Shine: On Race, Glamour, and the Modern

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an incandescent curve
licked by chromatic flames
in labyrinths of reflections
—Mina Loy, "Brancusi's Golden Bird" (1922)

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RECENT EFFORTS IN THE FIELD OF CULTURAL POLITICS TO REDEEM beauty, including the insurgence of studies on topics such as celebrity and glamour, have reminded us that there is more to beauty than a history of injury. Yet the key texts in this line of inquiry, from Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999) to Jo-

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seph Roach's *It* (2007), do not ask the haunting question of what it means for the history of euphoric beauty to meet up with the history of dysphoric, racialized bodies.[1] This oversight is understandable, since in most of Western history and philosophy, idealization and racial difference have hardly gone hand in hand, and where they converge we are likely in the all too familiar realm of fetishization. But is the fetish the only way to understand the convergence of race and celebrity?

Celebrity studies and race studies share little except an enduring attachment to the discourse of fetishism, an attachment that has in many ways prevented us from confronting the fraught interconnections between the presumed antinomies of personhood and objectification, embodiment and image. Even the more revolutionary discourse about race tends to reproduce the raced body's irreducible visibility and materiality.[2] Since Frantz Fanon, for instance, we have been alert to the interaction between subjectivity and crushing objecthood, but has the "epidermal schema" hardened for us into untroubled legibility (Fanon 112)? We take to heart the wisdom that racial difference is a form of "disabling overvisibility" and that the epidermis is the "the most visible of fetishes" (Doane 223; Bhabha 78). Yet what are the terms of this presumed visibility? In what ways and under what conditions does a (raced and gendered) body come into visibility at all, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the modes of seeing are radically transforming?

In the early twentieth century, a handful of internationally renowned "race beauties" emerged. These women built their iconographic images on a visual idiom that is as exuberantly synthetic as it is organic, crafting the self as art and as product. Their success as agents and commodities presses us to think in more nuanced terms about what celebrity and glamour mean for the woman of color. What does modern celebrity—predicated on constant self-production and tied to commodity culture, to the ascension of the public persona, and to the politics of performance—mean for someone seen at once too much and not at all? How do we talk about agency, consent, and embodiment in this highly mediated context? And what does glamour (as perhaps the last residue of aura or as a packaged, shining, and impenetrable mode of beauty) do for a subject whose body has been simultaneously overembodied and depersonalized? If the history of Western art, from Titian's *The Rape of Lucretia* to Picasso's *Guernica*, has been preoccupied with the philosophical problem of how to come to terms with the meeting of violence and aesthetics, the celebrity of the raced female body offers a pragmatic instantiation of that dilemma. When it comes to the woman of color, embodiment is the ground on which she has been denigrated and affirmed. To talk about celebrity and glamour for the woman of color is, therefore, to reckon with the collision between the violence of impersonality and the violence of personality.

The conjunction among celebrity, glamour, and race is thus the place where we can address the intimacy, rather than opposition, between agency and objectification, persona and impersonality. The visual culture surrounding the racialized, female body in the West may appear to insist on a transparent tale about the coercion of the visible, but the transition from ethnography to celebrity may document not a continuity of vision but a process of revision, even a reorganization of the visuality that informs racial difference. Instead of seeing celebrity culture as a rejection or an obfuscation of the material history of de-idealized bodies, I take celebrity as a politics of recognition and glamour as a politics of personhood and encourage us to revise some of the deepest assumptions that we have about raced bodies and their presentations. Revising these assumptions will allow us to challenge a racial discourse, both progressive and regressive, that has so long relied on the raced body's fundamental embodiment.

FIG. 1
Publicity still for *Piccadilly*, 1929. BIP / The Kobal Collection.

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When we turn to the few great race beauties of the early twentieth century who garnered intense, international fame, we may find something unexpected. Two such rare figures come to mind: Josephine Baker (1906–75) and Anna May Wong (1905–61). These iconic beauties—both celebrated and decried for exemplifying the bounded corporeality of primitivism and orientalism—have produced, on examination, art and performances that apply tremendous pressure to the apparent discrepancy between presence and absence, embodiment and abstraction. In a recent study of Baker, I suggested that instead of epitomizing the history of pseudoscientific display, this primitivist icon embodies a crisis of nakedness (and its implied corporeal presence) that assaulted modern Western aesthetics and the conceptualization of a raced body; this crisis in turn reveals modernism's larger struggle over the threatening intimacy between persons and things (*Second Skin*). Today, let us trace another trajectory in that story by turning our gaze to the great "Oriental beauty" of the time: the iconic and radiant Anna May Wong.

Like Baker with her polished black skin, the golden-skinned Wong radiated glamour and allure, which, as her popular life story goes, allowed her to transcend negative personal circumstances and the abject history of "yellow women."[3] Like Baker, the American-born Wong mobilized a passionate, international fan base that was (and probably still is) barely known to mainstream America. Wong enjoyed a cinematic career that spanned over forty years, from silent films to talkies, and mesmerized audiences in London, Berlin, Paris, and Vienna. With over sixty films to her credit, she performed in English, French, German, Mandarin, and Cantonese; she also acted on stage, radio, and television. Like Baker, Wong exerted a magnetic pull over modern artists, directors, photographers, and philosophers.[4] In addition to appearing in so many films, Wong was even more photographed than the superlatively photogenic Baker. The spectacular archive of Wong's glamour photography boasts of hundreds of images, many obsessively taken by photographers such as George Hurrell, Carl Van Vechtan, Alfred Eisenstadt, Edward Steichen, Lotte Jacobi, and E. O. Hoppe. We may observe that where Baker gained her celebrity through the theater, Wong acquired hers through the filmic mediums of cinematography and photography. How did this Chinese American woman acquire such international celebrity in an age of extreme anti-Chinese sentiments, and what is it about her that renders her so exquisitely compatible with high glamour and its shimmering celluloid traces?

Let us begin, then, not with flesh but with light. In the British film *Piccadilly*, directed by the German E. A. Dupont in 1929 and recently restored by the British Film Institute, Wong appears in an incandescent dance number that would seem to epitomize her appeal for the white, European, male audience. Wong's last silent film, *Piccadilly* secured her fame and made her the toast of the town in London, Berlin, and Paris. In it, she plays Shosho, a Chinese dishwasher who is discovered in the basement scullery of the Piccadilly Club and then given the chance by Valentine Wilmot (Jameson Thomas), the nightclub owner, to perform publicly upstairs in the grand ballroom. This Cinderella story is entwined with a sordid plot involving Shosho's displacement of the club's regular star, Mabel Greenfield (Gilda Gray), onstage and in Valentine's erotic affections. In a key sequence that this essay treats as the film's primal scene, we witness Shosho's first public performance, the one that launches her overnight rise to stardom.

In this extended scene, Shosho, scantily but elaborately clad in an ornamental costume of glittering gold, rises from the floor of a large art deco stage; moving no farther than two feet in any direction, she proceeds to dance slowly and "exotically" to sultry but somber music (fig. 2). Although the staging is simple (one dancer center stage, three

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stringed instruments tucked upstage, no orchestra, no chorus), we nonetheless experience the scene as a sensorial deluge, for it is suffused with a nearly unbearable light—coming from Shosho's golden, pailletted body and the candles and lamps set aflame—and with the palpable energy stretched between dancer and audience.

It is not a coincidence that this extraordinary scene of visual saturation takes place

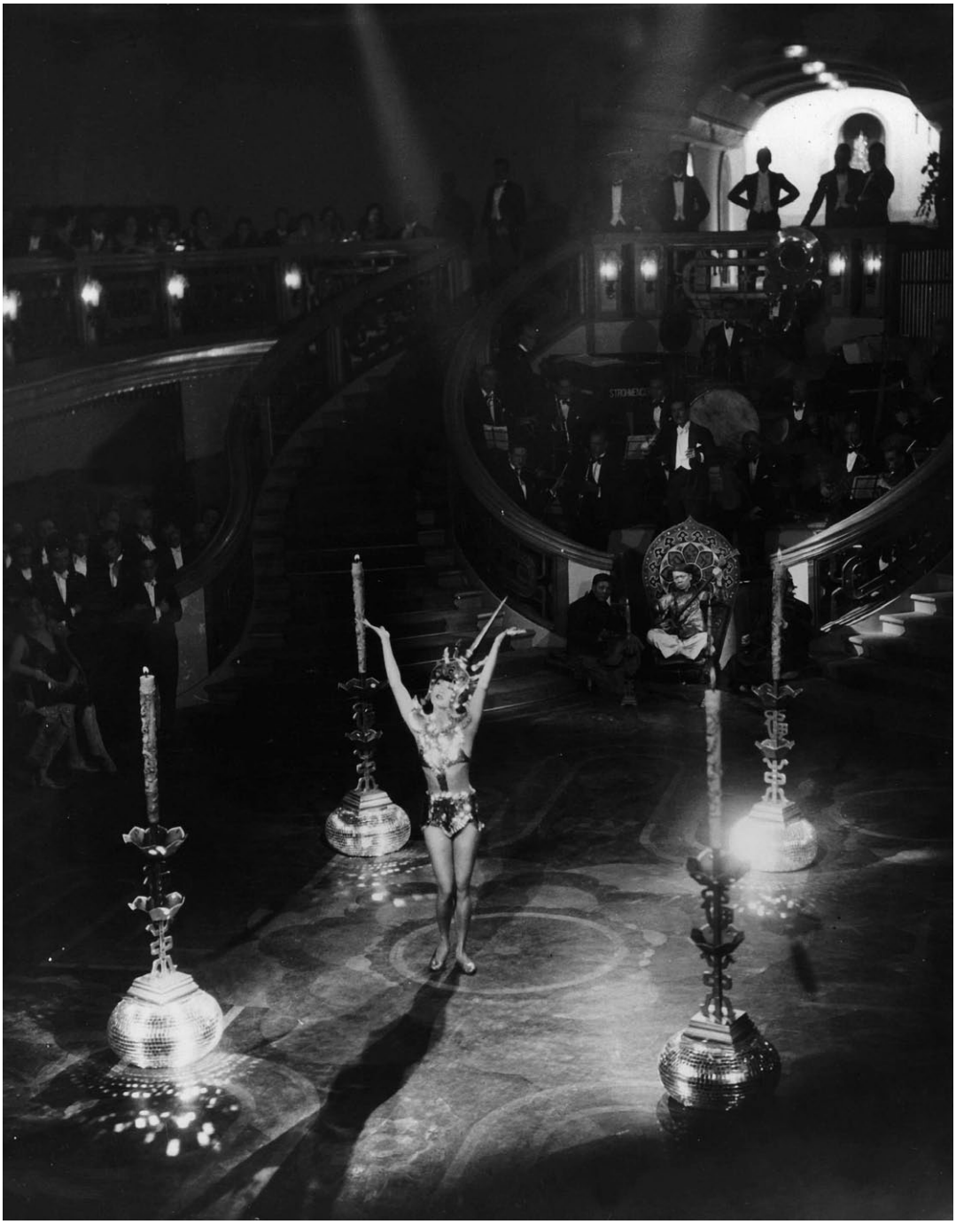


FIG. 2
Publicity still for *Piccadilly*, 1929. BIP / The Kobal Collection.

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in a diegesis about the dream of celebrity. While Baker's films almost all rehearse the story of her own rise from rags to riches, *Piccadilly* is the only film in Wong's extensive catalog that meditates on the making of her celebrity. Although Wong's star quality may be evident even in films where she holds minor roles, and although she has often played other dancers and performers (in *Daughter of the Dragon* [1931] and *Chu Chin Chow* [1934], to name just two), *Piccadilly* is the one film that explicitly contemplates celebrity in a sustained way: its making, its fickleness, its shining exhilaration. Moreover, this is the film in which Wong most actively aligns herself with her character; at one moment, she signs her real name in (and into) the film. In *Piccadilly* Wong's offscreen radiance acquires its keenest onscreen reflection,[5] and in the diegetic scene of her breakout performance, a shimmering enactment and metareflection of celebrity making, we find Wong at her most seductive and, I will argue, her most subjunctive self.

This scene of classic orientalist performance is arresting not for its clichés but for its cinematography. Though devoid of color, the glittering film surface appears more than black and white and feels laden with light and affect. Four large strobe lights circle the foot of the stage, shooting a round of golden, ricocheting lights around the ballroom, and in the middle of this chromatic, vertiginous ring we find Wong herself, moving dreamily, clad in bare skin and metal, a column of radiance that both draws and deflects the gaze. The publicity still in figure 2 cannot do justice to the richness of the optic field enacted by the film. The print's chiaroscuro fails to capture the rapturous and promiscuous spill of cinematic light throughout this vibrant sequence: touching not just Shosho but also the shimmering surfaces of floor, walls, ceiling, and rapt faces all around, a net of light that literalizes the web of fascination. The light, acting as dream and dreamer, unites the dancer and her spectators in a moment of visual and temporal trance.

This scene of enchantment evokes a poetics of visuality—indeed, of light itself. What do we make of this brilliance and of this incandescent body? At first glance, it may seem all too appropriate that this episode of fetishized, orientalized femininity should be staged with an obsessive attention to "bling." After all, in contrast to primitivism, which deploys a rhetoric of nakedness, orientalized femininity from Mata Hari to Afong Moy (the Victorian "Chinese Lady" traveling on display) has always relied on the spectacularization not of naked skin but of ornament: the excessive coverings and decorations that supposedly symptomize the East's overdeveloped and hence effeminized and corrupt civilization. We also know that in Freud's meditation "Fetishism"—an essay that displays most intensely his sartorial preoccupations—"shine" plays a key role. In discussing the often cited case of the young man who has "exalted a certain sort of 'shine on the nose' into a fetishistic precondition," Freud accounts for this odd choice of object by unpacking the series of substitutions that that choice effects:

> The surprising explanation of this was that the patient had been brought up in an English nursery but had later come to Germany, where he forgot his mother-tongue almost completely. The fetish, which originated from his earliest childhood, had to be understood in English, not German. The "shine on the nose" [*Glanz auf der Nase*] was in reality a "glance at the nose." The nose was thus the fetish, which, incidentally, he endowed at will with the luminous shine which was not perceptible to others. (152)

In Freud's analysis, "shine" was not just a psychic substitute (standing in for the nose standing in for the missing maternal penis) but also a linguistic one: *glanz* mistaken for *glance*. For Karl Marx, too, shining surfaces signal commodity fetishism. Where for Freud

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fetishism arouses and cancels the knowledge of castration, for Marx fetishism arouses and cancels the knowledge of alienated labor. In the light of these contexts, Shosho epitomizes the commodification of the feminized and the Asiatic in labor production. In sum, there are plenty of sound reasons for reading Wong, playing the scullery maid turned star, as the quintessentially fetishized object and for understanding the lure of shine in this scene as its symptom.

Yet these readings do not feel wholly satisfactory, for they cannot quite explain away the scene's affective impact, or the consternation it provokes. Who is the watcher, and who is being watched? Does the overwhelming light signal plenitude or blindness? Are we assured or assaulted by it? And what happens when "shine" falls on everyone and everything? Composed of a sequin-layered breast plate, a spangled girdle, and a tall and spiky headdress, Shosho's costume gleams preternaturally. The glare bounces coolly, brilliantly, and erratically off her breasts and hips, at times making it literally impossible to look at her. The star draws our gaze only to reflect it back with violence and indifference. If the lure of shine is meant to protect the fetishistic spectator from the threatening lack underneath, here that protective shine hurts the eye.

This presumably fetishistic scene is difficult to parse. For one thing, it encompasses many layers of gazes and just as many partial objects. Not only are we looking at the audience looking at Shosho, but Valentine is also surreptitiously watching his clients watching his investment, and offstage Mabel is watching her competition (or betraying lover?) in enthralled horror. Who or what is the fetish, and for whom? Whose lack is being projected and compensated? And then there is the camera eye, which at times tracks in 360 degrees, reinforcing the vertiginous feel of the scene even as it suggests a transcendental point of view, and at times adopts Shosho's apparent point of view. The objects of gaze therefore include not just Shosho but also her audience; everyone (including those of us watching the film) is placed on display. Shosho's shining body in the center of the ring provides less a screen than a mirror: the mesmerized audience (both diegetic and extradiegetic) is suspended by Shosho and, in the process, arrested by its own watching.

This anatomy of fascination suggests that to be fascinated is not to enjoy distance from the commodified object nor necessarily to use it to compensate for one's own lack. Instead, fascination enables contact with objectness. It facilitates empathy for the imagined pleasure of self-objectification: the relished slide from *me* to *it*. We, the extradiegetic viewers, are implicated as well in this pleasure of *fascinum*, of self-immobilization. When the flickering light leads us to the gazing audience in the film, we are thrown back to our own watching, to our own dwelling, reminded that the true object of fascination in the cinematic experience is light and arrestment. What is the pleasure of cinema as a sensual experience if not the fantasy that we can fuse our eyes to light, a fantasy of sight as well as of blindness?

Instead of enthralling us with a body as lack (be it a nose or the racialized female body), does *Piccadilly* then seduce us into occupying the slippery interspace between shine and glance, between blindness and insight? Its cinematography forces us to confront this passage between vision and blindness. Just before we are treated to the startling sight of Shosho's dazzling performance, the camera abandons us to an odd visual pause when it pans slowly from left to right, showing nothing but a dark blank screen for almost a whole minute. This awkward scopic failure in the middle of an important scene makes no spatial or diegetic sense; instead, it draws attention to the contrasting burst of light or the birth of vision to follow and underscores the alliance among light, visuality, and the fantasy of corporeal creation that *is* the gift of cinema. The supposed fetish (the female body)

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stands in for light and becomes the precondition for cinematic vision rather than for psychic blindness. In other words, this scene may be seen not as a metaphor for fetishism but as a parable for the cinematic experience: what it means to see in the presence of nothing. This scene is thus a meditation on cinematic birth: the eruption of a body into a presence and a being that exist only in light.

Viewing Shosho as aligned with cinematic possibility itself (not as a mere symptom of cinematic pleasure) leads us to an analogous question about the relation between glamour and body: what does it mean for us to see a made-up body? Or, what kind of body must be imagined for such seeing to be possible? To answer this, we have first to note that, for a sex icon and a celebrated femme fatale, Shosho presents a body that is surprisingly light in more ways than one. In contrast to the pale, Rubenesque body of her competition, Mabel, which is constantly being emphasized as embodiment and weight (often seen reclining or leaning, the camera repeatedly offering protracted meditations on large expanses of plump white flesh as Mabel's male admirers plant punctuating kisses on exposed upper arms, shoulders, and back), Shosho's gleaming body, when it is finally revealed, is shockingly sparse: boyishly slim, childlike, ribbed, clad in scales and spikes. In motion, Mabel makes us feel the weight of her body: the rise and fall of her Charleston, the exertion of her "shimmy" (a style the actress playing Mabel, Gilda Gray, is said to have originated), the sweaty heat of her routine. Shosho's movements, in contrast, are cool and light, almost ephemeral in their slow sways and spirals. Where Mabel embodies the frenzy of showbiz, Shosho is geometric reverie. Where Mabel covers ground, Shosho is all concentric circles.

While many today might take the skinny body to be the desirable one, in Great Britain in 1929 the preference for Wong (as Shosho) over Gilda Gray, a more established star, was hardly guaranteed. Indeed, Shosho wins the sexual competition by drawing not on a rhetoric of fleshly availability but on its opposite. Constraint, not exposure, characterizes Shosho's self-presentation. The first time we see her, she is dancing on a table in the basement of the Piccadilly Club (fig. 3). The scene of exhibitionism is curiously hushed. Shosho dances among tendrils of steam, her body fully clothed, her face closed in self-absorption, while her female comrades, the other dishwashers, watch in silent enthrallment. Even though history would remember Shosho's dancing in uniformly orientalist and primitivist terms, recalling her "gyrating" or "thrusting" hips (Hodges 93; Chan 216), Shosho's movements are remarkably subtle and subdued, bordering on the somnambular. In this highly metatheatrical performance, we get quiet instead of noise, restraint instead of drama, being within the self instead of being for the other.

This prurient, orientalist revelation turns out to be quite unrevealing.[6] Indeed, Shosho's moments of exhibitionism—here in the basement and later in the ballroom—tend to offer themselves as moments of interiorization rather than exteriorization. Her two dance scenes are sonically linked, and in both scenes the music produces an estranging effect. In the scullery, Shosho appears in the diegetic world to be dancing to pure, smoky silence, but the extradiegeic audience hears a simple score that anticipates the music from the later ballroom scene. Once in the ballroom, we first assume the music to be diegetic because we are watching a musical number. But then we realize the ballroom music (like that in the scullery) must be extradiegetic, not because the sound is always so in a silent film but because the ponderous, pentatonic but fully orchestrated score that we hear cannot be coming from the three instruments (two lutes and one erhu) in the mise-en-scène. The music thus creates a kind of privacy: either we are not privy to whatever diegetic music is being played onstage or we are hear-

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FIG. 3
Publicity still for *Piccadilly*, 1929. BIP / Photofest.

ing Shosho's internal music. In either case, we and Shosho suddenly find ourselves outside the plot's time. In other words, the extradiegetic music sonically repeats Shosho's own extradiegetic quality: the way she appears to be for and not for the audience; the way her performances seem suspended between being seen and self-seeing, between spectacle and reverie, between being an object on display and a subject hiding in plain sight.

Instead of guaranteeing subjectivity, Shosho's self-absorption exerts a kind of aggressive impersonality, as if she is and has always been elsewhere. Perhaps this is why this celebrity (in the film, if not in the publicity shots) never looks at her adoring audience; indeed, she appears oblivious to it. Her introspection is neither content driven nor psychologically coherent; instead, it gestures toward an absence that may be fundamental to the making of stardom. Wong's inwardness speaks not to her ontological authenticity (as fans may be eager to assume) but rather to theatrical work itself: the active production of a presence that can be witnessed—in other words, celebrity. This hint of interiority does not secure for the performer a privacy that is safe from public prurience; this is, after all, a scene about publicity.[7] Rather, Wong's performance of withdrawal produces a fantasy of interiority, which the audience can witness and treasure. We are, in short, looking at a choreographed soliloquy. This scene therefore dramatizes rather than simply thematizes the construction of celebrity by unpacking the theatrical process of interiority made public.[8] It does not instantiate agency but represents its mechanism. Similarly, while contemporary critics tend to lament the lack of physical contact between Shosho and Valentine

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on screen as a sign of the racist taboo against interracial romance, I contend that that absence is in keeping with Shosho's erotic and performative withholding.

Shosho's solipsism invites, but it is an enigmatic (to borrow a Laplanchean term), not erotic, provocation. A shimmering surface beckons us to plunge into a flat and reflective interiority. Wong negotiates crushing, corporeal objecthood by assuming a kind of resistant objectness. The allegories of the birth of celebrity embedded in this film point not to the emergence of a unique subject or person but to the states of objectness that precondition the fantasy of personhood usually guaranteed by celebrity. Wong's celluloid body enthralls through corporeal absence; it seduces through surrogacy rather than presence. From our first sight of Shosho to her tragic demise, the most sensuous thing about Shosho has never been her flesh but what can stand in for it.

When it comes to Shosho, *Piccadilly*'s sartorial preoccupation far exceeds its corporeal obsession. Questions of skin often morph into questions of fabric or other materials. Back in the scullery, when we are first introduced to Shosho, the camera zooms in on her and moves slowly down the length of her well-covered body to linger lovingly on the close-up of a long run in her sheer black stocking. The camera will return yet again to and fixate on this tear in Shosho's "skin" when she makes her second appearance, in the back stairs of the club. While this detail must have been intended to invoke a Victorian sense of titillation and to connote Shosho's class status, it also invites a series of questions about the integrity of Shosho's "epidermal schema," as well as about whether it is possible to see Shosho's flesh. Indeed, on making the risky decision of giving an inexperienced scullery maid her own floor show, the club's owner, Valentine, immediately worries about her costume, not her choreography or rehearsal. Those who have seen the film will recall the memorable sequence when Shosho insists on the kind of "Chinese dress" she ought to wear for her debut and knows exactly where to buy it, as if she had been planning for this moment all her life (though the dress turns out to be neither really Chinese nor really a dress). In the back room of a Chinese restaurant in London's Limehouse district, Shosho dictates to Valentine almost all the terms, including the price, involved in deciding how to dress her body. While the soft silks draw Valentine's eye, Shosho picks instead the most armored and prickly of costumes: "I dance in that or not at all."

In this dramatically recursive scene, we see Wong peeping through Shosho, assuming through the mediation of her character the roles of haughty star, costume designer, director, and producer all at once. This is especially poignant given Wong's frequent real-life comments about the racism that she has suffered professionally and personally.[9] At the same time, though we may get a promise of Wong's authorial agency at this critical moment, a stranger (perhaps more incisive) kind of agency is potentially at work, one that critiques the politics of subjecthood and embodiment conditioning claims of subversive female agency.[10] For this portrait of sartorial dictation and presumed authorship is quite cagey about what kind of body is in that back room issuing commands. At first, this scene of barter seems to be replete with clichéd erotic suggestions: the back of a seedy restaurant as a makeshift dressing room, the haggling men clearly also bidding for the woman's body and sexual attention. The erotic charge, however, does not come from the exposure of Shosho's real body but its fantasized presence. When Valentine asks to see Shosho in her new costume, setting the stage for a perfect moment of heterosexual male prurience, Shosho asks her other love interest, Jim (King Ho Chen), to try on the dress instead. There follows an exquisite moment when Valentine looks Jim up and down, presumably contemplating the

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costume but also trying to imagine the body (Shosho's? Jim's?) inside it. We see Valentine, for instance, lifting Jim's breastplate to look underneath. Is this to confirm the presence or absence of sexual or racial difference? In this fraught scene, where the Asian female body is, so to speak, on the block, that body appears in its most displaced and subjunctive form, while male, heterosexual voyeurism expresses itself as a homoerotic exchange.

In this racialized and gendered moment of barter and exchange, skein replaces skin. Shosho offers herself by displacing herself. This curious scene of mediated voyeurism reminds us that fantasies of skin (a trope that seems invariably racialized and gendered) may be profoundly indebted to fantasies about covering. Here the epidermal schema gives way to—perhaps is never as seductive as—a fantasy of skin as a teasing negotiation between corporeality and covering, embodiment and substitution, wholeness and tear. What makes seeing (racial and gender difference) possible here is the impossibility of seeing. And what makes star quality most fully present is its insistence on its own surfacedness. Does this mean that celebrity for the woman of color is an instance not only of her capture but also of her escape? In *Piccadilly* the spectacularization of "yellow skin"—the moment that should have been equivalent to Fanon's "Look, a Negro . . ." (189)—coincides instead with that skin's displacement.

Instead of redeeming the dejection of yellow skin by idealizing or authenticating it, Shosho the golden girl replaces that skin with a metallic shield—even displacing it altogether onto a surrogate (male) body. And when she does finally assume the costume, the suit will hijack the scene, overwhelming its wearer's organic skin with its metallic brilliance. In both art history and vernacular culture, there is an enduring discourse of shine historically and pejoratively associated with racialized skin (Fend; Thompson; Foster),[11] an ethnographic, racialized, commodified history of shine that Hollywood glamour lighting studiously represses. Hence, as Richard Dyer has famously argued, Hollywood lighting embodies and extends a transcendent ideology, one that is associated with idealized white femininity and that suppresses the shine of animalistic and corporeal sweat by offering a compensatory, pearly glow of soft femininity. But Shosho's brand of shine is neither animalistic nor soft. Indeed, its metallic luster points us to another mode of glamour lighting not identified by Dyer: an alternative mode of light that I would call "hard diva photography," which is more closely associated with the shellacked beauty of Jean Harlow, Gloria Swanson, and Wong's close friend and costar in *Shanghai Express* (1932), Marlene Dietrich (figs. 4, 5, and 6).

In contrast to the pearlized, feminized, and vulnerable surface identified by Dyer and applied by Hollywood to women such as Lillian Gish and Marilyn Monroe, the armor worn by Wong when she plays Shosho emits an almost brittle, aggressively inorganic quality that we might call "cellophane glamour." In her study *Glamour in Six Dimensions*, Judith Brown points out that the appeal of cellophane and plastic shine in the first quarter of the twentieth century in theater, film, photography, and everyday commodity signifies modernism's propensity for hygienic sleekness, plasticity, and blankness. I want to suggest that we understand this "moribund aesthetics" differently when it comes to Wong, that she mobilizes a vitally inorganic aesthetics (Brown 64).[12] Wong's refusal of the human produces a notion of inanimacy critically different from the laden, passive, or regressive corporality often associated with the (good or evil) "Oriental beauty." In this cinematic meditation on celebrity as spectacle making, we are given the fascination not of a darkened or exposed body, or of one penetrated or ruptured by gaze, but of a body clad in resistant and mobile gleam.

Glamour's shellacked beauty reminds us that the presentation of self as object for con-

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Fig. 4
Jean Harlow. Photograph by George Hurrell, 1933. MGM / The Kobal Collection.



Fig. 5
Gloria Swanson. Photograph by Clarence Sinclair Bull, 1934. The Kobal Collection.

sumption coexists with the rendering of that self as indigestible. Suddenly, we understand that the cult of personality exemplifies the desire for the ambivalence of personhood rather than a celebration of uncompromised or exceptional individuality. It is not a coincidence, or a symptom of commodification, that the vernacular term used to indicate ultrapersonality—the "It" that Roach recently brought to light again—is also the pronoun that designates nonpersonhood. Glamour's imperviousness thus draws on a crisis of personhood that is inherently political and maybe even strangely liberating for a woman and a minority—liberating not in the simple sense of acquiring a compensatory or impenetrable beauty (because Shosho remains vulnerable even if her self-presentation is not) but in the sense of temporary relief from the burdens of personhood and visibility. It may seem counterintuitive or even dangerous to talk about the raced and sexualized body's longing to be thinglike or to disappear into things, but it is the overcorporealized body that may find the most freedom in fantasies of corporeal dematerialization or, alternatively, of material self-extension.

We are tracking a peculiar form of agency, one that is not rooted in the certitude of a sovereign subject but is instead developed through surrogacy. Throughout the film, some form of substitution comes into play whenever we are supposed to be witnessing authentic personhood. In another scene of self-referential star making, the camera gives us a quick close-up of Shosho signing her contract with Valentine: we see not just that Shosho has signed in Chinese rather than English but also that she has written Wong's given name, Huáng Liushuang 黃柳霜. Many take this to be a triumphant assertion of female agency, yet the signature

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writes Wong into and out of the film. This inscription is also a disappearance. Taking place within the diegesis, this consent to celebrity and to misrecognition is a gesture at once real and fictive, a complicated act of self-inscription. The name marks Wong's identification with and distancing from Shosho; in that difference we bear witness to the fraught politics of recognition that the celebrated woman always faces: the fine lines between self-expression and publicity, between the real and the representational, between affirmation and fetishization. The moment may register a rare and significant moment of authorial intent on Wong's part, but it also inscribes the peculiar form of nonsubjective agency that celebrity itself enacts: one always is and is not the star that one signifies.

This paradox makes agency, which we always like to attribute to our stars, appear in *Piccadilly* to hover between the promise of a person and the promise of a thing. Whenever Shosho performs, agency seems to get displaced onto the aesthetic surfaces surrounding her. The shimmering life of things (metals, clothes, fire, glass, ornament) activates cognitions that reach beyond the explicit domain of the diegesis. In the superluminous moments when light seems to exceed the frames of the film, the viewer is moved furthest from the plot and transported, along with Shosho, into another realm of seeing, hearing, and feeling. Light, animate inanimacy, enables the transfer to this other realm. Here, in addition to the discourses of Hollywood photography and cellophane gloss, we should recall modernism's fascination for metal as a form of vibrant matter, for when it comes to Wong's incandescent figure we need to consider another cult of light: the discourse of shine and sculptural surfaces in the 1920s and 1930s. When *Piccadilly* was made, shine as a concept was enjoying currency in visual culture. Artists, especially sculptors in the interwar years, were enthralled by the possibilities of shine. Poets such as Mina Loy and sculptors such as Constantin Brancusi and Henry Moore wrote and spoke about the symbolic and active values of "shine" to "enhance curve" and "lead the eye around"; shininess came to embody for them a host of ideas about modernity and technology (Wood 2).[13] But even more than connoting the machine and plastic ages, shininess for these artists presents the means through which materiality might be released rather than reified. Brancusi and Moore came to think of shine as capable of imputing motion and sound to inanimate objects and even embodying ideas of auratic potential and originary radiance.[14] In early-twentieth-century philosophy, the surprisingly ubiquitous yet little studied deployment of the rhetoric and trope of shine is intriguing because its occurrence usually indexes a fundamentally ambiguous relation between humans and things at the site of aesthetic engagement. Writers as diverse as Marcel Proust, Roland Barthes, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Lacan have attributed to shine an inherent quality of aesthetic formation that



FIG. 6
Marlene Dietrich. Photograph by A. L. "Whitey" Schafer, 1947. Paramount / The Kobal Collection.

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reveals art's desire and capacity to escape its materiality.[15] In short, shine signals for these thinkers a potentially ethical, rather than fetishistic, dimension of aesthetic experience.

In *Piccadilly* we might think of shine as another agent of surrogacy for the orientalized woman. Through its refractions, the "Oriental woman" as objet d'art has been derealized. Shine offers less a description or quality of light than an active mode of relationality: a dynamic medium through which the organic and the inorganic fuse, and through which the visual spills into the sensorial. The intense visual pleasure afforded by *Piccadilly*'s ballroom scene derives not from female flesh on display (we have seen how elusive that is) but from the exhilarating eruption of the visual into other realms. Shine transports the visual into the haptic. We might say that instead of skin we are getting skin-sense. (Are we now seeing the relation between *glance* and *glanz* not as a linguistic displacement or error but as a structural repetition preconditioning visual ecstasy?) Shine mobilizes the interstitiality between sight and feeling, visuality and textuality. And if earlier we noted that Shosho's shininess is like a mirror, we can now claim that it is an animated agent, because it acts on us. By firing up her body with light and stretching that light around the room, by cladding her in gold and repeating that gold in the objects surrounding her, the mise-en-scène expands her outline and produces an animated and multisensorial surface that decorporealizes and extends her body. Light lives on that transitive, metallic surface, while the modular body within follows. And we follow that light's shine, glued to the seductive agency of a life living on the surface of ornaments. It is the surface rather than the body that assumes the fantasy of subjectivity.

The woman as ornament is an old trope, but in this film the ornament is alive. The ballroom exudes a diva's charisma of its own. The semicircular stairs that enclose the stage, the room's bejeweled and multifaceted appearance (produced by the glittering strobe lights), and the gem (Shosho) in the middle of this structure turn the scene into an elaborately wrought ornament. The spatial relations embedded in the ballroom invite us to confront the various, insistent references to the idea of worlds and world making. In many ways, this is a scene about geography, mapping, and geometry. Primal, geometric shapes—circles, cones, triangles—dominate the atlas of Shosho's performance. Shiny ornaments—from the shimmering "stars" on the ceiling to the gleaming tower on Shosho's head to the glowing spheres at her feet—suggest cosmological inferences and enhance the sense of a moving diagram. Shosho's own pencil-slim body, with its spikes pointing and sliding like a pendulum or a compass, appears to be redrawing and remapping the space in which she moves. If Shosho the Chinese dishwasher in London is the stranded object of British imperialism, what are her dance and its cartography saying? (Can an object speak?)[16]

For the rest of this essay, let us tease out the economy of light in relation to the geography of imperialism. That the Piccadilly ballroom instantiates an imperial geography is hardly surprising. Everything about the floor show and the plot tells us that Shosho is the "Eastern jewel" that crowns British imperialism. Yet this jewel stretches its inorganic light to consume the entire room. How do we understand this early-twentieth-century "bling" spectacle and what it says about celebrity and commodification? Historically, light is often seen as a symptom of commodity culture. In her essay "The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop," the art historian Krista Thompson offers a study of shininess in contemporary celebrity culture that historicizes the modern market's roots in nineteenth-century imperialism. She situates hip-hop culture's propensity for flashy, material display in a much

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"longer history of refashioning status and prestige through shiny jewels, tactile surfaces, and sumptuous goods." For her, this history provides a conceptual framework for questioning "the performance and visual propagation of power" in today's "bling" culture (Thompson 487, 490). Yet can ornamentation affect an alternative economy, one that is related to material history but stands in a different relation to commodification?

I suggest that we see Shosho's shimmering, excessively ornamentalized performance as a proto-bling moment, in which the stakes of what is being refashioned have less to do with personal material wealth or ontic aspirations than with resignifying the origin of consumer culture that Thompson indexes—that is, the geography of imperialism. We can see this shimmering scene of presumably orientalist display and female celebrity as also an attempt to remake the world. Gottfried Semper, the nineteenth-century architect, art theorist, and amateur ethnographer, reminds us that the ancient Greek word for adornment, *kosmos*, means both "decoration" and "world order." (This is why the words *cosmetics* and *cosmology* share an etymological root.) In his essay "Concerning the Formal Principles of Ornament and Its Significance as Artistic Symbol" (1856), Semper notes that, far from being superfluous, ornament aims to align itself with cosmic laws (100–03). Adornment is thus a micrograph of the visible world and a dynamic representation, if not enactment, of the invisible forces of the universe.[17] According to Semper, there is a primary category of ornamental artifact, called "directional ornaments"—of which Shosho's spiky headdress is the most striking example in *Piccadilly*—that remaps space (94). Directional ornaments not only follow and enhance bodily movements but also dynamically represent what today we would call prosthetic possibilities by expanding bodily periphery through the extension of inanimate objects. The spear or tower headdress that Shosho chooses to wear for her performance, facilitated by shine, shape, and movement, appears to extend her bodily and psychic boundary, creating a new outline at once corporeal and fictional. The costume Shosho wears on her opening night resembles but is not exactly the same as the one we saw her select in the back room of the Chinese restaurant. The plates and spikes of this version are more exaggerated, as if, appearing in the limelight, the costume has grown to its most striking scale.

Shosho's costume generates a map of its own. Parts of the costume, as well as Shosho's hand and arm gestures, allude to various stylistic elements from Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Thai, and Indonesian costumes and architectural forms. Her costume has often been criticized by contemporary reviewers as ethnically inauthentic and taken to be yet another symptom of orientalist conflation. But does the hybrid Orient embodied by Shosho's costume not also produce or incite, if unintentionally, a refutation of authenticity? And could we go even further and call the Orient being re-formed on Shosho's body a sartorial remapping of the fragments of pan-Asian geography in the face of Western imperial expansion? Rather than take this mélange as just another instance of orientalist conflation, we might see it as an imaginary gesture of alliance and communication, not as subversion per se but as a collection of stranded objects. This re-formation or re-collection does not guarantee recuperation; instead, it enacts and memorializes a shoring up of the fragments as fragments. Although Semper, as a nineteenth-century amateur ethnographer, may have been influenced by primitivist and orientalist imaginations, he also came to see the history of ornament as a history of the breakdown of ethnography by understanding ornaments not as pristine cultural or national signifiers but as "portable ecology" (Papapetros, "Ornamented Inventory" 44). We might say that the fragmented, archival world of Shosho's Orient records loss and imports or

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relocates several ecologies. Shosho's costume and ornamentation re-collect the pan-Asian geography that has been transplanted to the heart of London.

Wong as Shosho speaks to the world *as* the fragmented world. The symptom and the ornament of orientalism, she is nonetheless a stranded object that continues to articulate through its objectness. Through the rapture of light and the insistent life of the object, a performance of imperial tourism, reminiscent of a world's fair, realigns the notions of spectatorship, ownership, and geographic centrality. Who is the traveler, and who is the one at home? In this scene, Shosho moves little; it is the audience circling around her who can be said to have been moved. She may be the imported exotic, but in this performance she is the one calling out to the world, and it is the audience members who are interpellated. If the contemporary use of bling by hip-hop celebrity signals a subaltern reclamation of capitalism, as Thompson claims, in this early-twentieth-century precursor, the shining object displays itself as a spoil of imperialism, and yet, at the same time and through the process of self-display, this stranded object removes itself and, in doing so, moves those around it.

It is hardly an accident that the trope of the circle dominates this scene: we find the shape recurring in the choreography, in Wong's bodily placement, and in the stage, as well as the props on it. Semper tells us that the ring emits symbolic power as a microcosmic shape because, a form of circular antenna, it collects forces of the universe and confers them on the body that it adorns (97–99). (This is why royalty wears crowns.) Indeed, the circle appears to be the perfect analog for Shosho's mode of simultaneous self-expansion and self-containment. We thrill not to Wong's reification but to her almost indifferent megalomania: the way she commands all things around her, the way she centripetally pulls objects, lights, and glances to her magnetic center. Even the diegetic audience enjoys being an object under her sway, being "held" by her. Instead of reading this scene as yet another staging of female narcissism, we might see it as a material self-absorption and self-investment that in turn turns the world.

The audience and the lights fly around Shosho so that, even as she is the dancer, the scene is dancing around her. Placed on display, has the Asiatic become the alternative center of this map? Are we looking at a revision of the birth of Venus, one of the founding myths of Western aesthetics? With whirling locks and fabrics surrounding her magnetic body, Botticelli's Venus is also the still yet moving center of a brewing storm, a goddess of animated and sartorial splendor (fig. 7). The architectural theorist Spyros Papapetros has invoked Botticelli's masterpiece as a pictorial meditation on "mobile accessories":

> While looking at Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, one might even argue that the entire canvas is essentially an ornament: the painting represents an annular ornament or ring, the way that fabrics and hair appear to circulate around Venus, orbiting around the axis of her marmoreal body like satellites. . . . Venus stands at the very center of this commotion of accessories. ("Aby Warburg" 324)

We might say the same about the scene of Shosho's theatrical birth: the ballroom, alight with jewel-like reflections, faceted by glances, itself an ornament, a microcosm of the universe, with Shosho as the almost still center emitting and drawing in the stars and lights that scatter around the sphere of this room. Instead of parodying or demythifying orientalist ornamentation, Wong as Shosho reinvests it with an aural concentration that enables her to assume—even induce—the world. How can we not notice that the strobe lights sitting at her feet resemble four glittering globes, anchoring the four corners of this

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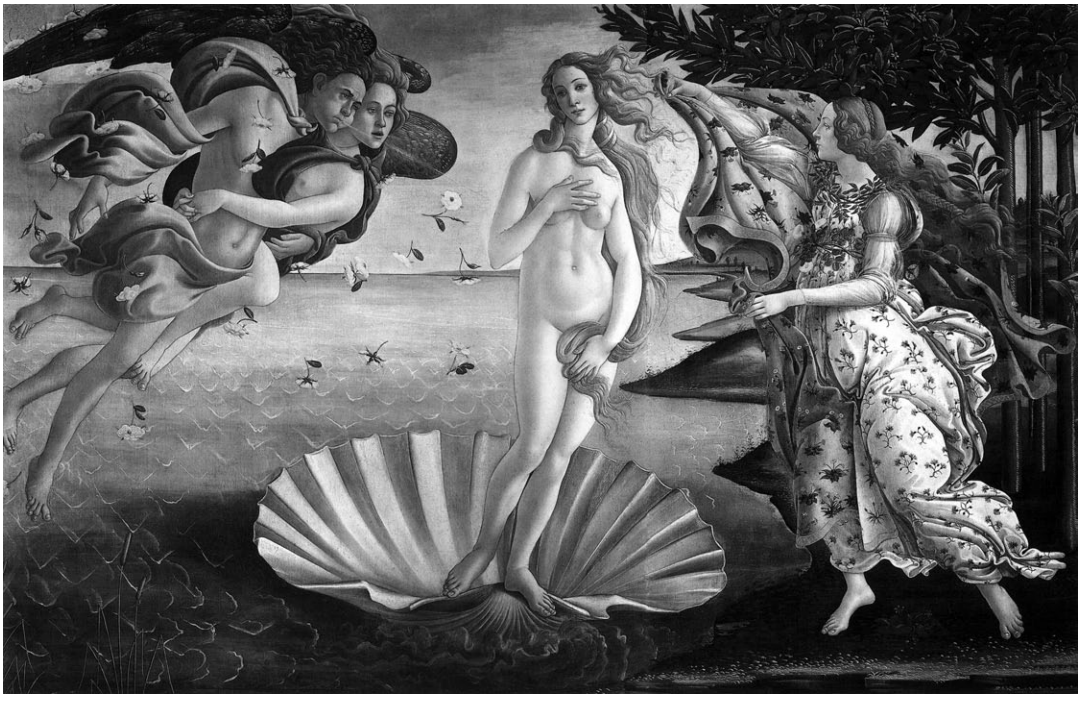


Fig. 7
Sandro Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, c. 1485. Tempera on canvas, 172.5 × 278.5 cm.

imagined cartography? And what would it mean to consider this scene as having been transformed from a display of Western conquest into a moment of ascent and radical expansion where Wong as Shosho remaps the universe with her as its axis? This scene rehearses the tropes of self-origination against the pressures of imperial time. The birth of eros and aesthetic has been reframed as, and relocated to, Asia. In a way, this scene foreshadows Western anxiety about the rise of pan-Asian modernity in late modernity, but here it underscores the particular and intense quality of Wong's screen presence, one that is not so much subversive or narcissistic as simply materially possessive.

If cinema as medium and glamour as ideal are both about imagining a body, we might think of this moment of Shosho's rise as a parable about the emergence of aesthetic authority. The birth of Venus is also an allegory about the birth of art and semiotics. The art historian Edgar Wind has famously argued that the Botticelli painting represents the original fragmentation, the primary fracture of the world, following the castration of Uranus, from which Venus was born, a myth described by Hesiod and then Plato in *The Republic* (136–37). In this account, the birth of decoration—of sign—emerges from originary loss. Thus, ornamentation represents the sign of originary loss as well as its reparation. Wong's performance also negotiates lack and compensation, though not in the traditional, Freudian fetish way. In this encounter between East and West, we are given an Asiatic Venus turning her own ruptured thingness into the plenitude of thingness and originary radiance. Sign has offered itself as referent. She has "It" because she knows how to be "it."

Viewing Wong's iconography in *Piccadilly* through Botticelli's painting may not seem so whimsical once we recognize the ballroom scene as an active reinscription of the myth of Venus: not the iconic blond Venus, nor her abject inverse, the black Venus, but a third figure, whose yellow-gold body mediates between the poles of luminance and excrescence, the aural and the corporeal. This extraordinary moment of assumption is

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temporary. We will have to emerge from this gorgeous dream to the sordid realities of Piccadilly Square and the empire in 1929, just as Shosho herself will be extinguished at the end of the film. But for the duration of this performance, Shosho is more than just another little dancing Chinese girl; she is the object who wields the auratic power of signs. I am asking us to bear witness not to the reality of Wong's subjective authority but to the fantasy and performance of her aesthetic force.

Five years after the release of *Piccadilly*, in 1934, the Mayfair Mannequin Society of New York named Wong "the World's Best Dressed Woman."[18] This celebration of Wong's clothes over herself may hold poignant insights into Wong's exquisite, unfleshly, extensible textuality. Wong herself perhaps most astutely intuited the heart of (her) celebrity when she once observed that "you can forgive a woman for a face that is not beautiful more easily than for a dress that isn't" (qtd. in Hodges 105).[19] This statement says much less about the shallowness of celebrity, what Daniel Boorstin calls the celebration of the "human pseudo-event" (45), than about the interdependence between subjecthood and surrogacy in the making of celebrity, a nexus of issues that become all the more pronounced when that celebrity belongs to a body historically denigrated.

Wong's alienation from her own fleshliness is no small thing for a woman of color making her way in a world of commodity. Is it a coincidence that some female performers of color in the early twentieth century, like Wong, Josephine Baker, and even Lena Horne, should be so preoccupied with the temptations and hazards of persona, covers, and what goes on their skin?[20] I think not, for their work involves an unavoidable and constant negotiation with the symptom that is their bodies. And what rests on and substitutes for their skin becomes the site for risky inscription as well as transformation. On top of the scullery table, in the shop at the back of the Limehouse restaurant, and, later, in the grand ballroom, Wong's mediated relation to her fleshed body communicates more than just the glamorous body's inherent mediation and instructs us on an altogether different view of how the corporeal come to be perceived at all. It is between sight and sense, between a body projected and a body evacuated, that the "Oriental beauty" takes shape.

Shosho's fluctuation between being a commodity and being a resistant object uncovers the shared tension informing the politics of personhood (which drives most redemptive discourse about race) and the politics of recognition (which drives the discourse of celebrity). If liberal racial rhetoric has not been able to tolerate the possibilities of subjective failures or corporeal ambiguity on the part of its recuperated subjects, and if celebrity studies have been overinvested in the cult of personality and its fantasy of agency, our discussion of Wong as Shosho reveals how the euphoric politics of redemptive personhood and recognition requires more-rigorous engagements with the dysphoric alternatives to this politics. If we consider Wong's disappearance into appearance in this film not as abjection or reification but as a recourse to celebrated skin's potential to be transformed, to obtain a new, material objectness, we begin to grasp that her glamour is not a denial of racial injury or lack (the possibility of which is undeniable for an actress of color in the 1920s) but a reminder of and insistence on subjecthood's fundamental indeterminacy. Her objectness compels us to confront the inherent, taut intimacy between being a thing and being a person.

This story of modern celebrity and glamour is thus an intricate tale about race and style and a dream of subjecthood that is deeply indebted to states of objecthood. Wong sustains our imagination neither through her apparently racialized performances nor through her uncomplicated assumption of female agency but through her paradoxical

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staging and erasure of her body and of the skin that is supposed to give that corporeality meaning. A song in illumination, this early-twentieth-century beauty offers a crucial pause in the politics of celebrity and the politics of race, by asking us to consider how a body might operate subjunctively rather than materially and what the concept of a subjunctive body means for how we formulate the imperatives of personhood. In the end, it is the extravagance of style, rather than the fulfillment of embodiment, that proves to be the source of Wong's enduring fascination.

Notes

1. The bulk of critical literature on celebrity culture (such as Boorstin; Schickel; Braudy; Gamson; Marshall) does not address the issue of race. The exceptions are Dyer and, more recently, Brown. Also, aside from Roach, studies of celebrity tend to be less than celebratory about the phenomenon they study: Boorstin equates celebrity with damaging or distorting illusions; Schickel sees celebrity as generating empty, social symbols that devastate the boundary between public and private lives with psychopathic consequences for our society; Braudy and Gamson are less harsh, though both agree that twentieth-century celebrity is the artificial product of commercial culture; and Dyer sees the star system as iterating dominant racial and gender ideology. My essay asks us to venture beyond this moral economy and argues that instead of simply reproducing the pathology of commodification, celebrity at the site of the traditionally abject body provides a critical occasion for developing a nuanced understanding of the issues of agency and embodiment that haunt the raced female body.

2. Even critical race theory, as it effectively unpacks the "fact" of whiteness, tends to reproduce the irreducible materiality of the black body. For the racist, the raced body signifies rawness, animality, and dumb flesh and is repeatedly invoked, socially and legally, as the sign of inhumanity; for the liberal race theorist, while the raced body is being debiologized it is also being reproduced as that which inevitably indexes skin's visual legibility: "Look, a Negro!" (Fanon).

3. See, for examples, Hodges's and Chan's biographies.

4. The biographer Graham Russell Gao Hodges documents, for instance, a tantalizing encounter between Wong and Walter Benjamin (77–79). For further accounts of this meeting, see Witte 105–06 and Broderson 164–66.

5. The screenplay was originally written for Gilda Gray. Wong stole the spotlight both onscreen and off. This is an especially poignant and exceptional film, given that, in spite of appearing in over sixty films, Wong rarely got the starring role. In 1960, after a long film career, Wong was still being given roles like the "inscrutable Chinese maid" (*Portrait in Black*).

6. The unrevealingness of the Asian female body is the best-kept secret of this film. So much of the discourse surrounding this film, in the form of reviews and biographies, remembers Shosho as little more than a stripper. Even the image on the original movie poster, which shows Wong in a topless gypsy outfit and now appears on the cover of the newly digitalized version of the film, is nowhere to be found in the film itself.

7. My hesitation to reclaim Wong's subjective interiority or agency in a scene such as this does not come from the belief that she could not have had any but rather from the belief that such reading tends to ignore the fact that the performance being discussed is a theatrical product. So how do we talk about agency at the layered intersections of production, scripts, directions, and audience expectation?

8. With her ability to project an image that suggests presence and depth, Wong can more than hold her own next to the imperturbable Marlene Dietrich in a film such as *Shanghai Express*. The two actresses' equally strong screen presence, however, is not reflected in their pay scale. Budget records for *Shanghai Express* show that, although Wong and Dietrich shared surprisingly equal screen time, Wong earned a quarter of what Dietrich was paid.

9. Wong made many public comments about the racism and sexism that she confronted (Chan; Hodges), and she also wrote a series of brief articles for the French magazine *Pour vous* a year before making *Piccadilly* that spoke of the racism she faced in Hollywood.

10. In the political rhetoric around the woman of color, *subjectivity* is frequently brought up as a recuperative term. And *subjectivity* (often mistakenly equated with *biography*) is mostly taken to mean uncompromised subjecthood and the implied power of intentional agency. But as a star Wong offers a radically different account of how we think about the dream of the subject in racial politics and celebrity studies.

11. For the most part, this racialized shine is linked to the commodification of black bodies, but there has also been a pejorative discourse about yellowness since the 1800s. From the "yellow peril" to "yellow journalism," the color yellow has long been linked to notions of meretricious gaudiness and decadence (Connor 173–74.)

12. As Meikle reminds us, the invention of plastics at the inception of the twentieth century brought with it a host of visionary, social ideals about creative transformation and plasticity. Plastics were seen as vital surrogates for, not cheap imitations of, rare and valuable organic materials. That euphoria dissipated by the 1940s, when

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plastic became a common household presence and signaled inexpensive and tacky copies.

13. For further readings on Brancusi, see Wood, Hulks, and Potts, as well as Mina Loy's collection of poems *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, in which the poet converses with Brancusi, a volume that includes "Brancusi's Golden Bird," the source of this essay's epigraph.

14. This animated shine is distinct from the sterile gloss of plastic or cellophane identified by Brown. While it is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be fascinating to pursue the relation between this sculptural shine and the cultural currency of "shine" in black vernacular—not in the pejorative sense but in the sense of psychic energy, found in the blues, rhythm and blues, and street jargon.

15. Much work has yet to be done on the place of shine in twentieth-century philosophical thinking beyond that of Freudian or Marxist fetishism—on shine in relation to immateriality, for instance, rather than as the gaudy symptom of material value. Barthes famously observes that glossy photographs retain the shine or residue of life. Lacan uses the glitter of the sardine can as the provocation to launch the complacent subject into an ethical encounter with its own "splitness." (See my reading of that moment in "Passing.") Words like *gleam*, *luster*, *radiance*, and *flash* populate the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and are a critical site for his rethinking of the nature of flesh as the difference between *physis* and being. Heidegger's writing is also dotted with references to radiance and shine; his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" asserts that shininess does not obscure truth but is the medium through which it can be revealed (56). Finally, Leo Bersani observes that artists from Caravaggio to Proust saw shine as the trace of the material world's disappearance; as such, shine signals art's ability (maybe even ethical capacity) to transcend its own materiality.

16. Attending to why Wong as Shosho might speak through her objectness rather than her subjectness would challenge the tendency of the recuperative discourse of authentic subjectivity and agency to overlook the compromise to subjecthood that discrimination and the politics of performance have already produced. What can agency look like in a crisis of consent? I am here also implicitly responding to Krauss's critique of Rubin's influence-study model. Krauss contends that "primitive objects" are not "historical" but "theoretical objects": "the value of the primitive was, quite simply, what it enabled one to think" (60). Yet it is clear who the "one" doing the thinking is; thus, her formulation does not quite rescue those objects from what she calls their "neutralized" state. What remains unquestioned is the boundary separating Western subjectivity and primitive objectness, Western intellectualism and non-Western things. I would ask, can the object think or speak as object?

17. I am indebted to Papapetros's study of Semper in his essays on Aby Warburg and ornamentation. For further reading on the larger history of ornamentation, modernism, and gender, see Schor; Wigley.

18. Few records are left of the Mayfair Mannequin Society of New York (MMSNY), which was most likely an offshoot of the Mayfair Mannequin Academy, a modeling school in New York City in the 1930s that appears to have done much to professionalize modeling. The school advertised itself as "America's Original Mannequin School" in the *New Yorker* (8 Sept. 1934). And an article in the *New York Times*, entitled "Professional Models Open War on Debutantes Who Do Work Free; Appeal to Junior League to Keep Pastime-Seekers out of Field . . . , Spokesman for Fifty Determined Girls Says," shows that the academy (and potentially the MMSNY) advocated for women in the profession. The idea that the MMSNY may have been a kind of proto–labor union for women models renders its praise of Wong's sartorial art all the more intriguing.

19. Wong made this remark to a German reporter during an interview for *Mein Film* on 4 June 1930.

20. In an essay on Lena Horne's "impersona," Shane Vogel also demonstrates an interest in locating a form of corporeal evacuation effected by women artists of color in the early twentieth century. Where I argue that Baker and Wong turned to a sartorial and physical play of surfaces, Vogel identifies a similar strategy Horne employed at the site of sound and song, a "third person voice" that offers "sound *in place of* subjectivity" (Vogel 180).

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