

Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman

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For a long time now there have been two primary conceptual frameworks through which many of us conceptualize racial embodiment: Frantz Fanon's "epidermal racial schema"¹ and Hortense Spillers's "hieroglyphics of the flesh."² The former denaturalizes black skin as the product of a shattering white gaze; the latter has been particularly instructive in training our gaze on the black female body and the ineluctable matter of ungendered, jeopardized flesh. Yet, 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?

This essay is driven by the haunting of a different kind of racialized female body whose "flesh" survives through abstract and synthetic rather than organic means and whose personhood is animated, rather than eviscerated, by aesthetic congealment. Culturally encrusted and ontologically implicated by representations, the yellow woman is persistently sexualized yet barred from sexuality, simultaneously made and unmade by the aesthetic project. *She* denotes a person but connotes a style, a naming that promises but supplants skin and flesh. Simultaneously consecrated and desecrated as an inherently aesthetic object, the yellow woman troubles the certitude of racial embodiment and jeopardizes the "fact" of yellowness, pushing us to reconsider a theory of person thingness that could accom-

1. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York, 2008), p. 92.

2. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden, Mass., 2000), p. 61; hereafter abbreviated "MB."

modate the politics of a human ontology indebted to commodity, artifice, and objectness.

Although the yellow woman, like the black woman, has suffered long histories of brutal denigration and relentless prurience, her discursive construct is qualitatively different. Consider these two iconic nineteenth-century images of racialized femininity (figs. 1–2): on one hand, Sarah “Sartjie” Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, was reduced to bare flesh, what Spillers calls “the zero degree of social conceptualization”;³ on the other hand, Afong Moy, a young Chinese woman imported by the Carne brothers to tour major US cities in the 1830–1850s as a living museum tableau and known simply as The Chinese Lady, offered a scopic pleasure that centered on her textual thickness: her material, synthetic affinities. Her 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 fantasmatic corporeal syntax that is artificial and layered. Where black femininity is “vestibular”/bare flesh/weighted, Asiatic femininity is ornamental/surface/portable (“MB,” p. 73).⁴

The point here is not to posit a naturalized difference between Africanist and Asiatic femininities—indeed, my argument will insist on how modes of racialized representations mean to index racial difference but are in fact wholly promiscuous in application—but I do want to underscore here the specificity of a racial imaginary that has been at once pervasive and yet taken for granted. The tying of ornamental artifice to Asiatic femininity in Euro-American visual and literary cultures is ancient and enduring, reaching as

3. The focus on Baartman’s flesh extends well beyond her death; as we know, her reproductive organs, dissected by Georges Cuvier, were on display at the Musée de L’Homme in Paris until as recently as 2002. Spillers famously made the distinction between “body” and “flesh,” the latter being pure matter that exists outside of any kinship or state apparatus even as it is enlisted to serve both: “In that sense, before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization” (“MB,” p. 61).

4. Spillers also famously conceptualizes black female flesh in spatial terms; as the black female is barred from crossing the symbolic threshold into personification, she is both stuck in and a mechanical transit for the threshold dividing the human and the not human, rendering her “vestibular” to culture.

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



FIGURE 3. Gustav Klimt, *Woman with Fan* (1917–1918).

It is astounding that so little has been done to consider the production of this particular form of personhood. This vast and tenacious history of Oriental female objectification is refracted through the lenses of commodity and sexual fetishism. Yet, the truth is, we barely know how to process the political, racial, and ontic complications of confronting a human figure that emerges *as* and *through* ornament. Neither mere flesh nor mere thing, she/it applies tremendous pressures on politically treasured notions such as agency, feminist “enfleshment,” and human ontology.

When it comes to this exquisitely defiled subject, caught in the haunting convergence between aesthetic value 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



FIGURE 4. Henri Privat-Livemont, *Bitter Oriental* (1897).

the subjugated find themselves or meet one another in and through aesthetic form. What follows then is not just a story about how we use people as things, or how things dictate our uses of them, but a drama involving a deeper, stranger, more intricate, and more ineffable fusion between thingness and personhood.

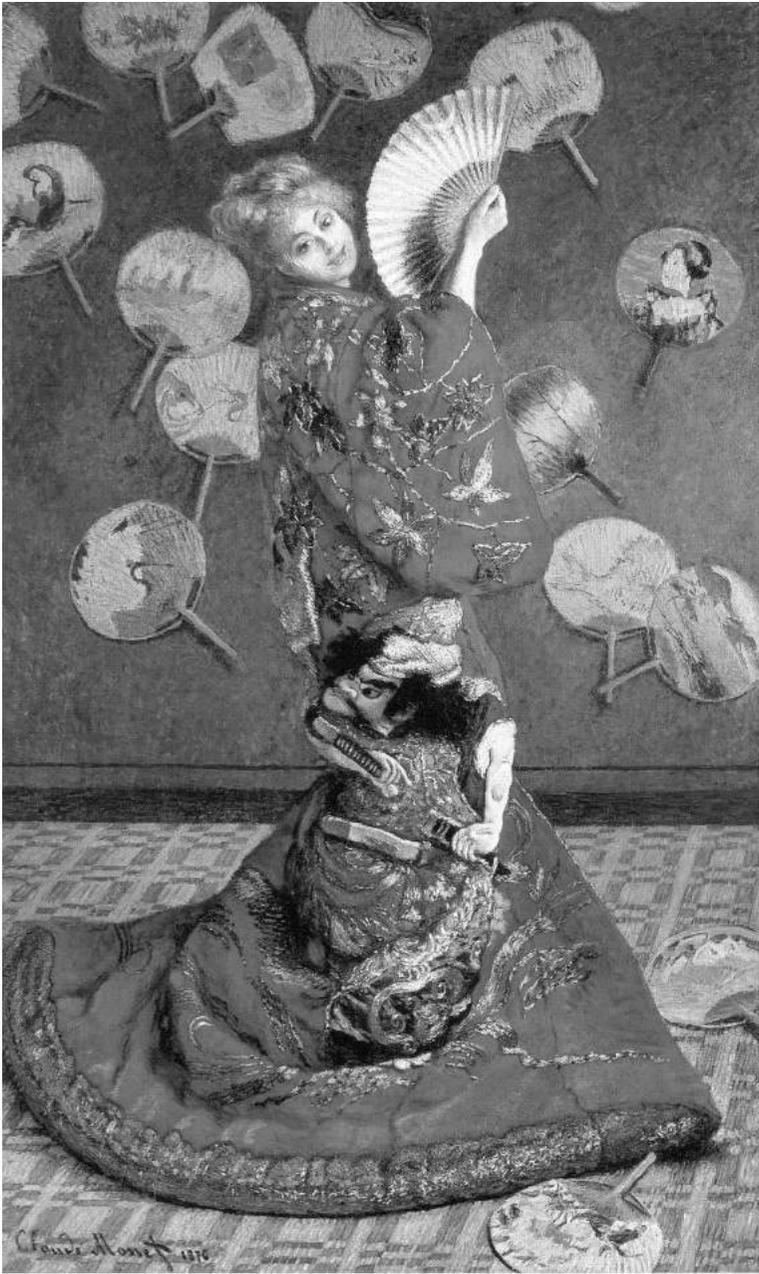


FIGURE 5. Claude Monet, *Camille Monet in Japanese Costume* (1876).

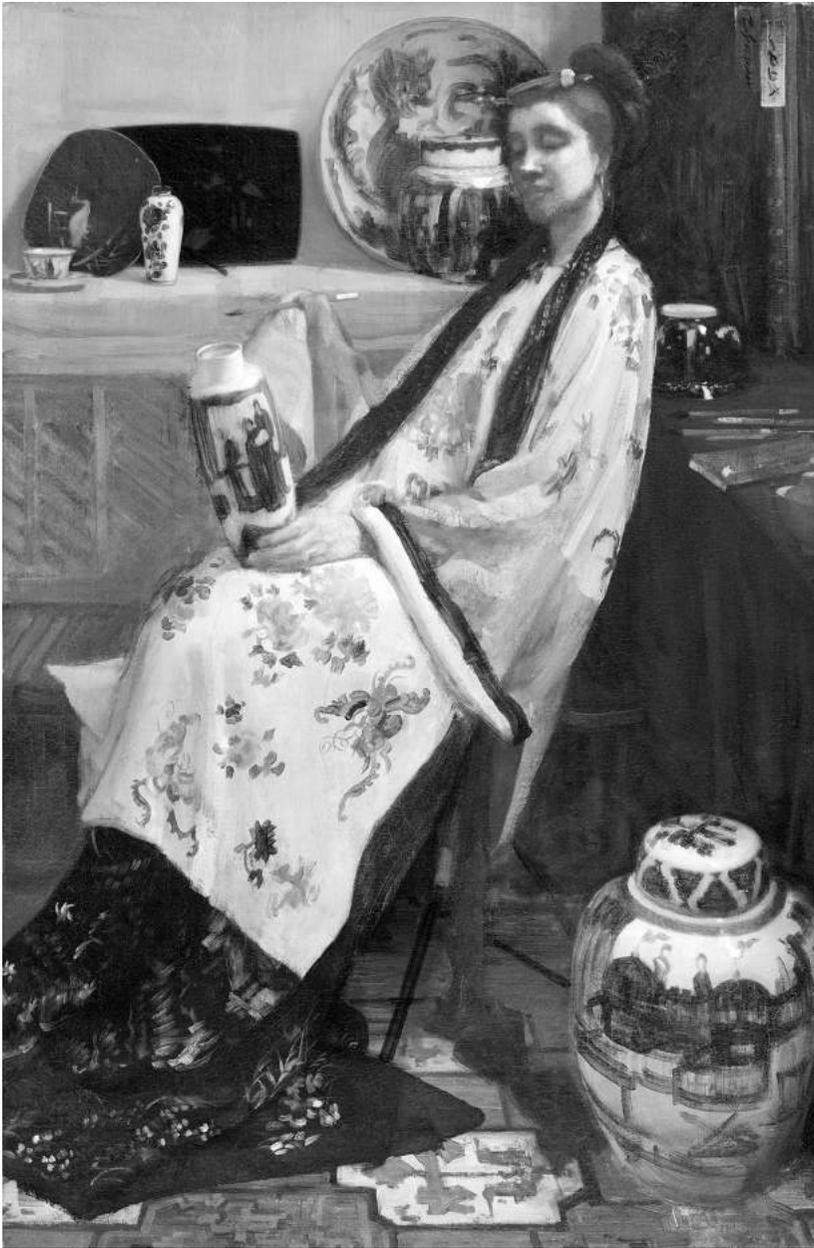


FIGURE 6. James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks* (1864). Courtesy of The John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art.



FIGURE 7. Arnold Genthe, *Little Tea Rose* (1896–1906).

Almost two hundred years after New Yorkers flocked to the American Museum in New York to witness the living tableau of *The Chinese Lady*, throngs from all over the world lined up in Manhattan to see another spectacular display of Asiatic femininity qua ornament: this time, the 2015 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art entitled *China: Through the Looking Glass*. The exhibition featured more than 140 examples of Euro-



FIGURE 8. Photograph of Anna May Wong taken by Otto Dyar (1932). Courtesy of Rex Features, UK.

American haute couture and avant-garde ready-to-wear from fashion luminaries such as Paul Poiret, Yves Saint Laurent, John Galiano, Alexander McQueen, and more. Interspersed among these resplendent sartorial creations are scattered decontextualized Chinese and Japanese artifacts from the museum's Asian Art Collection. An eighteenth-century yellow silk satin imperial robe shadows a sequined yellow silk satin evening gown by Tom Ford for Yves Saint Laurent; a Qing Dynasty snuff bottle and a



FIGURE 9. Maggie Chung in film still from *In the Mood for Love* (dir. Wong Kar-wai, 2000).

twelfth-century kimono echo a Cartier perfume flask; an early fifteenth-century cobalt blue dragon jar flanks a Roberto Cavalli creation in blue and white.

This sumptuous collection rehearses for the twenty-first-century audience the basic tenets of nineteenth-century Orientalism: that opulence and sensuality are the signature components of Asiatic character; that Asia is always ancient, excessive, feminine, available, and decadent; that material consumption promises cultural possession; that there is no room in the Orientalist imagination for national, ethnic, or historical specificities. Most of all, the show reminds us that *China* (conflated throughout the show with Asia at large) equals *ornament*. The Metropolitan had accomplished quite an ornamental feat of its own: a byzantine build-out replete with intricate corridors and concentric spaces; large decorative arches leading to secret, enfolded rooms; a tall, transparent, plastinated bamboo forest—all nestled deep inside the museum's bowels, filling up both the Anna Wintour Costume Center in the basement and the Chinese galleries on the second floor and claiming a large portion of the repurposed Egyptian Gallery. Through this labyrinth, one would, for instance, turn and suddenly find oneself in a hushed "garden," standing on a meditation bridge overlooking a large glistening pond encased by winding corridors (fig. 10). No natural light disturbs this dreamlike, highly man-made environment. The lacquer pond glimmers but does not flow. In this beautiful graveyard, Eastern nature appears wholly continuous with Eastern artifice.

From the get-go we realize the limits of the critical framework of Saidean *Orientalism*, as the exhibition itself has already coopted the term



FIGURE 10. Exhibition hall of *China: Through the Looking Glass* (2015). The Metropolitan Museum of New York. Photograph by Anne Anlin Cheng.

as its own internal critique and alibi. A large sign greets the visitors as they enter through a set of imposing two-story-tall red lacquer doors:

Empire of Signs

For the designers in this exhibition, China represents a land of free-floating symbols, a land where postmodernity finds its natural expression. Like Marco Polo or Gulliver, they are itinerant travelers to another country, reflecting on its artistic and cultural traditions as an exoticized extension of their own. . . . When quoting Chinese artifacts or costumes, these designers are not reproducing literal copies or accurate facsimiles. Rather, they reinterpret them through seemingly paradoxical postmodern constructions.⁵

The show recuses itself from the burden of authenticity even as its mis-en-scène fetishizes the artifactually and culturally real.⁶ Invoking and recursively enacting Roland Barthes's famously cool dismissal of the notion of (Japanese) cultural authenticity—"to me the Orient is a matter of indifference"—this exhibit disaggregates aesthetic pleasure from politics and

5. From the exhibition *China: Through the Looking Glass*, Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, 7 May–7 Sept. 2015.

6. As the exhibition overview on the museum website states: "This exhibition explores . . . how China has fueled the fashionable imagination for centuries. In this collaboration between The Costume Institute and the Department of Asian Art, high fashion is juxtaposed with Chinese costumes, paintings, porcelains, and other art, including films, to reveal enchanting reflections of Chinese imagery" ("Exhibition Overview," The Met, www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2015/china-through-the-looking-glass).

reclaims postmodernism as cure to Orientalism, performing exactly what Hal Foster has referred to as capitalism's revenge on postmodernism.⁷

There is much criticism one can offer on the grounds of racial appropriation, inauthenticity, commercialism, and neoliberal bad faith.⁸ Yet we should be less surprised by the tenacity of this racial imaginary and more concerned with the limits of our response to it. For a long time now the concepts of Asian authenticity and of Orientalist commodification have remained our only safeguards against the vice of racist consumption. But neither the longing for the former nor the allegation of the latter can address the complex relations between appropriation and susceptibility, or between embodiment and style. Moral outrage in the face of consumption or fetishization, however warranted, cannot address or relieve the truly striking, idiosyncratic, and passionate exchange between thingness and personhood into which a display like this draws us. The exhibition's visual and sensorial extravagance—its dizzying invitation for visitors to lose themselves in the fastidiousness of extreme aestheticism; the completeness of severe, scrupulous details; the sensorium of textiles and materials; the seductive dynamism of vivacious inanimateness and synthetic pleasures—all work to facilitate that slide between things and persons, an erotic and erratic plunge that both preconditions the making of Chinese/Asiatic femininity and renders inadequate binary critiques when it comes to this kind of racial objection. Thus while Saidean Orientalism and the Foucauldian critique that it embodies help us identify symptoms and locate political culpability, neither can address the profound, queasily seductive entanglement between organic corporeality and aesthetic abstraction imputed to yellow womanhood.

Let's face it, critical discourse has never been very good at speaking to what Rita Felski calls the erotics of aesthetics beyond that of a critique of commodification or an assertion of transgressive pleasure.⁹ I am not here to make an argument for pleasure, though that is often elided by the moral and gendered politics of consumption. Instead, the exhibit gives me the

7. Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1983), p. 3. See also Hal Foster, "Postmodernism in Parallax," *October* 63 (Winter 1993): 3–20.

8. There was much public protest. *The New York Times* published a scathing review, offering even a history lesson about the so-called China trade and its legacy for American imperialism; see Holland Cotter, "In 'China: Through the Looking Glass,' Eastern Culture Meets Western Fashion," *New York Times*, 7 May 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/05/08/arts/design/review-in-china-through-the-looking-glass-eastern-culture-meets-western-fashion.html?_r=0. The Asian American Arts Centre wrote a letter of protest to the Metropolitan Museum, see Robert Lee, "China: Through the Looking Glass - An Open Letter," Asian American Arts Centre, artspiral.blogspot.com/2015/07/china-through-looking-glass-open-letter_20.html

9. See Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

opportunity to pay attention to the material, affective, and kinesthetic making of an aesthetic ontology that I will call the ornamental personhood of Asiatic femininity. So how do we begin to think about racialized bodies that remain insistently synthetic and artificial? How do we take seriously the life of a subject who lives as an object, and how do we do so without either resigning that figure to the annals of commodity fetishism or assigning it to the sinecure of reassuring corporeality?

The challenge here is to negotiate between, without abandoning, the very human stakes of deanimated persons and the very material history of animated things. Of the many “enigmatic objects” (a term used by the exhibition) displayed in this extensive exhibition, the most mesmerizing and confounding one is surely the specter of the yellow woman, synecdochized through faceless and at times headless mannequins and metonymized through luxuriantly sensuous fabrics.¹⁰ What is this charismatic sensorial presence that does not require a biological body or nature? Quite the opposite, Asiatic femininity is radiantly reproduced through inorganic and insensate mediums. Consider, for example, the evocation of Asiatic femininity via ceramics.

In a series of rooms devoted to the theme of blue willow, an imitation Chinese china pattern made popular by Thomas Minton in the 1790s, we find a grouping of blue and cream silk gowns designed by contemporary designers such as Cavalli and McQueen. We can dismiss this association between Asiatic femininity and Chinese ceramic as yet another Orientalist cliché. But if we do so, we would miss a much more intricate and intriguing proposition: the affinity among racialization, imagined personhood, and synthetic invention.

I am interested in how the primacy of the ornament, as artifact and as gesture, in this show acts as a crucial, transitional node through which the human is simultaneously invoked and displaced and how racialization functions in this transfer. I want to think through, rather than shy away from, that intractable intimacy between being a person and being a thing. Let us then 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.

10. “Exhibition Overview,” www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2015/china-through-the-looking-glass

To begin to do so, I offer *ornamentality* as a conceptual lens through which to attend to the afterlife of a racialized and aestheticized object that remains very much an object, even as the human stakes remain chillingly high.¹¹ At the most basic level, ornamentality, with its almost homophonic echo of Orientalism, names for me the critically conjoined presences of the oriental, the feminine, and the decorative. But more than naming a symptom, it identifies a process whereby personhood is conceived and suggested (legally, materially, and imaginatively) through ornamental gestures: gestures that speak through the minute, the sartorial, the prosthetic, and the decorative. Ornamentality is thus an admittedly rather inelegant word that describes a very elegant (that is, seamless) alchemy between the borrowing properties of thingness and personhood.

It is important to note that ornamentality, as I am deploying it, does not refer to agential acts of self-performance or willful self-making. That is, as ornamentality is a technology of personhood that mobilizes a racial logic that operates ornamentally rather than requiring—and often even suppressing—a biological body or nature, it is very different from a corpus of scholarship that sees sartorial practice as recuperative acts of self-naming or individualist performance. This is not a project about retrieving human agency, because the subject under discussion here (the yellow woman) is a seriously compromised subject and, in many instances, not a subject at all. At the same time, however, I do want to claim the orna-

11. The term *ornamentality* has surfaced among art historians and those engaged in aesthetic philosophy to refer to the deployment of ornament for decorative purposes, especially when done in excess, but I wish to recall it precisely because of what has gone completely unheard in its previous iterations: its suggestive and almost-homophonic entanglement with Said's deployment of Orientalism. The term was also most recently revived in David Cannadine, *Ornamentality: How the British Saw Their Empire* (New York, 2001). But there "ornamentality" does not refer to artifactual ornaments but more generally to sets of rituals and ceremonies that the British deployed to export Britishness to the far corners of their empire. And this study also remains curiously—perhaps even studiously—deaf to the sonic residue of Orientalism inhering in the word *ornamentality*. I suspect this is largely due to the fact that Cannadine was eager to displace race as a critical term in British imperialism. His central thesis argues that class, more than race, offers the formative lens through which the British imagines its empire hierarchically. Orientalism as a racial imaginary thus makes no appearance in Cannadine's study. Finally, Cannadine's treatise looks at British influence on its colonies but not vice versa.

While scholars have noted how gendered the discourse of the ornament in the decorative arts has been, much less attention has been focused on how deeply racialized (indeed, how Orientalized) this history has been as well. It is my sense that retrieving the Oriental logic of ornamentation, and vice versa, will alter some of the most fundamental terms behind how we think about race and personhood, as well as impact larger concepts such as modernism and Orientalism. See Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York, 2007), and Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001).

mental personhood of Asiatic femininity as a rare and valuable opportunity to consider alternative forms of being, not at the site of the free, natural, modern subject and his or her celebrated autonomy, but, contrarily, at the edges and crevices of a non-European, synthetic, aggregated, and feminine body. The stakes, therefore, of taking the insidious elision between the Oriental and the ornamental as the foundation for a yellow feminist theory are: 1) to detach us from the ideal of a natural and an agential personhood that invariably accompanies critiques of power and from which the yellow woman is already always foreclosed; 2) to take seriously what it means to live as an object, as aesthetic supplement; 3) to attend to peripheral and alternative modes of ontology and survival; and, ultimately, 4) to contend that the discourse of the yellow woman—at once pervasive and marginal, enhancing and disparaging—is part of a much larger debate about beauty and violence, about life and artificiality, nestled in the making of Euro-American, modern personhood.

The ornament and the ornamental gesture in *China: Through the Looking Glass*, far from being incidental or merely decorative, enacts critical labor through which powerful ideas of personhood, race, and objectness transfer. Let us take for example the intimacy between Asiatic femininity and cool ceramics. Recent scholarship in the area of material culture has revealed the complex history of Chinese porcelain: its importance in early global imperial trade; its role in spurring European technological invention and decorative design; its impact on growing economic, social, and cultural values in Denmark, Germany, France, and England and its American colonies.¹² To this richly documented history, I would add the wrought/fraught intimacy between this “White Gold” and the making of yellow flesh.¹³ For more than economic or social values, Chinese porcelain personifies a set of affective and somatic values forged out of the kiln of what Gordon Chang aptly called the centuries-old “fateful ties” between China and the West.¹⁴ Connoting old-world exoticism and modern material, civilization and decadence, durability and fragility, heat and coolness, imper-

12. See Jennifer L. Anderson, *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012); *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, ed. Alden Cavanaugh and Michael E. Yonan (Surrey, 2010); Madeleine Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2010); Chi-Ming Yang, *Performing China: Virtue, Commerce, and Orientalism in Eighteenth Century England, 1660–1760* (Baltimore, 2011).

13. “With the exceptions of tapestry and silver, no artistic medium was more coveted or valuable [than porcelain].” Its “cultural associations” with “exotic lands” made porcelain “a semi-magical material, a ‘White Gold’” (Cavanaugh and Yonman, “Introduction,” in *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, pp. 4, 3, 4).

14. See Gordon H. Chang, *Fateful Ties: A History of America’s Preoccupation with China* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015).

viousness and susceptibility, Chinese ceramic was thought to embody characteristics that are mapped onto Asiatic persons and bodies.¹⁵ And the fates of Chinese bodies and Chinese porcelain run parallel. When this much valued and coveted material came to represent the precarity of a system of Western wealth based on importing novel Eastern goods, this prized object started to lose its radiance, along with other things Asiatic. As Euro-American acquisitiveness began to run in excess of what it could offer China in return, the early romance with china/China began to deteriorate in a breakdown that left putative and lasting traces in American law and economic policy (from US foreign policy and trade agreements in the eighteenth century to discriminating immigration laws in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries); in the American popular imagination (think of the fate of Chinese porcelain itself, its fall from denoting precious goods to connoting tacky crockery); and, finally, for our discussion, on the bodies of Asiatic women. In 1996, the *New York Times* has this to say about the Chinese women's gymnastics team at the Summer Olympics: "The Chinese remain the world's most erratic top gymnasts, and today, like many a Ming vase, their routines looked lovely but had cracks in several places."¹⁶

Thus more than exemplifying an incidental decorative motif or revealing the limits of the imperial imagination, the citation—indeed, the embodiment objecthood—of Chinese porcelain in this exhibition, regardless of curatorial intentions, revivifies this long, expansive history of human imbrication with racialized and manufactured materials, fueling the fraught amalgamation between inorganic commodity and Asiatic female flesh. We might say that the ubiquitous presence of fine Chinese porcelain throughout the show generates a specific epidermal schema of its own.

This creation by McQueen for his autumn/winter 2011–2012 collection offers a play in simulation and contrast, juxtaposing the inorganic and the organic, the insensate and the sensorial, the hard and the soft (figs. 11–12). Most of all, it invokes a particular vision of the racialized female body, one that sustains these contradictions. The eruption of the fluffy, layered extravagance that is the skirt, at first glance, looks like supple feathers but turns out to be shredded silk organza. The exposed underskirt, suggestive of layers of artificial skins turned inside out, at once beautiful and violent, is then offset by the startlingly weight of the torso, which on closer inspection reveals the bodice to be made not out of the proverbial bone but of hundreds

15. A noted characteristic of true fine *kaolin* Chinese porcelain is that it can sustain tremendous heat while still being receptive to and sustaining brilliant, clear colors.

16. Christopher Clarey, "Atlanta: Day 3—Gymnastics; Miller Gives United States High Hopes for a Gold," *New York Times*, 22 July 1996, www.nytimes.com/1996/07/22/sports/atlanta-day-3-gymnastics-miller-gives-united-states-high-hopes-for-a-gold.html



FIGURE 11. McQueen and Burton, evening dress. From *China: Through the Looking Glass*. Photograph by Cheng.

of reconstituted shards of blue and white porcelain: porcelain as flesh and flesh as porcelain.

Dare we say it? 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 *being* is at the interface of ontology and objectness. Here Chinese femininity is not only more and less than human but also man-made; not only assembled but also reassembled. This reassemblage, by virtue of its materiality, memorializes the practice of ornamentalism and the techniques of race making. This image of the flexible yet brittle body reminds us that this aesthetic discourse is fastened to a fractured history of craft, labor, and bodies in transit. If Eric Hayot has traced for us the persistent Euro-American conceptualization of the Chinese male body as infinitely and stoically capable of sustaining pain and suffering, an association that led to the image of the coolie as at once animal and superhuman, an ideal laborer, then we are tracing here a Chinese female version of this discursive formation—a smooth beauty that bears the lines of its own wreckage, a delicacy that is also imper-



FIGURE 12. McQueen and Burton, evening dress. From *China: Through the Looking Glass*. Photograph by Cheng.

meable and insensate.¹⁷ The dream of the yellow woman is thus really a dream about the inorganic. The yellow woman is an, if not *the*, original cyborg. From the thingliness of Anna May Wong (whom Walter Benjamin once referred to as a “moon” and a “bowl”) to Nany Kwan’s trademark Porcelain Skin, for the Asian American woman, porcelain has always been flesh *and* not flesh.¹⁸

Going back to our blue willow room, we can now see a broader fascination with the inhuman human structuring the grammar of this stage. The McQueen gown is placed next to a Cavalli dress, and they in turn stand next to and echo an early fifteenth-century Chinese porcelain jar painted with a cobalt blue dragon—urn as beauty as death as dress as corporeal gesture. The sensorial and somatic realization of Asiatic femi-

17. See Eric Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain* (New York, 2009).

18. Quoted in Shirley Jennifer Lim, “‘Speaking German Like Nobody’s Business’: Anna May Wong, Walter Benjamin, and the Possibilities of Asian American Cosmopolitanism,” *Journal of Transnational America Studies* 4, no. 1 (2012), escholarship.org/uc/item/16v4gob1

nity fulfills itself, paradoxically, through the forms of these empty-yet-orthopedic vessels (fig. 13). There is no ordinary flesh here, by which I do not mean the obvious (that there are no real bodies on display) but that this show is palpably not that interested in the human, much less the woman. These garments do not need the human; indeed, the human would disrupt their composure. In fact, we are looking at a peculiar form of anthropomorphism or prosopopoeia whereby the human is being used to recall objectness rather than vice versa. The objects on display,



FIGURE 13. Roberto Cavalla evening dress, blue and white silk satin (2005–2006). From *China: Through the Looking Glass*. Courtesy of Platon/Trunk Archive.

from frocks to vases, invite neither wearability nor usage. Instead of objects that function as appendages to the human (as one would expect fashion and furnishing to do), what we find here instead are objects that reference other objects.

In this room, the human is the ornamental gesture. And the ornamental in turn acquires its ancillary human aura by being “Chinese.” In other words, beauty here comes from the primacy of the object; the human or the anthropomorphic is the incidental alibi for, or an afterthought of, relishing this pure objectness. Crucially, at the same time, what renders this pure objectness legible as such is precisely the invocation of racial difference. While Orientalism is about turning persons into things that can be possessed and dominated, ornamentalism is about a fantasy of turning things into persons through the conduit of racial meaning in order, paradoxically, to allow us to abandon our humanness.

If the modernist relation to the fetishized object is fundamentally a melancholic one, then we are getting here something of a twist to that subject-object relation. That is, if we are prone to looking for ourselves in lost or alienated mass cultural objects—as Bill Brown elegantly describes it, “it is all those spaces within [the Thing]—the inside of the chest, the inside of the wardrobe, the inside of the drawer—that . . . enables us to image and imagine human interiority”¹⁹—then here we are looking at objects that short circuit that project by duplicating our own truncated or stunted relation to the very notion of interiority. In that blue willow room at the Met, all the empty containers—the urn, the dresses—are already wholly occupied by emptiness. They only seem to offer the promises of anthropomorphic possibilities as compensation for making us confront their (and potentially our own) thingness. We cannot fill these voids with our fullness because they are easily occupied without us. This is possibly why one feels so essentially alone in the beauty of a room filled with things that were presumably meant to enhance us. The relationship here, however, is not simply one of an object refusing the human but an object that does so by mirroring the inhumanness of the human.

To point to this enchantment of the inhuman is not to rehearse the problem of objectification or to downplay the issue of race but to point to a provocative dilemma about how the object preconditions, rather than being the product of, the human figure—a modern crisis that Asiatic femininity personifies. This is why ornamentalism is not only an object of feminist critique but can be also a vector of feminism. The eradication of the

19. Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago, 2003), p. 7.

human, even as raced and gendered corporeality are being imputed, compels a reconceptualization of feminized, racialized flesh. The critique of power from Michel Foucault to Edward Said to Laura Ann Stoler has long taught us that carnality and flesh, instead of being private domains, are sites that have been deeply penetrated and structured by power. Human flesh has undeniably been one of the highest prices paid for the history of human enslavement in various forms. And often, understandably, in feminist and racial discourses, we end up with a longing for that lost and violated flesh or, inversely, a total refusal of the body. But these stranded “bodies” in the Metropolitan invite further ruminations about the interplay between fleshliness and the inorganic for certain raced and gendered bodies. What happens to our notions of the subject when carnality is cultivated not out of flesh but of its fusion with inorganic matter? What happens when we accept that style (mediated through yet detached from a racial referent) may be not simply the excess or the opposite of ontology but a precondition for embodiment, an insight that challenges the very foundation of the category of the human? What is at stake here is not just the objectification of people but how that objectification opens up a constitutive estrangement within the articulation of proper personhood and life.

More than denoting an aesthetic practice and a technology of power then, ornamentality—the forging of the sense of personness through artificial and prosthetic extensions—provides an allegory for the crisis of personhood that the modern ideal of an integrated, organic, individual person was meant to alleviate. If we think of the Anglo conceptualization of modern personhood as indebted to an Enlightenment notion of natural and integral bodies (posited through John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes, Montesquieu, William Blackstone)—the idea, for example, that the person is a living, organic, and organized human body “such as the God of nature formed us”—then we are tracing here another kind of body that confronts us: one that not only poses a challenge to this ideal but also insists on the primacy of aggregated objectness in the experience of the human.²⁰

As if in answer to this bracing realization, we find something else in the blue willow assembly (fig. 14). Here, aesthetic congealment has grown into full-bodied edifice. The to-be-used Chinese female body seems to

20. William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England, 1765–1779* (Chicago, 1979), press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch3s3.html. For a study of ornamentality in law—that is, the formative role of Asiatic female ornamentation in nineteenth-century juridical ideas about legal personhood—see Anne Anlin Cheng, “Law and Ornament,” in *New Directions in Law and Literature*, ed. Elizabeth S. Anker and Bernadette Meyler (New York, 2017), pp. 229–51.



FIGURE 14. Li Xiaofeng, *Beijing Memory No. 5* (2009). Qing Period Shards. From *China: Through the Looking Glass*. Photograph by Cheng.

have petrified into domestic and collectible things (teapots, cups, plates) whose value now resides in their aggressive uselessness. At the same time, this congealed and fractured domesticity, offering repurposed purposelessness, transcends its own mundanity to lay claim to art. Made by contemporary artist Li Xiaofeng (born 1965), this piece is clearly not human, but it is also not entirely a thing. The weight (of material, history, domesticity, femininity) implies petrification, but the form suggests flight. Is this dress or armor? Is it winged victory or the madwoman in the attic? Is it a tribute to monumentality or a concession to the mundane? What has died here—the human or the ornament? And, finally, has the human outmoded itself or has the object outrun the human demand?

We cannot read this piece from the Chinese artist as a rebuke of the Western commercial designers with whom he shares the space because the work is itself a meditation on troubled authenticity.²¹ The sculpture *Beijing Memory No. 5* (2009) by Li was part of a series known for utilizing ceramics excavated from authenticated archaeological sites throughout China. The museum catalogue attributes the ceramic fragments to the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), commonly known as the last great Chinese dynastic empire, suggesting that the memory being recomposed (or shattered) here is attached to the memory of a lost imperial China and making this piece something of an exercise in what Rey Chow calls the “ethnic detail.”²² Chow notes with her usual acuity that the Chinese detail is always already an *ethnic* detail—even for the Chinese. For Chow, this is so because of the pastness assigned to the Chinese by Anglo modernity; consequently, the Chinese detail functions for Western modernity as a kind of *Nachträglichkeit*. The historicity of Li’s version of the Chinese detail, however, has been subjected to much manipulation. On a closer look, among the rubble that is the body of this ceramic woman, we discern a scattering of some intact Chinese ideograms. Many are out of context, and several are positioned upside down (an ironic statement of value? a jab at the old joke about Chinese illegibility for Western viewers?), with words like “precious,” “tea,” “superior.” Others offer seemingly precise self-authentication with stamped reign dates, such as “Xuande Reign of the Great Ming Dynasty (1426–1435),” purporting to indicate a royal workshop.

21. Li is himself an equally complicated figure who works in China, Hong Kong, and the US and whose work traverses the realms of art, commerce, and kitsch. In 2010, for example, he collaborated with Lacoste to create a collection of polo shirts.

22. In speaking about the ornamental details in the films of Zhang Zimou, Chow observes: “Like Barthe’s loquacious lion, the ethnic details in these films are not there simply to ‘mean’ themselves; rather, they are there for a second order of articulation. They are there to signify ‘I am an ethnic detail; I am feudal China’” (Rey Chow, *Primitive Passion: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* [New York, 1995], p. 145).

The shards thus speak to us and date themselves even further back in time, to the Ming Dynasty, prior to the Qing (figs. 15–16). But we cannot rest easy in their promise of more precious pastness because these signatures of provenance, both inside and outside of the artwork, only serve to underscore the homelessness of these fragments. Given the fact that fairly early on the practice of such temporal inscription on objects degraded into anything within the spectral range of affectation to forgery, this kind of designation is likely to be more misleading than not. And since an earlier date would signal a grander affectation and the Xuande era was exactly when such inscriptions first became common, it is probable that these fragments may be anything but Xuande.

Even more intriguing than this little drama/trauma of authenticity, moreover, is the possibility that this twenty-first-century Chinese porcelain body made for an international audience may be seeking to petrify itself as a gambit for its continued relevance. Just as *Beijing Memory No. 5* invokes a vanished China only to unsettle the very thing it claims has disappeared, the sculpture also summons via those calcified, fragmented ceramics the memory of yellow female flesh only to replace it with a more insistent, inorganic presence. This feels less like nostalgia for yellow female flesh than



FIGURE 15. Detail of Li Xiaofeng, *Beijing Memory No. 5*. Photograph by Cheng.



FIGURE 16. Detail of Li Xiaofeng, *Beijing Memory No. 5*. Photograph by Cheng.

like a consecration of its fossilized (raced and gendered) afterlife. This is flesh congealed into porcelain *and* porcelain invoking the possibility of flesh. *No. 5*'s tensile balance between formal preoccupation and suffocating mass asks us to consider the simultaneously dematerializing *and* materializing processes through which raced female bodies come to matter. It insists that commodity is *also* art, body, thingness, memory, and its evaporation. It instantiates the salvage, the reassemblage, and the subjunctiveness behind Asiatic, female corporeality. If the yellow woman has always been simultaneously embodied and erased through ornamental objectness, then this piece asks what life is or could be after such devastation.

Sigmund Freud tells us that one of the most unsettling effects for human ontology is to be confronted by a machine that comes to life.²³ Here, with *No. 5*, what is uncanny is that the machine refuses to come to life *and*, in its lifelessness, imagines what life might have been. And it is in this very *might*

23. See Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 17:219–52. It is beyond the scope of this paper, but there is much more that can be said about ornamentalism and the racial logic of the machine, especially in relation to contemporary debates about technology, the human, and the ethics of artificial intelligence.

have been that we experience the prospective and prosthetic quality of our ontology. In other words, *No. 5* does not give us a memory of something; it *is* memory: the layered encrustations of absent but imagined lives. (It gives us not the human hand but the empty handle.) This yellow woman is instructive, not because “she” offers us a sartorial performances as redemption or because she promises the possibility of the real behind the object. On the contrary, this memory gives us a chance to take seriously (rather than simply decry) the intractable intimacy between Being and being, to explore the entanglement between living and living as thing.

In the end, this complicated congealment may be what is possible in a life of precarity. Sometimes, disposable lives find themselves through disposable objects. (Is this why some Asian women, given limited options, would rather be ornamental than Oriental?) Freedom for the captured may not be the gift of uncompromised liberty but the more modest and more demanding task of *existing* within entombed shells. It is not only that bodies can leave their residue in the things that they produce (an insight that object studies has taught us) but also that objectness reveals the divergent, layered, and sometimes annihilating gestures that can make up personhood. More than memorializing bodies that may otherwise not be remembered, Li’s porcelain woman explores what it would mean to instantiate through excess materiality the dematerialized nonbody. It marks a kind of third nature, one that surrounds and approximates the human and one that manages to survive despite or through commodification. The perihumanity of Asiatic femininity (that is, something at once inside and outside of civilizational first principles) is why she is often a figure enlisted to represent contemporary apprehensions about more-than-human entanglements.²⁴

The aesthetic language—the entanglement between the animate and the inanimate—with which the yellow woman has been infused draws from and sustains a dynamic but disturbing principle of artificial life that,

24. From *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982) to *Ghost in the Shell* (dir. Rupert Sanders, 2017), there has been a widespread use of Asiatic aesthetics and tropes in the genre of science fiction, especially in film. I would suggest that the presence of the Asiatic (Asiatic femininity in particular) is more than an exotic, ornamental detail; it often serves as the site and the conduit through which ideas of the inorganic/mechanistic interface with the human, more often than not as ethically problematic transgressions. That is, the ornamentalism of Asiatic femininity renders it the perfect agent and parable for the miscegenation of the inhuman and the human. Finally, in relation to the machine aesthetics, one might point out that there is a bifurcation within Asiatic aesthetics between the Chinese (ornate, layered, decadent) and the Japanese (simple, minimal, natural.) But I would suggest that Japanese “simplicity,” so favored by both the modernists and by hi-tech aesthetics today, *encompasses*, like modernist sleekness itself, *the ornamental logic as well*. As I argue elsewhere, the “‘naked,’ modern surface” is *also* a style and one that enfolds rather than ejects the racial other (Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* [New York, 2011], p. 35).

rather than being peripheral to, intensifies and haunts modernism itself. That is, the Asiatic ornamental object person is often seen as opposite to modernity, but it actually contains a forgotten genealogy about the coming together of life and nonlife, labor and style, that conditions the modern human conceit. It suggests a different genealogy of modern personhood: one that is not traceable to an ideal of a biological and organized body bequeathed from a long line of Enlightenment thinkers, but one that is peculiarly inorganic, aggregated, and non-European. This synthetic being, relegated to the margins of modernity and discounted precisely as a nonperson, holds the key to what I see as the inorganic animating the heart of the modern organic subject.²⁵ She/it brings into view an alternative form of life, not at the site of the free and individualist modern subject, but, contrarily, at the encrusted edges and crevices of defiled, ornamented bodies.

If liberal racial rhetoric has not been able to tolerate the possibilities of subjective failures or corporeal ambiguity on the part of its cherished objects, it is because the female body and its ineluctable flesh continue to offer the primary site for both denigration and recuperation. At the same time, if recent critical discourse about the posthuman or what has come to be known as object-oriented ontology can at times feel politically disconnected even as its intention has been to unsettle a tradition of insular humanism and anthropocentrism, it is because it has forgotten that the crisis between persons and things has its origins in and remains haunted by the material, legal, and imaginative history of persons made into things. Not only can the nonanthropocentric object (meaning both the potential to be not alive and not of use) not shed the attachment of racial and gendered meanings, but it has *also* been a vexing, constitutive potential within the human subject. This paradox is most powerfully and poignantly played out for the yellow woman and, for her, holds the most devastating consequences and, for us, the most challenging political and ethical implications, especially for our conceptualization of freedom and agency.

We have at last arrived at an understanding of ornamentalism, not as a theory of thingness but as theory about the profound imbrication of things and persons. It tells a different story about a different kind of flesh in the history of race making. We can now return to the juxtaposition between Asiatic and Africanist femininity with which this essay began and reconsider

25. This is also why Asiatic femininity is at once atavistic (the geisha, the slave girl) and futuristic (the automaton, the cyborg). The artificiality of Asiatic femininity is the ancient dream that feeds the machine in the heart of modernity.

the paths of their divergence. I started this essay by distinguishing the wounded, flesh-laden black body from the immaculate, synthetic, ornamental yellow body. Our journey through the alternative logic of a racialized embodiment that is also not necessarily enfleshment, however, suggests that in the end there may be a potential for ornamentalism to speak also to Africanist female enfleshment. The body of labor (sexual, reproductive, economic) exemplified by the black female body—ungendered and excluded from the realms of kinship, state, and aesthetic value—is nonetheless *not* wholly alien to the practice and afterlife of ornamentalism. Or to put it differently, ornamentalism may help elucidate for the black woman a set of different though related issues about the fraught convergence of material violence and aesthetic congealment.

We do well to ask, how can we possibly talk about decoration or style in the face of the unimaginable corporeal brutality enacted through the history of slavery? Let me approach this question by bringing up another kind of object: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. I turn to *Beloved* because it is a text that would seem to offer, at least initially, the most powerful argument against the purviews of ornamentalism with its other-than-human aesthetic enchantments. Horrifying scars, wounds, fissures of the flesh abound in Morrison's novel, giving us vivid and literal instantiations of the "hieroglyphics of the flesh." We are reminded that the black woman has been "decorated" by culture and law in very specific and corporeal ways. The novel also contains one of the most moving arguments for the flesh. (It is hard to forget Baby Sugg's sermon at the Clearing: "*You* got to love it. . . . Flesh that needs to be loved; Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support. . . . Love your neck . . . and all your inside parts . . . the dark, dark liver . . . the beat and beating heart").²⁶ At the same time, however, *Beloved* is also a text that repeatedly compels us (and its main characters) to confront the troubling coincidence of the aesthetic and the abstract precisely at the most devastating of moments, moments of profound unmaking: lynching, rape, torture. In the novel, violent scars on the body often manifest themselves as unexpected sites of aesthetic eruptions: a necklace, a smile under the chin, soughing sycamores, a luminous skin dress, a gorgeous chokecherry, a rope around the waist, a little tobacco tin buried in the chest like a treasure box. How are we to understand the uneasy proliferation of ornaments in this novel of grief and violence; how are we to process its terrible beauty?

Let me begin by noting that these sites of aesthetic eruptions are not offered through similes but come at us by way of a deeper and more

26. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, 1988), p. 88; hereafter abbreviated *B*.

complicated fluctuation between the literal and allegorical. Sethe's scarred back is never described (by Paul D, Amy, or Sethe herself) as being *like* a tree; it always appears to *be* a tree (see *B*, pp. 15, 78). In the human-yet-nonhuman figure of the scar, the real entails the figural even as abstraction manifests materiality, reminding us that flesh as "the zero degree of social conceptualization" is already ridden by conceptualization, the product of acts of imagination and brutality, an evacuation of one kind of the real only to redeposit another. Sethe—half woman, half ornament, with her dead back that is also a tree—is a hybrid being whose personhood applies tremendous pressure on our notions of what constitutes living versus surviving.

Now to what extent is this bifurcated condition of being human and nonhuman always already the condition of being black and a slave? Why do we need ornamentalism to think about black female objectness? Because it names the aesthetic and inorganic entanglements repressed by (yet critical to) a history of human materialism. Not only does the law speak through abstraction and disembodiment (something that Barbara Johnson has taught us) but also the dehumanized body might actually require objectness in order to subsist.²⁷ Ornamentalism is thus also potentially an operative component in the vestibular economy, helping us to see that there is no "zero degree of conceptualization," because even bare flesh *is* inscription—the *hieroglyphics* of the flesh.

Insofar as the fantasy of the organic flesh has remained the single most cherished site of feminist and racial redemption, it has not been able to contest our assumptions about the basis for ontology, or how object life challenges whole sets of aspirations about individualism, freedom, agency, and self-possession. The figure of the tree in Morrison's novel is particularly instructive here because, in replacing flesh with wood, it registers the potential for life outside of the human-animal dyad. It introduces into the conversation about blackness and animality another category of being: plant life, itself an allusion to the perverse life produced by the ecology of the plantation. Monique Allewaert suggests that that plantation ecology not only maps the disappearance of human agency for the subaltern but it also charts "an emerging minoritarian colonial conception of agency by which human beings are made richer and stranger through their entwinement with . . . colonial climatological forces as well as plant and animal bodies."²⁸ The genealogy of the flesh, alongside my genealogy of ornaments,

27. See Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

28. Monique Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis, 2013), p. 1.

is not—and has never been—simply human; instead, it tracks something “richer and stranger.”

Sethe’s tree is neither bare flesh nor pure object. Alternately gorgeous and repulsive, fragile and indelible, the clump of scars that is the chokecherry stands as the fixed traces of sorrow, but it is not inert; it has “trunks, branches, and even leaves” and seems to grow and change its contours (*B*, p. 16). When Morrison tells us that Sethe was “divided . . . back into plant life,” the author registers the cleaving and deprivation of human agency at the plantation, but when she gives us the chokecherry, she opens the door to the possibilities of an alternative form of ontology that survives through its entwinement with dirt, soil, and death (*B*, p.188). This interspecies entanglement suggests a vision of “collaborative survival,” a shifting assemblage of humans and nonhumans that the modern human “condition” does not usually allow us to see.²⁹ Sethe-the-woman-tree gives us an image of a particular kind of assemblage or deformed personhood that nonetheless evinces form. It is then not an accident that the tree is also the product of wrought labor, born out of different kinds of craft: alternately natural, maternal, creative, and manual. As an intricate and layered composite, it invokes insensate deathliness, wild vegetal extension, and artisanal fabrication: “a sculpture . . . , like the decorative work of an ironsmith” (*B*, p. 17). One of the reasons that the turn to the ornament as heuristic model has been productive for me has to do with precisely this insight that flesh is an aggregate, an incorporation indebted to a logic of serial attachment that is at once violent and aesthetic, material and abstract.

The question is no longer how we can think about aesthetics in the face of violence but how we could not. For the black woman, ornamentation can name a particular mode of being that applies pressure on the fantasy of corporeal integrity. It is precisely when flesh has been defiled and radically severed from its own sense of humanity that the path back to it requires mediation. That is, the flesh that passed through objecthood needs ornament as a way back to itself. Even Baby Sugg’s much-quoted sermon, which so passionately urges a return to the flesh, understands that self-possession has to be courted—with all the strangeness and distance implied by that concept. This is why her song is also a blazon of body parts: “backs that need support; shoulders that need arms. . . . Love your neck; *put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up*” (*B*, p. 88; my emphasis). This lesson on self-regard delineates an approach back toward the self as

29. The idea of a “collaborative survival” comes from Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, N.J., 2015).

a collation of lost objects. Having been made stranger to oneself by unimaginable brutality means that one must reapproach the self as a stranger. Here the instructions for loving the “natural” body articulate this poignant and melancholic gesture of almost orthopedic reconstruction, of carefully tacking up a scaffold of the body as a prop for your psyche. This is why I think self-love in this novel comes down to Paul D’s advice: “‘You your best *thing*, Sethe’” (*B*, p. 273; my emphasis).

The haunting in *Beloved* then is a haunting of the history of racialized flesh—a history that is not opposed to but encompassed by ornamentalism. From the divergence between black flesh and yellow ornament, we have arrived at this convergence: flesh that passed through objecthood needs “ornament” to get back to itself. When it comes to racialized flesh that has been mortified, ornamentalism points us not only to a history of disciplinary usage (where you mistake someone for something for invidious gains) but also to what it might take to reconceptualize personhood for unmade persons. If feminist scholars have been committed to the flesh in order to undo the taxonomy of gender, then ornamentalism points us toward a consideration of object life that not only undoes but suspends the taxonomy of the human. In our eagerness not to abandon the flesh, we have not been willing to attend to life’s a priori enmeshment with nonlife. Instead of considering what it means for a person to have been turned into a thing with an implicit nostalgia for that lost subject, I am suggesting that we must also consider the reversed process whereby things have been made into persons, thereby revealing the fundamental logic of abstracted decoration that constitutes the category of personhood in the first place.

Ornamentalism identifies both an epistemology and its fugitive meanings—both instrumentality and unexpected opportunities. It is tied to the practice and aesthetics of Orientalism, but it also offers a critical framework beyond the assumed racial categories and periodization implied by terms such as Orientalism, primitivism, and modernism. By opening up a broader and historically deeper set of inquiries about how the aesthetic entails the political and how the political entails the aesthetic, the coercion and the enchantment of ornamentalism allow the superfluous and the not-living that are integral parts of the human to come into view. It is precisely at the interface between ontology and objectness, animated by the ornament, that we are most compelled to confront the horizons and the limits of the politics of personhood.