modernist thinking about gender, nationhood, the human, and the inhuman, in the senses of racial difference as well as synthetic fabrication.

The minor aesthetic category, to follow Sianne Ngai's lead, of Asiatic feminine ornamentality is therefore far from minor; it bears the traces of some of the deepest and broadest philosophic debates underpinning modernity.²¹ It is nothing less than the very battleground on which struggles over beauty, racial and gender difference, and the boundary of the human are played. For me, then, the ornament resonates on multiple registers: as racialized material artifacts, as a linchpin in modernism's primal aesthetic crisis (itself also raced and gendered), as a struggle over the superfluity of persons and things, and as a problem about prosthetic humanness.

While the Western philosophic discourse surrounding the ornament, especially at the height of modernism, is expressly one of debasement,²² it is nonetheless deeply drawn to the ornament, a paradox that reveals a tenacious and genuine struggle with the problem of beauty, its radiant debt to horror and defilement. We might say that the history of Western art from Titian's *Tarquin and Lucretia* to Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* has been endlessly preoccupied with how to come to terms with the meeting of beauty and brutality. But for the yellow woman, this *is* her (im)material condition. As a figure of artistic investment and racial denigration, the yellow woman bears the privileges as well as the penalties for being an aesthetic being.

Contrary to their promises otherwise, aesthetics and violence both enact experiences that distort the borders between subject and object, consumer and consumed. What kind of life subsists along those porous edges? What can action or agency look like for someone who emerges out of that unmaking? How does an economy of trivial things alter how we think about the indispensability and expendability that

inform labor and life, people and things? For the yellow woman, politically treasured notions such as agency, consent, and embodiment take on complications that we have yet to really confront. When it comes to the defiled (raced and gendered) subject, caught in the haunting convergence between aesthetic experience and material abuse, it is not enough to say that she serves as a tool for power or its sublimation, or that she offers nothing but the congealment of commodification. Both statements are undoubtedly true, but neither is sufficient to address the profound, intrinsic, and often unspeakable ways in which the subjugator and the subjugated find themselves or meet each other in and through aesthetic forms.

When we attend to the critical labor of ornament, we will repeatedly find the intersection of beauty and terror, immateriality and corporeality, life and privation across a wide range of domains. Scars blossoming into the shocking beauty of chokecherry. Bare flesh growing like jewel shards. The law adjudicating legal persons through the sartorial. It is at the site of the unexpected entanglement with, or the inconvenient animation of, the ornament during moments of intense pain and privation that we begin to discern how the ornament as aesthetic decoration marks a political problematic about personhood.

The resistance against objectification almost always returns to the reconstitution of the person, just as the reparation for injuries to the body invariably seeks to reprivilege the flesh. I am interested in pursuing a different line of inquiry. I want to inquire after bodies that refuse the ontology or embodiment imputed to them, as well as those bodies that never get these options. This book is about a defiance of objectification that results in more objectness, a consequence that alters the very logic of racial embodiment as we know it and leads to much messier and more uncanny modes of materialization. It also shakes our assumptions about personhood and its often unacknowledged indebtedness to objecthood.

Let us think through, rather than shy away from, that intractable intimacy between being a person and being a thing. Let us try to build a different historiography of raced bodies: one constructed through fabrics, ornaments, and “skins” that never enjoyed the fantasy of organicity; one populated by nonsubjects who endure as ornamental appendages. Let us substitute *ornament* for *flesh* as the germinal matter for the making of racialized gender. Let us, in short, formulate a feminist theory of and for the yellow woman.

ORNAMENTALISM

I propose *ornamentality* as a conceptual framework for approaching a history of racialized person-making, not through biology but through synthetic inventions

and ornamentations. First, ornamentalism names the critically conjoined presences of the *Oriental* and the *ornamental*. Second and more importantly, ornamentalism describes the peculiar processes (legally, materially, imaginatively) whereby *personhood is named or conceived through ornamental gestures*, which speak through the minute, the sartorial, the prosthetic, and the decorative. We can find various examples of subject-as-object enchantment through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but Asiatic female ornamentality provides one of the richest, broadest, and most intense sources of power for this alchemy.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, art historians have used the term “ornamentalism” to refer to the deployment of ornament for decorative purposes, especially when done in excess.²³ I, however, wish to resuscitate what seems to have gone completely unheard so far in the term’s evocation: its almost homophonic resonance with Orientalism. As noted above, the intertwining of the Orient in the history of the ornament has largely gone critically unnoted even as it has always exerted its force. Recently the term *ornamentalism* enjoyed a revival thanks to historian David Cannadine’s intriguing study *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire*. Yet even there, the sonic and semiotic residue of Orientalism behind the term remains mute. This is because Cannadine argues that class, more than race, provided the lens through which Britain imagined its empire hierarchically. His project is thus not interested in the racial imaginary or even in the ornament per se, since ornamentalism for Cannadine refers broadly to a set of social rituals.²⁴ But I believe that retrieving the Oriental logic of ornamentation and, conversely, the ornamental technologies of Orientalism will open up important conversations about some of the most basic terms structuring our notions of race, persons, and the human, as well as the categories of modernism and Orientalism.

Orientalism is a critique, ornamentalism a theory of being. The latter, for me, names the perihumanity of Asiatic femininity, a peculiar state of being produced out of the fusion between “thingliness” and “personness.” As such, ornamentalism often describes a condition of subjective coercion, reduction, and discipline, but it can *also* provoke considerations of alternative modes of being and of action for subjects who have not been considered subjects, or subjects who have come to know themselves through objects. The making of personhood through synthetic assemblage or accretion can be impoverishing and additive. It can produce a person-assemblage that destroys autonomy but one that disrupts the privileged notion of natural bodies as well. It encapsulates a history of dehumanization, but it also speaks to a desire for objectness in the dream of the human. Ornamentalism thus offers us a capacious theoretical rubric by which to attend to the afterlife of a racialized and aestheticized subject that remains very much an object, even as the human stakes remain chillingly high.

The political stakes of “ornamentalist personhood” emerge beyond the dichotomies that normally inform our discussions about race, social justice, and the primacy of the human for both: dichotomies such as subject/object, interiority/exteriority, agency/oppression. To attend to ornamentalism is to ask how racial personhood can be assembled not through organic flesh but instead through synthetic inventions and designs, not through corporeal embodiment but rather through attachments that are metonymic and hence superficial, detachable, and migratory. Parsing the transformative magic of ornamentalism will allow us to address those bodies that, even as they are being deprived of it, do not seek humanity; to acknowledge those bodies that repel rather than instantiate the attempts to equip them with psychic or corporeal interiority. Ornamentalism thus serves as a critical framework through which I track this haunting alchemy between persons and things and its strange products.

This account of ornamentalism differs conceptually from an existing body of scholarship on sartorial performance or self-decoration as intentional or redemptive acts of self-affirmation. In lieu of traditional notions of agency, ornamentalism helps us address the unexpected, perhaps even unspeakable, forms and residues of ontology and survival. It is easy to identify the wrongness of treating someone like a thing for one’s own invidious gains, but it is much harder to understand or to judge when one treats oneself like a thing. In making room for stranger forms of less-than-human agency that might erupt out of these moments of ornamentalist transformation, I hope to clear some new ground beyond the political cul-de-sacs of feminist and race studies: the impasse between victimization and agency, antiessentialism and authenticity, and so on. Ornamentalism for me poses less a dilemma of identity than a problematic about the imbrication of personhood and materialization. *Ornamentalism* is therefore an admittedly inelegant word that names an elegant—that is to say, seamless—alchemy between things and persons. Those of us invested in the critique of power have long been alert to the crisis of persons who have been turned into things, but we should also attend to the ways in which things have been taken for persons and how this impacts our ideas about human ontology and aliveness. If, on the one hand, race studies have, understandably, been overinvested in the redemption of the flesh, and if, on the other, new materialism has too quickly abandoned or neglected the human stakes, this study hopes to open a conversation in that lacuna.

The goals of taking this insidious elision between the Oriental and the ornamental as the foundation for a yellow feminist theory are, therefore: (1) to detach us from the ideal of a natural and an agential personhood that invariably accompanies critiques of power and from which the Asiatic woman is already always foreclosed; (2) to take seriously what it means to live as an object, an aesthetic supplement; (3) to attend to peripheral and alternative modes of ontology and survival; (4) and finally,

to contend that the discourse of Asiatic femininity—at once pervasive and marginal, enhancing and disparaging, dated and yet contemporary—is part of a much larger debate about beauty and violence, as well as about life and artificiality, nestled in the making of modern Euro-American personhood.

So what does ornamentalism allow us to see that an understanding of Orientalism alone does not? Let us return in plate 16 to the iconic Victorian image of “the Chinese Lady.” Little is known about her; even the accuracy of her Chinese name is dubious.²⁵ At the level of fact, there is no rescuing her; she is lost to history. At the level of theory, she remains reified. Psychoanalytic fetishism, for one, would tell us that this is a scene of lack and compensation: Moy’s racial and sexual lack has been displaced onto her sartorial splendor even as it is iterated through her bound feet, which are neatly and conspicuously displayed on a little stool. Marxist fetishism would train our gaze on the proliferation of commodified objects. Indeed, every object in this room—the chintz, the silk, the mahogany or rosewood implied by the furniture, the tea, the sugar, the porcelain, and of course the Asian woman herself—is saturated with colonial and imperial history.

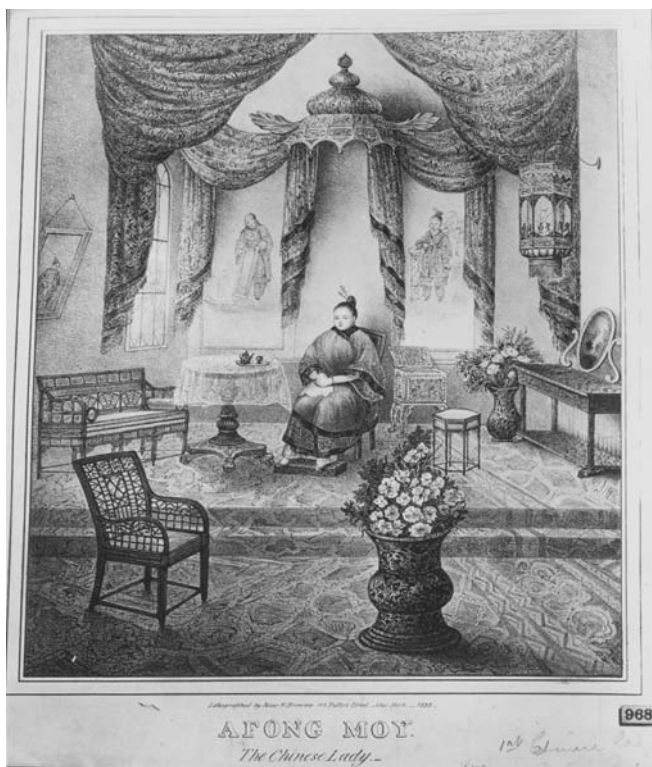


PLATE 16: Afong Moy, *The Chinese Lady* (1835). The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs. Courtesy of New York Public Library Digital Collection.

Historians of American Orientalism (John Kuo Wei Tchen, Lisa Lowe, Teemu Ruskola, Colleen Lye, Josephine Park, among others) have well documented the instrumental role that the uses of people and things from Asia in real and imagined forms have played in the formation of American modern politics, economy, cityscapes, cultural identity, and citizenship; the construction of notions of class and taste since the early colonials; the so-called China Trade's foundational role during the American Revolution in inaugurating the birth of "American free trade" and supplying the rationale for the articulation of American liberation and manifest destiny; the great wealth that built great modern American cities like New York and Boston (or famous East Coast universities like my own home institution); the exploitation of Asian labor in the construction of American agriculture and landscape; the segregation and discipline of Asian bodies in America providing the crucible for the formation of modern U.S. citizenship; the formative role of so-called Asian aesthetics in modern American arts and letters; and, finally, the enormous contemporary American appetite for "Asian styles" from the cute to the erotic. Against this extensive backdrop, it should not surprise us that the staging of Afong Moy in the nineteenth century presents an instantiation of the ghostlier demarcations that lie behind much more mainstream Victorian representations of white femininity, especially when the latter becomes conflated with commodity culture. Think, for example, of Becky Sharp posed for sale in the drawing room with her silk shawl and damasked cotton and her notable "small feet" on display.²⁶ Or consider Lily Bart's intense spiritual materialism in the face of an exquisite tea service.²⁷

At the same time, this expansive history of commodification—and the extensive critical attention it has received—has nonetheless *not* been able to accommodate the more unwieldy interface between consumer and consumed. The paradigm of "Oriental fetishism," while accurate enough, cannot address the strange life and the unpredictable encounters bred by this history of global exchange. What if, instead of seeing this scene as the petrification of Orientalism, we were to attend to the animation of ornamentalism?

The lady in question here is part of a composition of objects revolving around a dynamic exchange between foreground and background, skin and fabric, persons and things. This still tableau is very much alive. The immobile lady's ontological promise, her imagined interiority, is not just framed but also deeply infused by the built environment. Even as her "interiority" has presumably been displaced by flat surfaces—indeed, textiles—there is nonetheless an affective, sensorial, and semiotic reciprocity at work in this scene. She accessorizes the furnishings, while the furnishings accessorize her; she lends the human element to this theater even as the props lend her a human domesticity. The sitting woman repeats the two "Chinese" figures behind her, themselves European replicas of Chinese paintings.²⁸ This "human"

triptych is in turn echoed by the teapot and lone cup, both surely empty, on the table, reminding us that a woman's close proximity to "china" allows her to be read as a particular kind of surface: perfectly contained, perfectly empty, but also perfectly coextensive.²⁹ I will say more, especially in the chapter on blue willow (chapter 3), about the semiotic conductivity of china; for now I simply wish to underscore how this highly recursive scene offers a fantasy about the interchangeability of persons and things. The subject here *is* tableau vivant: the art of transforming life into the paradox of still life. And the pleasure afforded by this scene—the piquant insistence of nonliving live things—is not fleshly indulgence but rather the naughty porousness between persons and things, the alluring satisfaction of ontological shallowness. It makes us wonder whether we enjoy still life because it imitates or eschews life.

Ornament becomes—*is*—flesh for Asian American female personhood. Commodification and fetishization, the dominant critical paradigms we have for understanding representations of racialized femininity, simply do not ask the harder question of what constitutes being at the interface of ontology and objectness. We need to find new ways to think about the entanglement of organic corporeality and aesthetic abstraction exemplified by yellow womanhood. How do we begin to think about racialized bodies that remain insistently synthetic and artificial? What about bodies not undone by objectness but enduring *as* objects?

The peculiar materialism and materiality of "yellow decorativeness" press us to reconsider the facticity of racialized presence. Simultaneously consecrated and desecrated, materialized and displaced, the yellow woman challenges us to formulate a humane politics that accommodates artifice and objectness. The history that I invite us to consider here delivers a particular production of personhood that calls for a different kind of reading and a new account of race making. The imbrication or transference between things and bodies—commodified, yes, but also always asked to act and emit "beingness"—demands that we understand commodities in transit as neither simply cargo nor easily translatable back into cherished human subjects.

This book aims to bring to light those mercurial moments when ornaments become skin and flesh; when superfluous details provide the conditions under which personhood is negotiated; when artificial matter animates the human. These moments relocate the cherished notion of life to a different juncture and open up opportunities for us to discern alternative modes of existence—sites of peripheral or interstitial being. We will witness the disciplinary and damaging effects of the willful conflation of persons and things, but we will also begin to see how the resulting "ornamental personhood" invokes unspoken and still unexplored possibilities about the fungibility of objects and subjects that reshape how we understand the imaginative trajectories of modern freedom.

Ultimately at stake is not just the objectification of people but how that very objectification opens up a constitutive estrangement within the articulation of proper personhood and life. Ornamental personhood points us to a different genealogy of modern personhood. This synthetic being, relegated to the margins of modernity and discounted as a nonperson, holds the key to understanding the inorganic animating the heart of the modern organic subject. She/it brings into view an alternative form of life, not at the site of the free modern subject and his celebrated autonomy, but on the contrary, at the encrusted edges and crevices of defiled, feminine, ornamented bodies.

Throughout this project I do not attempt to secure redemptive, subversive agency as acts of self-will or intention, because the subjects that haunt this study are those for whom will and intention have been severely compromised. Nor am I offering up the real or the authentic as antidotes to a thick sediment of misrepresentations. On the contrary, the very premise of this project takes seriously, rather than simply decries, the intractable imbrication among femininity, the ornamental, and the Oriental, in order to explore the entanglement of living and living-as-thing. Certainly the center (the white, masculine, organic personhood of Western modernity) uses the marginal (the racial and gendered other) oppositionally in order to fortify its borders, but more important, the so-called marginal (that artificial, ornamental, Oriental femininity) is more integral to the historic, philosophic, cultural, and even legal making of modern personhood than suspected. What follows attempts to track the traces of this critical component in the constitution of Western personhood from nineteenth-century legal concepts of proper personhood to twenty-first-century scientific imaginings about the future of persons.

AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF RADIANT THINGS

The subjects and objects that fuse and come into view in this project are, for the most parts, American. But since the Asiatic/Asian American femininity under consideration is itself a century-long product that grew out of what Gordon Chang calls the “fateful ties” among America, Asia, and imperial Britain, this study speaks more properly to what some Asian American scholars have come to call transnational American racial modernity.³⁰ In many ways, this project assumes that American studies is itself a profoundly global critical venture and thereby understands the trope of “Asiatic femininity” as a global product circulating within American culture.

Although the racialization of Asians in America has been legally, phenotypically, and culturally fraught, as well as subject to historical contingencies and political

expediency, the trope of Asiatic femininity circulating in mainstream American culture that is the focus of this study makes no such distinctions and remains remarkably fixed.³¹ When I speak of ornamental yellow womanhood or Asiatic femininity, I do not intend to essentialize or reify this category but instead to track the endurance of a miniaturizing yet expansive motif and aesthetic practice. I am less concerned here with the question of racial identity than in the processes of racialization and identification and the surprisingly profound role that style plays in their making. I offer the yellow woman here not as the real but rather as a conceptual category and a critical agent, with the clear understanding that the origin of this term derives from a racist framework that is indifferent to ethnic and national specificities and to diasporic realities.

The chapters that follow move historically and additively, building on one another, rather than simply offering different examples of the same. I track the varied and developing manifestations of ornamentalism from the mid-nineteenth century to the twenty-first, especially as they respond to changing contexts and technologies of personhood. Each chapter is devoted to a particular modality of Asiatic ornamentality and its critical labor in the construction of Western personhood in a variety of registers: in the arenas of law (legal personhood), cinema (celebrity), fashion (sartorial personhood), food (consuming persons), and technology (artificial intelligence and other synthetic persons). In each of these cases, ornamentalism is at times a method of controlling definitions of personhood, but at other times, it opens up radical new modes of ontology that undo our certitude about the human. Ornamentalism thus operates in this project less as a prescription than a critical lens for tracing the fluctuations between subjects and objects, persons and things that have been activated by the evocation and construction of Asiatic femininity. Each chapter is devoted to an ornamental artifact or category of artifacts and a corresponding instance of Asiatic female ornamentality, with a coda that explores the potential of ornamentalism to speak to black feminism.

This study thus begins with the adjudication of legal personhood in the Supreme Court in the mid-nineteenth century; moves to the rise of fabricated personhood in the form of modern celebrity in the early twentieth century; travels to a contemporary exhibit of extravagantly embodied objects in a great American museum; visits the transformation of persons, things, and animals through the rituals of ornamental eating in a sushi restaurant; and finally, arrives at futuristic and technological visions of posthuman persons. In all these instances, Asiatic femininity bridges personhood and thingness. One reason for moving chronologically is to follow the historic development of ornamentalism. Moreover, I hope that by the end of the book, it will become clear that the seemingly atavistic, trivial, and disposable eruptions of Asiatic femininity in American law and culture powerfully enable the imagining of

the inorganic as ontologically durable, and that Asiatic femininity is fundamentally important to ideas of futurity in modernity. Similarly, ornamentalism applies tremendous pressure on the temporality of known categories such as Orientalism, primitivism, and modernism, and on their accepted subjects and objects. I hope the archaeology I am building here will reveal ornamental personhood to be not an exception to modern personhood, but its intimate sister.